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Total Quality Character Education (TQCE) in Pesantren Life: An Autoethnographic Journey.

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Abstract

This study explores how the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) are internalized and interpreted as Total Quality Character Education (TQCE) within pesantren life. Using an autoethnographic method, the researcher reflects on personal experiences as a student and administrator in two Indonesian pesantren, examining the formation of character through daily discipline, peer leadership, and symbolic guidance from the kyai. Data were gathered through reflexive journaling, document analysis, and embedded interactional notes, then analyzed using Spradley's 12-step ethnographic framework. The findings reveal that TQCE is not only a character education model but also a lived culture grounded in ritual consistency (standardization), collective governance (peer accountability), and moral exemplarity (kyai leadership). Routines such as tahajjud, musyawarah, and muhasabah served as formative practices shaping discipline and responsibility. Peer mentoring fostered collective responsibility, while the kyai's symbolic leadership became the spiritual anchor guiding values and behaviors. This study concludes that TQCE integrates the procedural strength of TQM with the spiritual-cultural fabric of pesantren, offering a sustainable framework for holistic character formation.

Keywords: Character Education, Pesantren, Total Quality Management, Autoethnography, Moral Leadership

1. Introduction

Pesantren is the oldest Islamic educational institution in Indonesia that plays a significant role in shaping the nation's character. In the pesantren education system, the educational process does not only occur in the classroom, but also through social interaction, exemplary, habituation, and sustainable discipline. The collective and hierarchical environment of pesantren enables the organic formation of religious values, responsibility, and independency ([1];[2]; [3]; [4]; [5]; [6]). Moreover, the hierarchical structure—with the kyai as spiritual and intellectual leader—and collective life in the pesantren create solidarity, social cohesion, and mutual respect. Intensive interaction among community members strengthens the formation of social values, empathy, and tolerance ([7]; [8]).

This comprehensive approach to character development is concretized through various established

principles and leadership systems within pesantren. [9] mentioned that the character of santri is formed through 12 principles of pesantren life, such as exemplary, collective responsibility, and active involvement in coaching. In the context of multicultural boarding schools, [10] showed that the santri leadership system formed through cross-cultural culture also enriches the value of leadership characters that are inclusive and adaptive to the complexity of the times.

Several studies enrich this discourse by showing the importance of learning innovation and process strengthening in improving the quality of character education. For example, [11] shows how the use of Padlet media can strengthen interaction and reflection on values in online learning. [12] and [13] highlighted that collaboration-based learning strategies and responsiveness to student needs have a direct effect on character attainment and active engagement.

However, despite the strong contextual practice of character education in pesantren, a systemic and scientific approach to character education quality management is still minimal. In the context of formal education, Total Quality Management (TQM) principles—such as continuous improvement, customer focus, evidence-based decision making, and leadership—have been proven to increase institutional effectiveness and learner satisfaction ([14]; [15]; [16]). [17] underlined that the application of TQM can be a strategy to strengthen character values when adapted contextually in religious value-based education. Thus, the need to synergise TQM in the practice of character education in pesantren is important so that pesantren not only survive culturally but also excel managerially.

Several studies have begun to explore how quality management is applied in Islamic education institutions. [18] noted that quality principles in Islamic education can strengthen the quality of governance when combined with the spiritual values of the institution. However, these studies often do not explicitly integrate TQM principles into a comprehensive pesantren-based character education model. [19] emphasized that quality-based character management must be designed systemically, not just ceremonially. [3], [7], and [20] for example, found that character education in modern pesantren emphasizes moderation and integration of traditional and contextual values but has not explicitly adopted TQM principles in its model. Similarly, [21] showed that character development in pesantren is carried out through the *taghyir* method which emphasizes changes in religious attitudes and discipline but does not link systemically with the TQM framework.

