

## TRACING ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL TRADITIONS THROUGH AN INDONESIAN PESANTREN: *RAHMAT*, EPISTEMIC AGENCY, AND TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY

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### ABSTRACT

Pesantren have become a defining feature of one form of education in Indonesia. Furthermore, Pesantren continue to develop innovative learning models that are relevant to the educational needs in this era of disruption. This study analyzes how the contemporary educational framework of *Peacesantren Welas Asih* (PWA) demonstrates both continuity and change, as well as rearticulation within the pesantren tradition. In addition, it explores how *Rahmat*, as rearticulated through *Welas Asih*, manifests in relational and pedagogical practices, thereby influencing student authority and agency. The study investigates how these pedagogical practices foster epistemic agency and contribute to the transformative experiences reported by students. To achieve this, the study employs a case study design, using *Peacesantren Welas Asih* as a representative example of the criteria required of Islamic boarding schools to address the research questions. Data collection was conducted through interviews, observations, documentation, open-ended questions, and digital archiving. The results showed that, at PWA, the pesantren tradition continued to uphold its religious and cultural elements. However, this continuity often went hand in hand with a rearticulation of the tradition, achieved through the infusion of new meaning derived from the value of *Rahmat*. Notably, this rearticulation was evident in the transformation of the educator's authority. Specifically, it shifted from reliance on supervision and obedience towards a more dialogical and reflective relationship, without diminishing the educator's role. As a result, this shift in authority created space for students to take the initiative in their learning process. As a result, this space paved the way for transformative pedagogy, in which students demonstrated development of epistemic agency and experienced transformative changes in how they thought and understood themselves.

**Keywords:** Islamic educational tradition, *Rahmat*, epistemic agency, transformative pedagogy

### INTRODUCTION

Islamic education has long been an educational approach developed in various educational institutions in Indonesia (Kosim et al., 2023). This practice can be found in madrasah, pesantren, and other Islamic schools (Putri & Hamami, 2023; Ratnasari et al., 2026). Among these, pesantren stands out as one of the Islamic educational institutions with deep roots in the history of Islam's development in Indonesia (Mas'udi, 2024; Isbah, 2020; Nurtawab, 2022). Its role is not limited to the transmission of Islamic knowledge; it also encompasses the formation of students' moral character, religious identity, and social orientation (Sofi, 2025). As institutions that evolve within the dynamics of society, pesantren have the capacity to preserve traditions while simultaneously responding to social change and the demands of contemporary education (Isbah, 2020; Sofi, 2025; Kawakip, 2023). Furthermore, a number of studies indicate

that the modernization of pesantren does not necessarily mean abandoning tradition. Instead, it can occur through the integration of new elements into an existing value framework (Mansir, 2020; Mas'udi, 2024). Consequently, pesantren are best understood as a “living educational tradition,” in which the legacy of Islamic education continues to undergo processes of continuity, change, and rearticulation in different contexts (Sofi, 2025; Kawakip, 2023).

This process of rearticulation is not only related to the curriculum and institutional structure but also concerns the relationship between educational authorities, students, and knowledge (Didin, 2026; Hamda, 2026). Historically, the pesantren tradition has positioned the kiai or educator as a key figure in the transmission of knowledge, the cultivation of good manners, and the guidance of students (Halimatussa'diyah, 2026). Meanwhile, contemporary education increasingly emphasizes student participation, dialogue, reflection, inquiry, and initiative in the learning process (Ju'subaidi, 2024). Therefore, the issue is not merely whether traditional authority is maintained or replaced but rather how that authority is negotiated as students gain greater space to ask questions, seek information, express ideas, and take initiative (Haliza, 2025). In this context, *Rahmah* can serve as an ethical-relational foundation that bridges Islamic educational traditions and the demands of contemporary pedagogy (Ma'arif, 2025). Specifically, *Rahmah* is understood not only as compassion but also as care, gentleness, respect for the dignity of students, and educational relationships that enable students to develop holistically (Taufikin, 2026).

