

# Holistic Education and the Transformation of Islamic Boarding Schools (Pesantren) in ASEAN: An Educational Psychology Perspective

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## Abstract

This systematic literature review (SLR) examines how Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in ASEAN have undergone transformative change towards a holistic educational model that integrates cognitive, affective, and spiritual domains within the framework of educational psychology. Drawing on PRISMA 2020 protocols, this study analyses articles published between 2018 and 2025 from Scopus and regional databases focusing on holistic Islamic education, character development, and psychological well-being of students in pesantren contexts across Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, and Singapore. Findings reveal three interrelated themes: (1) the integration of spiritual and psychological dimensions in pedagogy; (2) institutional transformation toward inclusive curricula that embrace science and modern skills; and (3) the psychological impact of value-based learning on students' character, emotional resilience, and academic achievement. The review highlights that pesantren education across ASEAN embodies the principles of holistic education through its balance of religious values and psychological growth. The paper argues that educational psychology provides a conceptual lens to understand how spiritual intelligence, motivation, and social connectedness drive students' self-actualisation within Islamic education. Recommendations are offered for future research and policy to enhance holistic learning frameworks in Islamic educational institutions throughout Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Holistic education; Islamic boarding schools; pesantren; educational psychology; ASEAN; transformative learning

## 1.0 Introduction

Education in the twenty-first century faces complex moral, cultural, and psychological challenges. Globalisation, technological acceleration, and post-industrial competition have encouraged systems of schooling that prioritise measurable cognitive outcomes while marginalising humanistic, affective, and spiritual dimensions (Miller, 2019; Noddings, 2013). In response, the paradigm of holistic education has re-emerged—an approach that aims to develop the full potential of learners by integrating intellectual, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual growth within a single, coherent educational process (Miller, 2007). Holistic education seeks to produce not merely knowledgeable individuals but compassionate, self-reflective, and socially responsible persons.

Within Southeast Asia, Islamic boarding schools—known as *pesantren* in Indonesia and Malaysia, *pondok* in Thailand, and *madrasah* in Brunei and Singapore—represent one of the oldest and most resilient educational institutions. Historically, these schools have combined Qur'anic learning with ethical formation (*akhlāq*) and community service, thus aligning closely with holistic educational principles (Dhofier, 2014; Azra, 2015). Through daily discipline, mentorship under *kiai* or *ustaz*, and communal living, pesantren nurture moral integrity, spiritual depth, and intellectual curiosity. Their emphasis on *ta'dib*—the cultivation of proper behaviour, manners, and wisdom—illustrates an indigenous model of holistic education rooted in Islamic civilisation (Al-Attas, 1991).

However, pesantren and madrasah across ASEAN are undergoing profound transformation. They face the dual imperative of maintaining religious authenticity while responding to contemporary educational standards, digital literacy demands, and psychological well-being concerns (Sulaiman, 2020; Rahim, 2018).

The integration of general science subjects, English proficiency, and modern pedagogy reflects a strategic attempt to balance tradition and modernity. Educational psychology, with its concern for motivation, emotional regulation, and learner development, provides a valuable theoretical lens to analyse how these transformations affect students' holistic growth (Goleman, 2020).

Despite the growing interest in holistic and Islamic education, systematic reviews examining how ASEAN pesantren operationalise holistic principles through an educational-psychological framework remain scarce. Most prior studies have been descriptive or localised, focusing on curriculum content or management aspects without synthesising their psychological implications. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) employing PRISMA 2020 guidelines. It addresses three research questions:

1. How has holistic education been conceptualised and practised within ASEAN Islamic boarding schools and madrasah?
2. What educational-psychological constructs (e.g. motivation, self-concept, emotional intelligence) underpin the holistic transformation of these institutions?
3. What theoretical and practical implications arise for the development of student well-being and academic achievement?

This review contributes theoretically by bridging Islamic educational philosophy and contemporary educational psychology, and practically by offering policy insights for curriculum integration and student-centred development in ASEAN pesantren systems. The study ultimately argues that holistic education within Islamic contexts embodies a sustainable model for nurturing balanced human beings capable of intellectual excellence, emotional resilience, and moral responsibility.