This gap—the lack of explicit integration of TQM principles into pesantren-based character education models—is an important area to be filled, especially with a self-reflective approach such as autoethnography, which allows exploration of the meaning of internalisation of character and quality based on concrete experiences in the pesantren ecosystem. The Total Quality Character Education (TQCE) model is then offered as a synthesis between TQM principles and pesantren character education practices. TQCE does not only talk about the quality of learning or academic output, but also the quality of character that is internalised through a system of coaching, exemplary, and continuous evaluation. In this construction, character is not only the ultimate goal, but also part of the process of continuous quality improvement ([22]; [23]; [24]). Character assessment based on experience and socio-religious context is also an important part of efforts to ensure the sustainability of values lived together in pesantren ([22]).

In the context of leadership, Kyai in pesantren is a central figure who leads the transmission of quality values and culture through his role as a link in the inheritance of cultural and religious values ([25]), shaping the attitude of students through exemplary behaviour ([26]), and guiding and directing the performance of teaching staff ([27]). Kyai is not only a spiritual leader, but also a value model and social quality controller in the pesantren community. The study by [23] shows that transformational and collective leadership based on religious values forms a strong organisational culture in maintaining the integrity and sustainability of santri characters. In this system, Kyai acts as a change agent who distributes values through informal relations, habituation, and exemplary

behaviour, all of which form the foundation for a vibrant and dynamic TQCE model in pesantren.

The autoethnographic approach in this study is relevant because it is able to capture the deepest dimensions of the experience of being a santri and pesantren administrator, namely the reflective, emotional, spiritual, and transformational dimensions. [28] and [29] explained that autoethnography not only presents a narrative of experience but also constructs cultural reality from within the participant who doubles as a researcher. In this context, personal experience as a santri and administrator for more than ten years allows in-depth reflection on how the value of character quality is formed through daily interactions, Kyai's exemplary behaviour, and the ongoing coaching process in the pesantren environment.

Based on this explanation, this study aims to: (1) explore in depth how the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) are internalised and interpreted in the practice of character education in pesantren through the researcher's personal experience, (2) describe how the dynamics of interaction between santri, seniors, administrators, ustad, and Kyai contribute to forming a total quality-based character ecosystem (TQCE), and (3) examine the example of Kyai as a spiritual and social leader to be the main axis in the implementation of structured and systemically organised character values in the pesantren environment.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This research employed a qualitative approach using an autoethnographic method, which allows the researcher to critically reflect upon personal experiences within the pesantren system while situating those experiences in broader cultural and institutional contexts. Autoethnography is particularly suitable for understanding deeply embedded cultural processes like Total Quality Character Education (TQCE) because it blends personal narrative, cultural interpretation, and theoretical insight ([28]; [29]).

This study is positioned within the interpretive paradigm, where knowledge is constructed through reflective engagement with lived experience. The research seeks to understand how the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) were internalized and recontextualized as TQCE through the daily life and cultural practices of pesantren, as experienced by the researcher himself. The scope covers character development, leadership dynamics, institutional governance, ritual practices, and peer relationships within the pesantren ecosystem.

The object of this research is the cultural implementation of TQCE in pesantren life, analyzed through the researcher's own trajectory as a santri, senior santri, and pesantren administrator. It involves: (1) The internalization of TQM principles (e.g., continuous improvement, systemic leadership) in pesantren life; (2) Character education practices rooted in religious tradition and communal discipline; (3) Leadership modeling by kyai and other senior figures.

2.2 Operational Definition of Focus

Social Status in Pesantren life: In the pattern of interaction with Kyai, the status of "Santri (Students, both junior and senior), "Pesantren administrators (musyrif)", "Ustadz (teacher)", and "Alumni" will remain the same, namely "Santri". Showing that the status of "Kyai" and "Santri" never changes. However, in administrative positions and social interactions other than with Kyai, these statuses will apply.

TQCE refers to a holistic character education model based on TQM principles—emphasizing discipline, accountability, continuous improvement, and stakeholder involvement—as contextualized within the pesantren setting.