This perspective is relevant in order to understand the development of Peancesantren *Welas Asih* in Garut, which builds education based on the values of *Welas Asih* with the concept of good character, action, and impact. Additionally, it incorporates elements of Islamic education, *tawhid*, *Qur'an*, *Hadith*, and *tahfiz*, along with literacy and general knowledge education using ARCA (Activity-Reflection-Concept-Action) and FIDS (Feel, Imagine, Do, Share) methods. PWA can then be considered as a tangible example of the ability to recontextualize the Islamic educational traditions through the concept of *Rahmah*, while simultaneously maintaining the traditional pesantren framework. Furthermore, epistemic agency pertains to students' capacity to assess, perceive, and produce knowledge. This, in turn, is connected with transformative pedagogy, which emphasizes the importance of listening to and making room for students' voices and awareness within the learning process. Unfortunately, however, research that combines the process of recontextualizing the concept of *Rahmah* within pesantren traditions and the construction of students' epistemic agency remains quite limited.

This study provides an empirical account of how *Rahmah*, rearticulated through the local wisdom of *Welas Asih*, operates as a pedagogical principle that sustains continuity while also rearticulating the Islamic educational tradition within the pesantren. This is evident in various aspects, including the integration of curriculum design, the renegotiation of educator-student authority relations, and the development of students' epistemic agency and transformative pedagogy within a single pesantren ecosystem. Consequently, *Rahmah* does not merely function as a value label attached to the pesantren's identity; rather, it acts as a mechanism that binds these three dimensions together, forming a mutually shaping educational process. Building on this, the study proposes an integrative framework in which *Rahmah* (*Welas Asih*) provides an ethical-relational orientation. Additionally, negotiation mediates the relationship between authority and learner agency. Furthermore, pedagogical opportunities for questioning, reflection, inquiry, application, and knowledge-sharing are created to establish conditions conducive to the emergence of epistemic agency. In summary, the study demonstrates how ethical orientation, authority, agency, and pedagogical practice become interconnected within an actual institutional setting, highlighting the complex yet cohesive nature of this educational approach.

## METHOD

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach with a case study design at *Peacesantren Welas Asih* Garut, West Java. *Peacesantren Welas Asih* was selected based on the criteria for Islamic schools necessary to achieve the research objectives. The criteria for Pesantren considered in this study include those that have taken the initiative to incorporate the values of *Rahmah* into the fabric of the school. Furthermore, this pesantren brings about transformation in the learning process, curriculum, and knowledge-making practices, all guided by *Rahmah*-based education. In addition, the institution also combines Islamic educational elements, including *tauhid*, *iman*, Islam, *ihsan*, the Qur'an, *Hadith*, *tahsin*, *tahfiz*, and Arabic, with contemporary learning orientations that emphasize reflection, participation, initiative, and knowledge-making. These characteristics, therefore, make PWA a relevant case for examining how Islamic educational traditions are maintained, changed, and rearticulated through *Rahmah*-oriented pedagogy.

A historical-interpretive perspective examined how inherited educational traditions relate to modern changes (Blakely, 2013). It was used as an analytical lens to trace continuity, change, and rearticulation in educational values, teacher–student relationships, authority, and practices, not to reconstruct PWA's full history. Consequently, this approach allowed the study to connect the historical dimension of Islamic educational traditions with their contemporary pedagogical expressions, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of the ongoing evolution of educational practices. Table 1 captures the participants' profile and data collection techniques.

Table 1. Participant Profile and Data Collection Techniques

| No. | Pseudonym      | Role                                          | Data Collection Technique |
|-----|----------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1   | Participant 1  | Vice Principal of the Islamic Boarding School | Interview                 |
| 2   | Participant 2  | Vice Principal of Curriculum                  | Interview                 |
| 3   | Participant 3  | Biology Teacher and Homeroom Teacher          | Interview                 |
| 4   | Participant 4  | Female Student                                | Interview                 |
| 5   | Participant 5  | Female Student                                | Interview                 |
| 6   | Participant 6  | Male Student                                  | Interview                 |
| 7   | Participant 7  | Male Student                                  | Interview                 |
| 8   | Participant 8  | Male Student                                  | Interview                 |
| 9   | Participant 9  | Female Student                                | Interview                 |
| 10  | Participant 10 | Female Student                                | Interview                 |
| 11  | Participant 11 | Female Student                                | Interview                 |
| 12  | Participant 12 | Female Student                                | Open Ended Question       |
| 13  | Participant 13 | Male Student                                  | Open Ended Question       |
| 14  | Participant 14 | Male Student                                  | Open Ended Question       |
| 15  | Participant 15 | Male Student                                  | Open Ended Question       |
| 16  | Participant 16 | Female Student                                | Open Ended Question       |