## **2.0 Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Concept of Holistic Education**

Holistic education views the learner as a whole being whose intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and social dimensions must develop harmoniously. Rooted in the philosophical works of John Dewey, Rudolf Steiner, and Maria Montessori, the movement gained further theoretical consolidation through the scholarship of Ron Miller (2007) and Nel Noddings (2013). Miller (2019) asserts that education should cultivate connectedness—between self and others, humanity and nature, reason and intuition. Within the ASEAN context, this aligns with the Islamic notion of *ta'dib*, a moral and spiritual cultivation emphasising *adab* (ethical conduct) as the essence of knowledge (Al-Attas, 1991).

Holistic education rejects fragmented learning that isolates the mind from the heart or the intellect from moral action. Instead, it aims for *unity of knowledge* (*tawhīd al-'ilm*), encouraging learners to perceive meaning across disciplines and to relate academic pursuits to ethical and existential questions (Nasr, 2010). Such integrative learning nurtures not only academic success but also psychological well-being, empathy, and ecological awareness—all vital competencies in a globalised ASEAN society.

### **2.2 Islamic Educational Philosophy and Pesantren Tradition**

Islamic educational thought situates learning as an act of worship and self-purification (*tazkiyah al-nafs*). Al-Ghazālī (2002) proposed that true education aims to transform the heart, cultivating balance between 'aql (intellect) and qalb (spirit). Pesantren embody this integration through their daily routines that combine *tahfīz al-Qur'ān*, *fiqh*, and social service, fostering both knowledge and moral virtue. Dhofier (2014) and Azra (2015) note that the pesantren's strength lies in its communal system (*bandongan*, *sorogan*), where knowledge transmission occurs through lived experience and example.

Contemporary pesantren and madrasah in ASEAN have adapted these traditions by integrating general sciences, language acquisition, and vocational skills, creating a hybrid model that remains faithful to Islamic identity while responding to modern societal needs. This transformation exemplifies holistic education in action—linking spiritual ideals with intellectual and practical competencies.

### **2.3 Educational Psychology as an Analytical Lens**

Educational psychology provides a scientific basis for understanding how holistic education affects learning behaviour, motivation, and emotional growth. According to Goleman (2020), emotional intelligence—comprising self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills—is fundamental to effective education. Holistic pedagogy thus corresponds with psychological theories of humanistic learning (Rogers,

1969) and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2017), both of which emphasise intrinsic motivation and self-actualisation.

In the context of pesantren, the *kiai–santri* relationship mirrors Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivism, where learning is mediated through meaningful interaction and scaffolding. The communal life of the pesantren supports psychosocial development through cooperation, empathy, and moral modelling. Moreover, integrating psychological counselling and mental-health awareness programmes in ASEAN pesantren demonstrates how educational psychology complements the spiritual mission of Islamic education (Rahim, 2018; Sulaiman, 2020).

Consequently, the theoretical framework of this study interweaves three dimensions:

- 1. Holistic education as a philosophy of integrative human development;
- 2. Islamic educational tradition as a moral-spiritual foundation; and
- 3. Educational psychology as an empirical lens to examine learning processes, motivation, and student well-being.

Together, these dimensions form a comprehensive framework for analysing how pesantren and madrasah in ASEAN have transformed into institutions of holistic education that nurture both intellect and soul.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to synthesise peer-reviewed research on holistic education and the transformation of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren/madrasah*) across ASEAN through the lens of educational psychology. Following the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Page et al., 2021), this SLR systematically identified, screened, and analysed empirical and theoretical studies published between 2018 and 2025.

The SLR design was chosen because it enables the integration of diverse research findings and conceptual insights into a coherent framework. By combining both Islamic and psychological perspectives, the review offers a comprehensive understanding of how holistic learning principles have been institutionalised and experienced within ASEAN pesantren systems.

3.2 Data Sources and Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted between January and October 2025 using five primary databases:

- 1. Scopus
- 2. Taylor & Francis Online
- 3. SAGE Journals
- 4. SpringerLink
- 5. Google Scholar (Advanced Search)

Boolean search strings were constructed using combinations of the following keywords and phrases:

(“holistic education” OR “integrated education” OR “whole person learning”)  
AND (“Islamic boarding school” OR “pesantren” OR “madrasah”)  
AND (“educational psychology” OR “student motivation” OR “emotional intelligence”)  
AND (“ASEAN” OR “Indonesia” OR “Malaysia” OR “Brunei” OR “Thailand” OR “Singapore”).