Autoethnographic reflection involves introspective engagement with personal memory, documents, cultural interaction, and lived practices that form meaning within a religious institutional context.

These three dimensions—personal internalization of TQM, actor-based practice, and kyai-centered modeling—formed the main analytical domains that guided the thematic structure of this autoethnographic inquiry.

2.3 Research Setting

The setting of the study includes two pesantren environments: (1) Pondok Pesantren An-Najah, PP Mambaul Maarif Denanyar (Ponpes Denanyar), Jombang City: where foundational religious and character values were first instilled, (2) Pondok Pesantren Miftahul Huda (Pondok Gading), Malang City: where the researcher grew into leadership roles as a musyrif, administrator, and community organizer.

2.4 Population and Informants

In line with the nature of autoethnography, the researcher serves as the main informant, with lived experience as the principal source of data. To enhance analytical depth and cultural triangulation, additional data were drawn from: Santri's, Alumni's, Ustadz's who were involved in character formation and Kyai's who led educational and institutional processes. These individuals were not formally interviewed but contributed through prior interpersonal interactions and memory-based reflections documented by the researcher. The researcher's immersion in multiple social roles—junior santri, senior, musyrif, and administrator—enabled a multilayered reflection that enriched the cultural analysis.

2.5 Main Sources and Instruments

The primary sources of data included: (1) Personal documents: diaries, notes, regulations, schedules, and institutional memos, (2) Reflexive narratives: written accounts of daily practices, rituals, and leadership dynamics, (3) Organizational artifacts: including task manuals, evaluation sheets, and meeting protocols, (4) Embedded impression notes: records of interactions with santri, ustadz, alumni and kyai, captured in the form of emotional impressions, remembered conversations, and behavioral modeling. Instruments consisted of reflexive journaling templates, self-inquiry prompts, and thematic coding sheets based on TQCE categories.

2.6 Techniques of Data Collection

The procedure of data collection in this autoethnographic study was organized into three complementary stages to ensure validity and depth of reflection.

1. Narrative Writing and Self-Reflection

The researcher consistently maintained reflective journals and autobiographical notes to reconstruct personal experiences as santri and administrator. Notes were written daily after routine activities such as prayers, communal chores, study sessions, and meetings. These narratives were compiled chronologically to capture both transformation and continuity in the internalization of values.

2. Document Analysis

Official documents of the pesantren—including institutional regulations, schedules, meeting records, and evaluation sheets—were collected. These documents were examined to provide contextual grounding and to identify how discipline, collective responsibility, and accountability were formally embedded into pesantren life.

3. Embedded Interactional Notetaking

Instead of formal interviews, data were derived from everyday interactions with santri, musyrif,

administrators, ustadz, alumni, and the kyai. After each significant encounter (e.g., musyawarah discussions, mentoring sessions, or communal worship), the researcher wrote impression notes to capture atmosphere, tone, and meaning. These notes preserved emotional nuance and cultural resonance often missed in structured interviews.

The entire data collection followed a cyclical process: (a) immersion in daily life, (b) recording narratives and impressions, (c) triangulating with institutional documents, and (d) reflective revisiting to refine interpretations. This iterative cycle ensured that data were rich, multilayered, and contextually grounded, making them suitable for subsequent ethnographic analysis.

2.7 Technique of Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study followed the 12-step ethnographic protocol of [30], which was adapted to the autoethnographic orientation of the research. Rather than treating the steps as rigidly sequential, the analysis unfolded in an iterative and reflexive manner, with continuous movement between domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, componential analysis, and theme analysis. Each stage was deeply infused with reflexivity, narrative writing, and theoretical interpretation, making the process both systematic and self-reflective.

As presented in Figure 1, it illustrates the adapted 12-step analytical protocol applied in this study. It visualizes how the researchers, as both a subject and analyst, moved cyclically through data immersion, coding, categorization, and thematic synthesis, before returning to reflective writing. The flow chart emphasizes the iterative nature of autoethnographic inquiry, showing the integration of narrative reflection with ethnographic rigor.