As shown in Table 1, the study involved 16 participants selected through purposive sampling. These included key institutional figures, the vice principal of the Islamic boarding school, the vice principal of curriculum, and a biology teacher who also served as a homeroom teacher, all of whom participated in interviews. The remaining participants were students (both male and female); some participated in interviews, while others responded to open-ended questions. This combination of informants was designed to capture diverse perspectives from those who held strategic positions or had direct experience of the learning process at *Peacesantren Welas Asih*.

Qualitative research is conducted to explore issues and develop a detailed understanding of a phenomenon. It begins by stating the objectives and research questions in an open manner to effectively capture the experiences of participants. In addition, data collection is primarily based on words, as outlined by Creswell & Guetterman (2019), Lim (2025), Saliya (2022), and Timonen et al. (2024). The data sources involved in this study include both primary and secondary data. Specifically, primary data serve as the main source, obtained through various methods such as interviews, observations, documentation, open-ended questions, and digital archiving, as noted by Bouncken et al. (2025), Merriam & Tisdell (2016), Mills & Birks (2014), and Yin (2018). Meanwhile, secondary data are gathered from books, journal articles, and reports relevant to the research topic, providing additional contextual background. To collect this data effectively, several techniques were employed, including interviews and documentation, as described by Creswell (2014), Maxwell (2009), Mills & Birks (2014), and Patton (2015). The interview process specifically involved various informants: the vice principal of Pesantren, the vice principal of curriculum, teachers, homeroom teachers, and students. Importantly, informants were selected using purposive sampling, based on criteria outlined by Patton (2015) and Creswell & Poth (2018). These criteria ensured that participants were individuals who possessed significant knowledge about *Peacesantren Welas Asih*, held strategic positions, or had direct experience with the learning process in the pesantren.

The analysis began by organizing and reducing interview transcripts, observation notes, open-ended responses, and documents according to their relevance to the research questions. Subsequently, the data were then coded and grouped into analytical themes concerning: (1) continuity and rearticulation of Islamic educational traditions; (2) *Rahmah/Welas Asih* as an ethical-relational orientation; (3) pedagogical practices and the negotiation of authority; and (4) learner and epistemic agency and transformative learning experiences. The development and refinement of these themes were conducted iteratively by comparing patterns across diverse data sources, which is consistent with qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Finally, the interpretation was developed by relating these themes to the study's research questions and examining how Islamic educational traditions were recontextualized through *Rahmah*-oriented pedagogy at PWA, thereby highlighting the interconnectedness of these elements.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Continuity, the Rearticulation of Pesantren Traditions, and the Transformation of Authority through *Rahmah*

Historically, the development of pesantren has often been interpreted through the presence of the *Kyai* as the central figure in the authority structure (Mumtaz et al., 2024; Ridwan, 2026). In other words, the learning process takes place through a one-way transmission of knowledge, where the teacher imparts wisdom and the santri passively receive it. Along with this, obedience is also considered an essential quality for santri, serving as a foundation for discipline and harmony within the pesantren community. Obedience is a positive trait; however, such a system is often associated with the use of disciplinary measures against

students as a means of enforcement (Dhofier, 1982), which can sometimes create a strict and authoritarian environment. This system has persisted in many pesantren and, more broadly, in schools (Jarrah Anilon et al., 2026), shaping educational practices over generations. Over time, pesantren have evolved, giving rise to contemporary and modern pesantren that adapt to changing social contexts. In this context, *Peacesantren Welas Asih* stands as a contemporary pesantren that embodies a transformative form of continuity. This continuity is achieved by preserving the pesantren as an educational institution while integrating local wisdom and cultural values. In other words, while maintaining the traditional character of the pesantren, a process of rearticulation occurs by adopting *Welas Asih* as the local equivalent of *Rahmah*, emphasizing compassion and empathetic understanding.