Search filters were applied to restrict results to peer-reviewed journal articles, open-access conference proceedings, and book chapters published in English or Bahasa Indonesia between 2018 and 2025. In total, 147 records were initially retrieved. Duplicates and irrelevant publications were excluded through iterative screening.

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure methodological rigour, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied based on relevance, quality, and conceptual contribution:

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Studies published between 2018–2025	Studies published before 2018
Focus on holistic education or integrated pedagogy	Articles focused solely on traditional curriculum without holistic scope
Focus on Islamic boarding schools/madrasah in ASEAN	Studies outside ASEAN region

Application of educational psychology concepts	Articles with no psychological or pedagogical discussion
Peer-reviewed empirical or conceptual studies	Non-reviewed reports, blogs, or commentaries
After screening and eligibility assessment, 32 articles met all inclusion criteria and were selected for synthesis.	

### 3.4 Data Extraction and Analysis

Each article was coded and categorised using an inductive thematic synthesis approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Information extracted included:

1. Author(s), year, and country
2. Research design and methodology
3. Educational-psychological concepts employed (e.g. motivation, emotional intelligence, moral development)
4. Key findings related to holistic transformation

Data were managed using NVivo 14 to facilitate open coding, thematic clustering, and frequency analysis. Themes emerging from the data were interpreted through the lens of educational psychology, particularly humanistic learning theory (Rogers, 1969) and Islamic value-based pedagogy (Al-Attas, 1991).

### 3.5 PRISMA Flow Process

The **PRISMA 2020** summarises the four phases of this review:

1. Identification: 147 records identified through databases.
2. Screening: 92 studies excluded due to duplication or irrelevance.
3. Eligibility: 23 papers removed after full-text review for insufficient theoretical depth.
4. Inclusion: 32 studies retained for final synthesis and thematic analysis.

This systematic and transparent process ensured the credibility, reproducibility, and validity of the literature review.

### Appendix B. Thematic Synthesis Table

Theme	Description	Key Sources
Integration of Spiritual and Psychological Dimensions	Combining Islamic moral education with emotional intelligence and self-awareness	Rahim (2018); Goleman (2020); Sulaiman (2020)
Institutional Transformation	Inclusion of science, technology, and modern pedagogy in pesantren/madrasah curricula	Azra (2015); Roslan & Ibrahim (2019); Hidayat (2023)
Psychological Outcomes of Value-Based Learning	Positive impacts on motivation, emotional regulation, and social empathy	Zarkasyi (2019); Yusof (2022); Keyes (2014)

### Appendix C. Coding Summary

Major constructs identified:

1. Emotional intelligence (EQ) – 22 studies
2. Motivation and self-determination – 18 studies
3. Spiritual intelligence (SQ) – 15 studies
4. Moral reasoning and *akhlaq* – 13 studies
5. Psychological well-being and resilience – 11 studies

### 3.6 Reliability and Validity

To enhance reliability, dual-coding and cross-checking were performed for each article by two independent reviewers. Inter-coder agreement reached 91%, indicating consistency in thematic identification. Construct validity was maintained through triangulation between Islamic educational theory, psychological constructs, and empirical findings.

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

As a literature-based study, no direct human participation was involved. Nevertheless, the research adhered to ethical standards by properly attributing sources, avoiding plagiarism, and ensuring transparency in data synthesis.



## 4.0 Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Overview of the Selected Studies

The final sample comprised 32 peer-reviewed studies published between 2018 and 2025, representing five ASEAN countries: Indonesia (18 studies), Malaysia (6), Brunei Darussalam (3), Thailand (3), and Singapore (2). The reviewed works included both empirical and conceptual studies that examined educational transformation, character formation, and psychological well-being in Islamic educational settings. Approximately 62% of the studies were qualitative (case studies, ethnographies, and phenomenological research), while 25% adopted mixed methods, and 13% were conceptual analyses. The common trend observed across these studies is the integration of religious-spiritual education with psychosocial and cognitive development, reflecting a convergence between *ta'dib*-based Islamic education and modern psychological theories of learning.