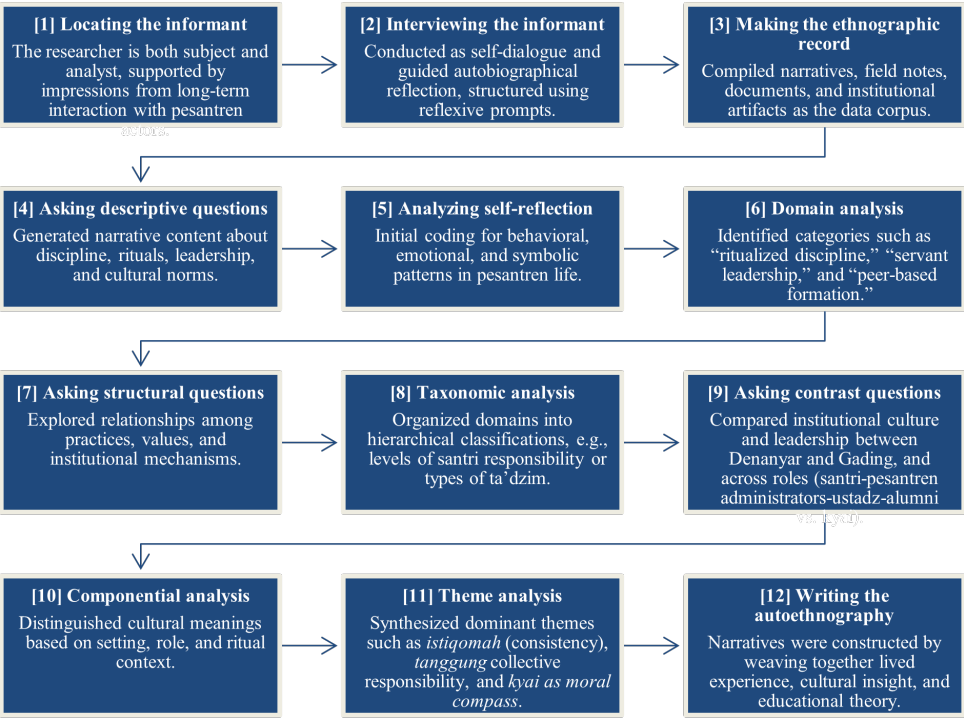


Figure 1. Procedures and Techniques of Data Analysis.

The process began with locating and interviewing the informant, where the researcher positioned

himself simultaneously as subject and analyst. This dual role was supported by long-term impressions gained through immersion in pesantren life. Guided autobiographical reflection and self-dialogue, structured with reflexive prompts, helped the researcher to surface latent meanings embedded in daily experiences. The next step involved making the ethnographic record, which entailed compiling field notes, reflective journals, institutional documents, and other cultural artifacts into a coherent corpus.

Once the data corpus was established, the researcher moved into descriptive and structural questioning. Descriptive questions allowed the extraction of narrative accounts concerning discipline, rituals, leadership, and cultural norms, while structural questions helped to map the interconnections among practices, values, and institutional mechanisms. Analyzing self-reflection further provided an initial layer of coding, particularly identifying behavioral, emotional, and symbolic patterns in pesantren life.

From this foundation, the analysis proceeded to domain and taxonomic analysis. Domain analysis identified central categories, such as ritualized discipline, servant leadership, and peer-based formation, which were then organized hierarchically during taxonomic analysis to reveal relationships between roles, responsibilities, and rituals. Asking contrast questions enriched this process by comparing institutional culture across pesantren (e.g., Denanyar and Gading) and across different roles (santri, musyrif, administrators, ustadz, alumni, and kyai).