*Peacesantren Welas Asih* is an Islamic educational institution in the form of a pesantren established in Samarang, Garut, West Java. *Peacesantren Welas Asih*'s vision is to nurture compassionate individuals who can provide solutions to the problems facing society and the world. Its mission is to provide education rooted in human nature by equipping students with an understanding and practice of a compassionate faith, as well as skills for social change. In this context, "*Welas Asih*" is understood as a manifestation of the value of "*Rahmah*" in Islam. This pesantren is regarded as a breeding ground for peacemakers and changemakers who follow the example of the Prophet Muhammad, who was sent to be a source of compassion for all creation, a concept known in *Islam as rahmatan lil alamin*. (Participant 4, personal communication, August 2025). The manifestation of *Rahmah* or *Welas Asih* within the pesantren environment is expressed through positive discipline, reflective relationships, and effective learning. Furthermore, Sundanese cultural elements also play a distinctive role in daily life at the pesantren. This is evident in the use of Sundanese terms to refer to male and female students as *aa* (male student) and *teteh* (female student), as well as the terms *Abah* (male teacher) and *Ambu* (female teacher). Over time, these linguistic practices have become one of the defining characteristics of *Peacesantren Welas Asih* (Participant 1, personal communication, June 2025). Ultimately, the use of the terms *Abah* and *Ambu* as forms of address for educators, alongside *aa* and *teteh* for students, has redefined the relationships fostered within the pesantren environment, reinforcing mutual respect and cultural identity.

Mostly, pesantren settings tend to create a hierarchical structure among students, teachers, and *Kyai*. However, these relationships have gradually transformed into ones that are more familial in nature (Humaidi et al., 2024; Mardia et al., 2026). In this context, the form of obedience continues automatically within this different articulation, as it relates to the emergence of an awareness of individual responsibilities, care, dialogue, and mutual respect (Participant 9, personal communication, August 2025; Participant 10, personal communication, August 2025). Furthermore, the cultural identity of the pesantren is maintained, yet the way traditions are upheld has evolved over time. In line with this, the foundation of *Rahmah*, which serves as the primary principle and core value deeply rooted in the pesantren ecosystem, demonstrates the existence of a model for fostering high-quality learning among students. This involves shared values, expertise, and effective strategies adopted by relevant educational institutions to cultivate a culture of education (Cleverley et al., 2026). Additionally, local wisdom, Islamic values, and the educational institution converge, forming an optimal combination for building an educational environment that effectively supports students' learning process. As the students expressed, many have experienced a knowledge-making journey rooted in the values of *Rahmah*, which they refer to as *Welas Asih*, highlighting the importance of these guiding principles.

In daily life, PWA implements a system of logical consequences. For instance, if a student is five minutes late to class, they do not receive a punishment; instead, they simply

attend the lesson until it ends. During recess, the student must make up the five minutes they were late by using that time for independent study. This approach is what is referred to as a logical consequence; there is no punishment, but there is a logical consequence. Moreover, internal awareness is prioritized, as the pesantren has a system based on mutual agreement and trust (Participant 2, personal communication, August 2025). Furthermore, PWA never gives rewards but consistently provides support; in addition, students are not taught to judge others but to learn to be understanding (Participant 1, personal communication, June 2025). Importantly, the educational focus on self-awareness sets this pesantren apart from most others. Consequently, this agreement system encourages students to build internal awareness (Participant 6, personal communication, August 2025). The terms of the agreement, therefore, encourage students to take responsibility and foster positive discipline. One student's testimony illustrated that a system of logical consequences can actually increase his sense of responsibility for his actions, because students feel more engaged and independent (Participant 6, personal communication, August 2025). Additionally, students who had previously attended other schools reported that this system differed markedly from what they had experienced elsewhere (Participant 4, personal communication, August 2025).