### 4.2 Theme 1: Integration of Spiritual and Psychological Dimensions

The first and most prominent theme concerns the integration of spiritual formation with psychological development. Research by Sulaiman (2020) and Rahim (2018) highlighted that pesantren curricula increasingly embed emotional and moral education into the core of religious studies, aligning Islamic virtues such as *sabr* (patience), *ikhlas* (sincerity), and *amanah* (trustworthiness) with psychological constructs like emotional intelligence and self-regulation (Goleman, 2020).

In Indonesia and Malaysia, this integration manifests through experiential learning—students engage in collective prayers, community service, and peer mentoring that cultivate empathy, humility, and emotional balance. From an educational-psychological perspective, such practices operationalise Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, in which moral reasoning and emotional intelligence develop through social interaction and modelling.

Holistic education in pesantren thus embodies what Rogers (1969) termed *person-centred learning*, where the role of the teacher (*kiai* or *ustaz*) extends beyond transmitting knowledge to nurturing emotional maturity and self-awareness. This pedagogy aligns with Al-Ghazālī's vision of *tazkiyah al-nafs*—purification of the soul as a path to knowledge and happiness.

These findings affirm that the spiritual ethos of Islamic education strengthens psychological resilience among students. Studies from Thailand's *pondok* schools (Khalid, 2021) and Brunei's madrasah (Yusof, 2022) show reduced levels of anxiety and improved self-efficacy among students exposed to spiritually grounded pedagogy.

### 4.3 Theme 2: Institutional Transformation toward Inclusive and Integrative Curricula

The second major theme identifies a structural transformation within pesantren and madrasah across ASEAN. Many institutions have revised their curricula to include science, technology, language, and social studies alongside religious sciences. This transformation is not merely administrative—it represents a paradigmatic shift toward integrative education, resonating with holistic learning principles that reject dichotomies between “religious” and “worldly” knowledge (Azra, 2015; Dhofier, 2014).

From the lens of educational psychology, such integration supports cognitive flexibility and metacognitive awareness—skills associated with higher academic performance and adaptability (Deci & Ryan, 2017). Empirical studies from Malaysia (Roslan & Ibrahim, 2019) show that madrasah students involved in interdisciplinary learning demonstrate higher motivation and problem-solving ability.

Moreover, the use of project-based learning and digital technology in Indonesian pesantren has strengthened *student agency*, allowing learners to construct knowledge collaboratively while internalising Islamic ethical frameworks (Hidayat, 2023). This aligns with Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, suggesting that students' belief in their ability to perform tasks mediates learning outcomes.

Institutional reforms in ASEAN pesantren therefore reflect both pedagogical modernisation and psychological adaptation—a dual process that balances faith-based values with global competencies.

### 4.4 Theme 3: Psychological Outcomes of Value-Based Learning

The third theme focuses on the psychological and behavioural outcomes of holistic, value-based education in pesantren contexts. Across the reviewed literature, recurring outcomes include enhanced emotional regulation, increased intrinsic motivation, stronger moral reasoning, and higher well-being indices.

Studies by Sulaiman (2020) and Zarkasyi (2019) indicate that pesantren's integrative approach enhances students' spiritual intelligence (SQ), which in turn influences emotional stability and academic perseverance. From a psychological perspective, this corresponds with Maslow's (1971) hierarchy of needs—where self-actualisation arises from a synergy between cognitive mastery and moral purpose.

Similarly, Rahim (2018) and Abdullah (2022) observed that pesantren graduates exhibit a stronger sense of social responsibility and altruism, key indicators of moral internalisation. These findings support the self-determination theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (2017), which posits that competence, autonomy, and relatedness are essential for sustained motivation.

In Brunei and Malaysia, schools adopting *adab-based education* reported improved interpersonal relationships among students and reduced behavioural issues (Yusof, 2022). This suggests that *akhlaq*-centred pedagogy fosters positive emotional climates that enhance learning engagement.

Overall, the reviewed studies confirm that holistic education in pesantren/madrasah contributes to psychological flourishing—defined by balance between emotional well-being, academic resilience, and moral purpose (Keyes, 2014).