To sharpen cultural interpretation, componential analysis was conducted to distinguish the meanings of similar practices across different contexts, such as varying levels of ta'dzim or collective responsibilities. Finally, theme analysis synthesized the findings into dominant cultural themes that characterized Total Quality Character Education (TQCE) in pesantren. These included istiqomah (consistency), collective responsibility, and the kyai as a moral compass.

The entire analytic journey culminated in writing the autoethnography, where lived experience, cultural insight, and theoretical perspectives were woven into narrative form. This narrative construction not only presented findings but also demonstrated the dynamic integration of personal reflection and cultural analysis. This analytical protocol allowed the researcher to thematize cultural meaning while maintaining the depth of personal narrative, ensuring that the story of pesantren life is not only told, but systematically interpreted. These twelve steps yielded key cultural domains discussed in the findings section, namely: ritualized discipline, collective governance, and symbolic leadership.

3. Results And Discussion

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Internalization of TQCE Principles through Personal Experience

The principles of Total Quality Character Education (TQCE) are not introduced as abstract theories but are absorbed through daily lived experiences within the pesantren system. The researcher's experience—first as a new student, then as a musyrif (senior student), and later as an assistant in student leadership—shows how consistent routines, spiritual discipline, and social responsibilities cultivated character and instilled internal standards of quality. These experiences represent how TQM principles such as standardization, continuous improvement, and leadership commitment become spiritually and socially embodied as part of a student's life.

In the first year, the researcher experienced structured daily activities, including waking up at 3:30 a.m. for tahajjud prayers, collective Qur'an recitation, dormitory cleaning, and nightly muhasabah. These routines provided the foundation for punctuality and self-discipline.

"I didn't understand why we had to wake up so early,"

The researcher noted in a journal entry, "but later I realized those hours shaped how I began managing time, even outside pesantren." These repetitive rituals reflected cultural standardization that aligns with the TQM principle of consistency in performance.

As a musyrif, the researcher assumed responsibility for mentoring junior students. When some failed to attend early prayers, he avoided punitive measures. Instead, he invited them to reflect on their roles. One evening over tea, he said, "We're being trained not just to keep our rooms clean, but to keep our intentions clean too." The following days saw improved participation, highlighting the role of reflective dialogue as a mechanism of continuous improvement. These encounters supported the notion that transformation occurs not through formal punishment but through personal connection and moral reasoning.

Later, as a vice chair of student affairs, the researcher joined weekly forums to evaluate responsibilities across divisions. Data such as task completion rates and room inspection outcomes were reviewed. In one meeting, a student proposed a dishwashing rotation to improve fairness. The proposal was accepted, and within two weeks, task compliance improved noticeably. These sessions became laboratories for participatory evaluation and problem-solving. Students weren't mere followers—they were contributors to the quality system.

Table 1. TQM Principles Internalized through TQCE Experiences.

TQM Principle	Personal Experience	Interpretation as TQCE
Standardization	Repeating daily spiritual and social routines	Building consistent discipline and order
Continuous Improvement	Coaching juniors through reflective dialogue	Enhancing moral awareness via emotional engagement
Leadership Commitment	Modeling punctuality, integrity, and responsibility as musyrif	Character-based leadership, not positional enforcement
Participatory Decision	Weekly evaluation forums with peer proposals	Building collective accountability and ownership

3.1.2 The Collective Role of Actors in TQCE Implementation

TQCE in pesantren is not a top-down system; it evolves through multi-level interactions involving all actors—students, musyrif, administrators, teachers, and the kyai. Character development is not enforced but lived and reinforced collectively. The researcher witnessed how musyawarah (deliberative forums), peer evaluation, and shared responsibilities nurtured a culture of mutual accountability. In one forum, a musyrif said:

"We are not enforcers; we are companions. If you fail to wake up for prayer, I've failed to wake you."

This statement reflects the collective approach to quality—individual behavior is seen as a reflection of the communal system. During weekly evaluation meetings, each division reported problems and proposed solutions collaboratively. For instance, when the kitchen team complained about students avoiding dishwashing duties, the ibadah (worship) division suggested linking the task to a spiritual reflection during a sermon. Participation improved because responsibility was reframed as part of worship, not labor.