This articulation is also evident in changes to how educational authority is exercised. The strategy underpinning the implementation of best practices in compassion by the students is supported by a culture that places full trust in students who have reached the age of maturity to make their own choices and take their own actions. Thus, the teacher's role is to facilitate students in discovering and honing the interests and talents they have already identified (Munsinski, 2007; Withall, 1975; Zeng et al., 2025). These efforts, therefore, can be carried out in a careful, timely, humane, and embodied manner (Aljabaly et al., 2026; Nadlir et al., 2025). Because teachers' performance will have a significant impact on students (Huriyah et al., 2025), it is essential to recognize their influence in shaping student development. In this regard, there is room for greater student agency, as students are educated to develop the skills and capacity to take initiative, make choices, take responsibility, and chart the course of their own learning. The existence of this space indicates that personalized learning and student-centered learning approaches are powerful tools that contribute to the intellectual development of students. Supporting this, a study conducted by Aryani et al. (2024) states that creating space for student-centred learning can encourage critical thinking, increase student empowerment, foster respect, and help students overcome difficulties. Furthermore, Gregory et al. (2017), in the wider education literature, also support this direction of change, as an approach that fosters a sense of responsibility, rather than punishment, for students' actions is more likely to shape students' long-term responsibility.

The change can be seen in the transition from the teacher as the source of authority and knowledge to the teacher as a facilitator. The notion of teacher authority has traditionally been molded around the teacher's role as a knower (Badley et al., 2022; Madsen et al., 2024; Reimers & Martinsson, 2026). Consequently, the role of educators in PWA is not interpreted in a rigid sense, such as that of a teacher who transfers knowledge, but rather as that of a facilitator and mentor. This shift does not diminish the educator's role; rather, it relocates their authority from control over students to guidance of their learning process, thereby keeping the teacher central to, rather than distant from, students' development. In practice, when teaching students, teachers allow ample scope for students' curiosity, which, in turn, encourages them to seek answers for themselves. This approach is balanced by the teachers providing a proportionate amount of explanation of the subject matter (Participant 5, personal communication, August 2025). Additionally, the students are also free to ask their teachers questions (Participant 14, personal communication, August 2025). It means that when students make mistakes, the teacher does not blame them but rather gives them the

opportunity to reflect on and consider their actions (Rahman, 2016). Furthermore, teachers become caring individuals, as compassion shapes an educator's character (Douwes et al., 2023). In this regard, teachers support students' self-esteem by encouraging, helping struggling students, preventing humiliation, and relating learning to students' experiences. Continuity, change, and rearticulation work together in shaping PWA's educational landscape. These elements reflect PWA's specific context, not the overall pesantren tradition.

Hence, *Rahmah* may be seen as an agent that rearticulates tradition and alters the authority relations in the pesantren. Tradition is reflected in Islamic values, the *Abah–Ambu* relationship with students, religious learning, and the pesantren life; however, all are given a new direction through reflective relationships, positive discipline, and effective learning. Now, the students are no longer simply receivers of knowledge but human beings who have their dignity, experiences, curiosity, and capacity to actively construct their knowledge. In light of this, *Rahmah* is not merely added onto the educational system; rather, it is a principle that fundamentally transforms the practice of the educational system itself. This transformation shapes teaching, error correction, decision-making, and student self-expression. The PWA process isn't abandoning pesantren traditions but making them relevant for today's students. These traditions remain vibrant and evolving, based on caring, trust, responsibility, and humanity.

Moreover, the rearticulation of tradition and the transformation of authority do not occur in isolation, but rather as two aspects of the same process, maintaining the pesantren as an Islamic educational institution without the reproduction of power structures that make complicity an end. In this way, *Rahmah* can be said to serve as a principle that enables the pesantren to carry out what can be termed reflective inheritance by continually questioning and rethinking the meaning of tradition in light of the needs of the pesantren's students. Therefore, continuity, rearticulation of tradition, and the process of transformation of authority can thus be regarded as an integrated and mutually constitutive process, and not as a mere series of coincidental events in the history of PWA. Interpreted through the study's relational and humanistic lens, this translation holds particular significance because *Rahmah* does not remain an abstract norm; instead, it shapes the relational conditions of education through care, dignity, dialogue, facilitation, and responsiveness. As such, this analytical progression can be described in four stages. It begins as an Islamic ethical value, then becomes embedded as a localized institutional ethos, takes shape as a pedagogical orientation, and ultimately manifests as observable pedagogical practice.