#### **4.5 Discussion**

The thematic synthesis reveals that pesantren and madrasah across ASEAN serve as living laboratories for educational transformation grounded in holistic principles. From an educational psychology standpoint, these institutions exemplify integrative models that harmonise spiritual intelligence (SQ), emotional intelligence (EQ), and academic intelligence (IQ) within culturally embedded contexts.

The relationship between teachers and students, anchored in mutual respect and moral mentorship, provides the socio-emotional scaffolding necessary for sustained learning and identity formation (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogers, 1969). Furthermore, the incorporation of psychological counselling and life-skills training in several modern pesantren illustrates the growing recognition that mental health and spirituality are interdependent in nurturing the “whole learner”.

In alignment with Miller's (2019) conception of *connectedness*, holistic Islamic education fosters interconnectedness between intellect and faith, individual and community, self and society. This synthesis supports the argument that pesantren are not relics of the past but adaptive institutions capable of leading 21st-century educational reform in Southeast Asia.

### **5.0 Implications for Educational Psychology and Holistic Pedagogy**

#### **5.1 Theoretical Implications**

This review contributes to the theoretical enrichment of educational psychology by providing evidence from Islamic educational contexts that learning and personal development are not merely cognitive processes, but spiritual and moral phenomena. The integration of *ta'dib* (ethical cultivation) within pedagogical practice offers a culturally grounded model of whole-person learning, reinforcing Miller's (2019) argument that education must engage the emotional, moral, and existential dimensions of human experience.

Furthermore, the review validates the cross-cultural applicability of major psychological theories such as Rogers' (1969) *humanistic learning theory*, Deci and Ryan's (2017) *self-determination theory*, and Goleman's (2020) *emotional intelligence framework* in Muslim educational settings. The synthesis demonstrates that when embedded in Islamic ethical systems, these theories support learners' intrinsic motivation and psychological resilience.

The pesantren tradition thus provides a model for an indigenised educational psychology, integrating Western humanistic constructs with Qur'anic anthropology that defines education as *tazkiyah* (self-purification) and *tarbiyah* (nurturing of the soul).

#### **5.2 Practical and Policy Implications**

From a policy standpoint, ASEAN ministries of education and Islamic councils can draw several insights from these findings:

1. **Curricular Integration:** Policymakers should institutionalise holistic education frameworks that merge religious knowledge with science, social studies, and psychological well-being programmes.
2. **Teacher Training:** Educators in Islamic institutions need professional development that combines pedagogical competence with emotional intelligence and counselling skills.
3. **Student-Centred Learning:** The pesantren's personalised mentorship model can inform contemporary education reforms emphasising empathy, character, and relational learning.

4. Mental Health and Well-Being: Embedding psychological counselling and peer-support systems into Islamic schools is vital for balancing academic demands with emotional health.
5. Regional Collaboration: Cross-border research and curriculum exchanges among ASEAN Islamic institutions could strengthen a shared framework for holistic human development.

By adopting these recommendations, policymakers can enhance not only the academic excellence of students but also their emotional maturity and moral consciousness, ensuring that education serves both worldly success and spiritual fulfilment.

## 6.0 Conclusion

This systematic review concludes that pesantren and madrasah in ASEAN represent one of the most enduring embodiments of holistic education, integrating cognitive, emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions through a psychologically informed pedagogy. Grounded in Islamic values of *ta'dib*, *akhlaq*, and *tazkiyah*, these institutions have successfully adapted to contemporary educational and psychological paradigms without losing their spiritual core. Three interrelated transformations have emerged from this review: 1) The harmonisation of spirituality and psychology in teaching and learning processes; 2) Institutional innovation through inclusive curricula and modern pedagogical approaches; and 3) The enhancement of psychological outcomes such as self-efficacy, emotional regulation, and moral reasoning among students. Collectively, these findings affirm that holistic education—when interpreted through Islamic philosophy and educational psychology—offers a robust model for 21st-century human development. As ASEAN societies confront rapid technological and moral shifts, pesantren and madrasah can serve as transformative spaces for cultivating balanced, ethical, and emotionally intelligent generations. Future research should employ longitudinal and cross-cultural studies to explore the neuropsychological and behavioural impacts of holistic Islamic education, contributing to global discourses on integrative and value-based learning.

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