This shows that TQCE is practiced through horizontal modeling and inter-role cooperation, where the community becomes a dynamic system of character formation. Tasks are not mere obligations

but meaningful contributions to shared goals, which integrates spiritual, ethical, and operational domains.

3.1.3 Kyai's Symbolic Leadership as the Core of TQCE

At the apex of the pesantren character system stands the kyai, whose leadership is not managerial but symbolic and spiritual. The kyai's influence is transmitted through presence, behavior, and symbolic actions. In one memorable experience, the researcher witnessed the kyai walking from room to room gently knocking and greeting students to wake them for morning prayer. He did not shout or issue orders, yet his presence moved students to act.

"When the kyai woke us, it felt like being woken by our own father. There was warmth and dignity. We promised never to make him come down again,"

In another case, a senior student shared:

"I never saw the kyai angry. But his words touched our hearts. Once, when many students were sleeping during class, our teacher conveyed the kyai's message: 'Knowledge is light, and light does not enter dark hearts.' I felt personally corrected without being offended."

The kyai's symbolic presence inspired self-evaluation and transformation. His model was emulated by teachers, musyrif, and senior students, creating a tiered system of role-modeling. The kyai was not just a spiritual leader but the embodiment of character values. His leadership served as the living curriculum of the institution.

3.2 Discussion

This study reveals that Total Quality Character Education (TQCE) in pesantren is not simply a framework for moral instruction—it is a lived, communal system where quality is nurtured through embedded routines, relational role-modeling, and spiritual leadership. Drawing from autoethnographic reflections, this research demonstrates how TQM principles are contextualized through culture and translated into values-driven education.

In terms of internalization (Research Focus 1), [28] argue that values are most deeply internalized when they intersect with emotion, memory, and body. The repeated experience of waking early for prayer, cleaning, and group recitation aligns with what [30] calls "cultural scenes," in which behavior and meaning are mutually reinforcing. In this sense, standardization within TQCE is not mechanistic—it is formative. [9] observed similar dynamics in pesantren where habits like *ta'dzim* and *istiqomah* arise from repetition, not instruction.

Character development also emerges from reflection and dialogue. The researcher's use of gentle coaching—inviting juniors to see themselves as future leaders—echoes Deweyan pragmatism and TQM's emphasis on continuous improvement ([14]). Notably, this approach strengthens what [31] terms "moral ownership": the idea that stakeholders participate in the shaping of communal standards. This aligns with broader findings in character education, where studies show the direct influence of character education on student behavior ([32]) and the effectiveness of various implementation strategies, even in diverse contexts like during a pandemic ([33]). Such findings underscore the pervasive impact of structured character development processes.

In the governance domain (Research Focus 2), the role of actors across the pesantren system highlights the importance of distributed leadership. Weekly discussion forums mirror TQM's PDCA cycle—plan, do, check, act—where each unit reports and evaluates. This participatory model was observed by [23] as central to religious-based institutions with collective leadership cultures. Furthermore, peer accountability was not merely disciplinary but formative—students corrected each

other with empathy. This dynamic parallels [16] assertion that mutual trust and cooperation are essential in moral-educational settings. These practices resonate deeply with the broader principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) as applied within Islamic educational contexts, aiming to enhance institutional quality and character formation through an integrated approach.

Total Quality Management (TQM) in Islamic education aims to enhance the quality and competitiveness of institutions through an integrated management approach that adapts Islamic values and fosters comprehensive stakeholder participation. Its core objectives include producing graduates with high intellectual, skilled, and social competencies ([34]), while fundamentally instilling Islamic values such as honesty, responsibility, and *ihsan* through daily programs like *muhasabah*, *dzikir*, and Islamic-based evaluations ([35]). Key implementation strategies involve reviewing the institution's vision and mission for character building ([36]), establishing rigorous quality standards and positive habituation ([36]; [37]), fostering participatory leadership to boost teacher motivation and external relations ([36]; [35]), and promoting deep collaboration among teachers, parents, and the broader community ([35]).