This structural integration is vividly reflected in PWA's curriculum design. The *Peacesantren Welas Asih* (PWA) curriculum is based on the National Education Curriculum; however, it has subsequently been adapted into modules specifically tailored for Islamic boarding schools (Participant 2, personal communication, August 2025). The curriculum includes 10 modules, which range from topics such as the universe to personal reflections on "myself," and from national identity in "My Indonesia" to familial concepts in "My Family." For instance, a module on the universe contains cumulative content that incorporates elements of mathematics, literacy, *Tauhid*, *Nahwu*, and *Sharaf*, all seamlessly integrated into a holistic whole. Moreover, in another module, elements of faith, Islam, and *Ihsan* are thoughtfully intertwined with elements of science, the Qur'an, and *Hadith*, creating a comprehensive learning experience (Participant 1, personal communication, August 2025).

This pedagogical orientation also provides the foundation for the other dimensions of the integrated framework. By shaping facilitative teacher roles, reflective learning, positive discipline, and opportunities for student participation, *Rahmah* creates relational conditions through which learners can exercise epistemic agency, questioning, interpreting, choosing,

solving problems, and contributing to knowledge-making rather than merely receiving established knowledge. Moreover, at the same time, the integration of curricular learning with reflection, experience, and application connects formal knowledge with the experiential and tacit dimensions of knowing emphasized by Polanyi (1966). The significance of *Rahmah* at PWA, therefore, lies not only in its institutional presence but also in its capacity to connect Islamic ethical orientation, relational pedagogy, epistemic agency, and experiential knowledge-making within a coherent pedagogical process. Thus, this approach extends humanistic and transformative approaches in Islamic education (Nadlir et al., 2025; Mujahid & Muqowim, 2026) by explicitly demonstrating how an Islamic ethical principle can become pedagogically operative, thus shaping both the conditions of learning and students' participation in knowing.

### **Emerging Epistemic Agency and Transformative Pedagogy**

In the educational process, learners do not merely serve as recipients of knowledge but also possess the capacity to engage in defining, constructing, and developing the knowledge they acquire (Pohlhaus, 2020; Fouché, 2025). This perspective aligns with the concept of epistemic agency, which positions learners as individuals who possess the capacity, rights, and responsibilities in the process of knowledge making (Zhang et al., 2022). Moreover, this picture is evident in the learning practices at *Peacesantren Welas Asih*, where students' involvement extends beyond mere participation to the ability to ask questions, express ideas, follow their curiosity, and seek and develop answers based on their experiences. The *Rahmah*-based educational approach provides the space that enables this process to take place, fostering an environment where learners can thrive. In this context, students are not confined to the role of mere recipients of knowledge predetermined by the teacher but are encouraged to actively engage in the process of discovering meaning and constructing understanding. Students are beings in learning, with dignity, relationality, and moral potential. Teachers, social environment, learning experiences, and interactions in the pesantren all support and shape their development.

Therefore, knowledge at PWA can be understood not as a product merely transmitted from teachers to students, but as the result of a dynamic and dialogic process. In this process, students take part in shaping, interpreting, and developing knowledge based on their experiences and interactions with their environment. Furthermore, epistemic agency is not limited to the students' ability to manage their own learning independently; rather, students use the knowledge and experiences they gain to interpret reality, build understanding, and determine their responses to the challenges they face. Consequently, the transformative experience at PWA interweaves three interconnected dimensions: knowledge, self-awareness, and action. Students not only learn to recognize themselves and understand their environment, but also build knowledge through these experiences and use it to bring about change in their daily lives. Even if that change begins with simple actions, it can lead to meaningful transformation.

One core element introduced is a distinctive learning model known as ARCA, which comprises Activities, Reflection, Concepts, and Application (Participant 1, personal communication, June 2025; Participant 12, personal communication, August 2025). The ARCA model serves as both a strategy and a teaching method employed by Abah-Ambu when teaching (Participant 1, personal communication, June 2025; Participant 12, personal communication, August 2025). The ARCA model is typically implemented in classroom teaching. To illustrate, Abah and Ambu, who teach each subject, apply this method to foster an active learning environment. Furthermore, the use of this method aims to reduce boredom and make lessons more effective (Participant 2, personal communication, August 2025). The implementation of the ARCA method begins with an activity designed to stimulate the

students to think and ask questions. If this initial stimulation is successful, the students are then guided to reflect deeply on the questions in their minds. This process also serves as a strategic approach to develop students' critical thinking skills. Only when questions arise does the teacher explain the concepts that address them. Following this, an application activity takes place in which students are encouraged to conduct various experiments or trials on a subject aligned with the topic being taught (Participant 3, personal communication, August 2025). The ARCA method, therefore, helps students develop the motivation to seek knowledge independently, which is then complemented by the teacher's explanations regarding the questions they have raised (Participant 2, personal communication, August 2025). In this context, teachers provide various learning stimuli such as engaging students in an activity (Hartikainen et al., 2023; Keiler, 2018), demonstrating relevant examples, providing scaffolding (Dominguez & Svihla, 2023; Watts et al., 1997), offering constructive feedback, guiding discussions, and accommodating the curiosity that naturally arises in students.

Students are also taught to become problem solvers through the project-based or problem-based learning model. Specifically, students are educated to become individuals capable of solving problems (Participant 13, personal communication, August 2025; Participant 7, personal communication, August 2025). This approach is further complemented by the implementation of the 'Design for Change' method. To ensure that students can fully grasp the concept of 'Design for Change', the boarding school introduces the FIDS method's 'feeling' process, in which students learn to recognize and understand the issues that will be the focus of their attention. Subsequently, students learn to devise solutions during the 'imagine' phase. Once a solution has been identified, students move on to the 'execute' phase, also known as 'do'. Following this, students share the solutions they have identified, reviewed, or developed with the community in the 'share' phase (Participant 15, personal communication, August 2025; Participant 16, personal communication, August 2025). This method has left a lasting impression, significantly increasing their awareness of the issues surrounding them (Participant 10, personal communication, August 2025). Students have created projects like a chicken tunnel and eco-friendly bins (Participant 8, personal communication, August 2025), along with other innovative products. Grade 12 students produce a scientific paper on a problem. Overall, student engagement is shown through active learning activities, such as responding to stimuli via discussion spaces, promoting a responsive classroom environment (Willison, 2024).

Subsequently, learning and a culture centered on the values of *Welas Asih* in pesantren foster an awareness among students to become individuals who have a positive impact on both their immediate surroundings and the wider community. A student feels that the value of compassion taught at school has made him an empathetic person (Participant 10, personal communication, August 2025). Many students revealed that, at first, their empathy was limited to other people; however, over time, they were able to extend their empathy to the environment and other animals as well (Participant 11, personal communication, August 2025). The value of *Rahmah* is also cultivated as a character trait of compassion, enabling students to develop good character, take action, and make a positive impact. Consequently, from these patterns, an educational ecosystem is formed that is grounded in strong Islamic values not only within the formal learning system but also fosters a humanistic approach. In other words, integrating cognitive, spiritual, and behavioural dimensions becomes a source of strength for the pesantren itself (Mujahid & Muqowim, 2026). Learning and knowledge creation are thus not merely activities to pass the time; rather, they represent a long journey toward self-discovery, developing sensitivity to one's surroundings, and becoming a person who brings meaningful contributions and impacts, whether on a grand scale or in even the

simplest and smallest ways. Furthermore, critical thinking and interest play a crucial role in instructional development, primarily by shaping instructional strategy (Usiono et al., 2026), ensuring that the learning process remains connected, relevant, and effective.