Despite its potential, TQM implementation in Islamic education faces challenges such as overcoming low work culture and discipline among staff ([34]; [37]), managing limitations in budget, facilities, and infrastructure ([37]), and ensuring seamless system integration that can otherwise hinder student character development ([37]). Nevertheless, the positive impacts are significant: TQM, when integrated with Islamic values, has proven effective in shaping the character and discipline of *santri* ([36]; [35]). It also leads to improved organizational performance, mediated by factors like teacher involvement, a positive school climate, and job satisfaction ([38]; [39]), ultimately supporting the achievement of quality education in line with sustainable development goals ([40]). In conclusion, successful TQM in Islamic education hinges on the integration of Islamic values, active stakeholder participation, and robust character building, all of which are influenced by institutional culture, available resources, and effective participatory leadership.

In the domain of symbolic leadership (Research Focus 3), the *kyai*'s role embodies what [41] refers to as "the spiritual anchor of institutional values." The symbolic leadership of the *kyai* in *pesantren* is widely regarded as central to instilling institutional and moral values. The *kyai*'s role extends beyond formal management; they serve as a spiritual exemplar whose presence profoundly shapes the culture and behavior of the *santri*, even without direct instruction. His subtle presence, such as gently waking students for prayer or remaining calm in times of tension, created a powerful moral force. This moral leadership through real-life examples of patience, humility, and discipline is observed to be more effective than formal rules in shaping *santri* behavior ([42]; [43]; [44], [45]).

The *kyai* acts as the primary guardian of *pesantren* values, through role-modeling, counsel, and daily interactions. The *kyai*'s charisma, simplicity, and spiritual depth are pivotal strengths in building the *santri*'s character and ensuring the *pesantren*'s sustainability. The researcher's observation of students adjusting their behavior simply by seeing the *kyai* walk by demonstrates the strong symbolic and moral influence of the *kyai* in daily *pesantren* life, effectively bypassing formal policy and operating through cultural-symbolic means ([42]; [46]; [2]; [44]; [47]). This concept aligns closely with the idea of servant leadership ([48]; [7]), where moral and spiritual influence holds more power than written rules. The *kyai*'s leadership model is very similar to servant leadership, as they serve, guide, and support the *santri* spiritually and emotionally. This approach has been proven to enhance *santri* discipline, trust, and spiritual development ([49]; [47]; [50]).

Overall, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of quality in Islamic education. Unlike procedural models that rely on documentation and standard metrics, TQCE functions as a socio-cultural system. It integrates three streams of influence: ritual (repetition), relational (peer modelling), and symbolic (moral presence). This aligns with [10], who argue for an integrative

character framework that accounts for social hierarchy, moral vision, and collective responsibility.

To better understand how TQCE functions as a comprehensive and multi-layered framework, the conceptual visualization below illustrates the flow of value internalization, character formation, and leadership modelling across different roles in the pesantren ecosystem.