Reflecting on the experiences that emerge at PWA indicates that knowledge does not exist in isolation but is formed through interactions with various elements within the pesantren, such as students with teachers, the principal, the social environment, and the school setting (Pontecorvo, 1993). Furthermore, it is important to note that knowledge is shaped by the learning and teaching experiences that students undergo (Green & Joo, 2016). The quality of these experiences, therefore, depends heavily on the educational design implemented in pesantren management, as this design influences both student well-being and engagement (Manca et al., 2020). In this regard, the management of Pesantren relies heavily on the ability to make informed decisions and to design effective educational models for implementation (Wise, 1985). Consequently, the presence of a core value serves as a guiding principle for Islamic boarding schools to direct the overall educational approach for students. Additionally, knowledge is built through a reflective process; thus, it is not sufficient to merely possess factual knowledge. Theological principles are the foundation for educational models in Islamic education and should be explored deeply. Challenges often treat religious values as mere content (Asnawi & Zuhdi, 2025), but these values can serve as the basis and orientation for education. For example, *Rahmah* in Pesantren *Welas Asih* shows that when learning is deeply rooted in students' hearts and minds, it can lead to meaningful educational outcomes.

ARCA, FIDS, project-based learning, and personalized learning foster epistemic agency by repositioning students from participants in learning activities to contributors in the processes through which knowledge is questioned, interpreted, applied, and produced. This distinction is important because active participation does not necessarily constitute agency if learners continue to work entirely within questions, interpretations, and solutions predetermined by teachers (Aragao & Malibari, 2026). At PWA, however, ARCA enables students to move from activity to questioning, reflection, conceptualization, and application; FIDS involves them in identifying problems, imagining responses, acting on selected solutions, and sharing outcomes. Furthermore, project-based learning extends this process through investigation and problem solving; meanwhile, personalized learning allows inquiry to connect with students' interests and aspirations. These patterns collectively support scholarship that reconceptualizes learners as contributors rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Fouché, 2025). In addition, they align with research on student-centered Islamic learning, teacher facilitation, project-based learning, and Design for Change (Aryani et al., 2024; Aljabaly et al., 2026; Guo et al., 2020; Allende & Luttenberg, 2021). Therefore, epistemic agency emerges when students are given structured opportunities, not only to engage with knowledge but also to influence the questions, problems, interpretations, decisions, applications, and solutions through which knowing develops.

Finally, the pesantren case provides an empirical basis for articulating what a *Rahmah*-based philosophy of Islamic education might entail. *Rahmah* can function not merely as an Islamic value to be transmitted, but as a principle through which Islamic pedagogy is designed, enacted, and experienced. Moreover, the ecosystem of *Rahmah* and its operationalization through instructional learning demonstrate that a locally rooted Islamic value can function not merely as an institutional ethos, but as a coherent pedagogical model. This model is, in turn, capable of repositioning students from passive recipients into active producers of knowledge. Consequently, it offers an alternative pathway for Islamic education beyond the transmissive paradigm that continues to dominate much of pesantren scholarship.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the relationship between continuity and change, as well as rearticulation, takes place concurrently in the educational tradition of *Peacesantren Welas Asih*. The principle of *Rahmah* is manifested as *Welas Asih* in the local articulation, which is maintained in the curriculum, the evaluation system, and the disciplinary system. This is achieved by preserving the constitutive elements as signs of Islamic identity while simultaneously providing a structural reorganization of the curriculum, evaluation system and disciplinary system. The authority that educators exert in this process is not negated; rather, it is transferred from a previous pattern of supervision and compliance, and space is made for some dialogic relationship that allows for negotiation of student agency without losing their connection to institutional structures. Furthermore, through ARCA, project- and problem-based learning, and FIDS, opportunities are created for the emergence of emerging epistemic agency, defined as students' early involvement in questioning, inquiry, and application. However, this remains incomplete, as it does not yet constitute full epistemic autonomy. Additionally, students reported changes in their ways of thinking, empathy, and self-understanding, which are understood as transformative experiences rather than causal relationships that can be longitudinally tested. Therefore, *Rahmah* represents the ability to connect the rearticulation of tradition, the shifting of authority, and the emergence of students' epistemic agency. It exemplifies a model of Islamic education that remains deeply rooted in the pesantren tradition yet is adaptable to the needs of modern education.

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