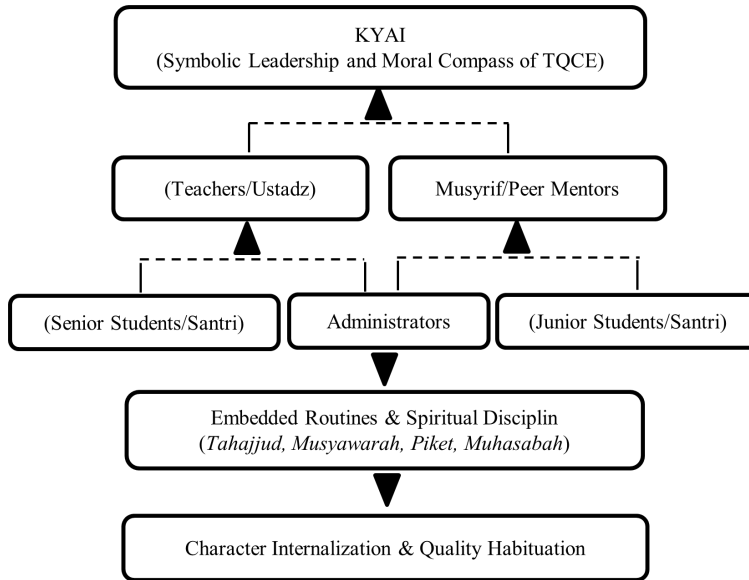


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of TQCE in Pesantren Life.

Figure 2 shows the integration of TQM principles into the lived structure of character education in pesantren. The kyai occupies the top symbolic tier, serving as the spiritual anchor and model of virtue. Ustadz and senior santri (musyrif) act as intermediaries who reinforce values through daily instruction and informal mentoring. Junior santri are nurtured through structured routines, reflective dialogue, and participation in collective activities that foster discipline, sincerity, and responsibility. This model illustrates how TQCE is internalized through repetition, relational trust, and symbolic leadership—making character not a subject to be taught but a value system to be lived.

Based on the conceptual model of TQCE in pesantren life, which illustrates the integration of TQM principles into the lived structure of character education, where the kyai occupies the top symbolic tier, serving as the spiritual anchor and model of virtue, while ustadz and senior santri (musyrif) act as intermediaries who reinforce values through daily instruction and informal mentoring, and junior santri are nurtured through structured routines, reflective dialogue, and participation in collective activities that foster discipline, sincerity, and responsibility, thereby making character not merely a subject to be taught but a value system to be lived, the following research proposition can be presented: “TQCE is a spiritually grounded character quality system that fuses daily discipline, peer accountability, and symbolic leadership to form a coherent and continuous moral learning environment”.

Despite the valuable insights provided, this study is not without limitations. As an autoethnographic inquiry, the findings are contextually bound to the researcher’s lived experiences in two specific pesantren, which may limit the generalizability of the TQCE model to other institutional settings with different cultural and historical backgrounds. The reliance on personal reflection, while providing depth and intimacy, also introduces a subjective lens that could be complemented by external perspectives. Therefore, future research is encouraged to expand upon these findings. A comparative

study involving multiple pesantren with varying characteristics could provide a broader understanding of TQCE implementation. Additionally, incorporating a mixed-methods approach, combining autoethnography with quantitative data or formal interviews with a wider range of participants, would offer a more comprehensive view. Finally, exploring the application of TQCE principles in other educational contexts, whether in forma

4. Conclusions

This study concludes that Total Quality Character Education (TQCE) in the pesantren system is not an abstract pedagogical theory, but a lived, deeply embedded cultural reality. The internalization of character values is fostered through structured spiritual routines, peer-based leadership, and the moral exemplarity of the kyai. Through autoethnographic reflection, the research reveals that TQCE operates at three intersecting levels: ritual consistency (standardization), relational guidance (peer accountability), and symbolic leadership (kyai's moral influence). These findings demonstrate how the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) including continuous improvement, participatory governance, and leadership commitment—are reframed within a religious and communal context to develop holistic student character. The pesantren thus emerge as a quality-based character education system that is both culturally resonant and pedagogically robust.

Based on the findings, this study recommends the institutionalization of peer mentoring systems and reflective forums in pesantren to strengthen character-based leadership at all student levels. Kyai and ustadz should be supported in preserving their symbolic and moral leadership through community storytelling, hagiographic writing, and documented legacy. It is also crucial to develop qualitative assessment instruments tailored to pesantren values—assessments that measure growth in discipline, responsibility, sincerity, and empathy through narrative reports and observational tools. Finally, researchers are encouraged to expand autoethnographic inquiry in pesantren studies to reveal hidden layers of educational practice that quantitative methods may overlook.

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