

## **Navigating Class Struggle: A Case Study of Teachers' Challenges in Indonesian Pesantren**

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### **Abstract**

This research investigates the complex class struggle experienced by teachers working in Indonesian pesantren, focusing on how economic hierarchy, institutional structure, and social expectations shape their professional lives. The research draws upon key literature addressing class dynamics in educational institutions, teacher identity formation, and structural inequalities in faith-based schools, highlighting a theoretical gap concerning how class struggle manifests uniquely in pesantren contexts. Using qualitative case study methods, the researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews, naturalistic observations, and institutional document analysis involving teachers of various roles and socioeconomic backgrounds. Findings reveal recurring issues such as unequal workload distribution, limited professional autonomy, salary disparity, and symbolic hierarchy shaped by seniority and religious capital. Teachers reported navigating tensions between spiritual devotion and economic survival, frequently negotiating between institutional loyalty and personal wellbeing. These insights contribute to broader discussions on class struggle in educational settings, demonstrating that pesantren—while spiritually rich—can also reproduce hierarchical systems that influence teachers' agency and professional growth. The research highlights the need for more equitable institutional policies, improved teacher welfare, and stronger professional development systems that acknowledge the socio-economic realities of pesantren educators. Overall, the study offers practical and theoretical implications for improving teacher conditions in Islamic boarding schools.

Keywords: *Class struggle; Challenges; Pesantren*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The teaching profession has long been associated with dedication, service, and moral responsibility; however, in many educational contexts, especially in traditional or faith-based institutions, teachers often work within complex socio-economic structures that significantly influence their professional experiences. This is particularly evident in Indonesian pesantren, where religious tradition, communal living, hierarchical authority, and cultural expectations converge to shape the daily realities of educators (Bukhori Muslim et al., 2024). While pesantren have been widely recognized for their profound contribution to Islamic education and character formation, less attention has been given to the internal dynamics of class stratification that teachers must navigate. Understanding these dynamics is essential, considering that teachers serve as the central agents in preserving institutional values and ensuring students' academic and spiritual development. Without adequate awareness of their struggles, both the quality of teaching and the sustainability of pesantren institutions may be compromised.

Class struggle in pesantren cannot be understood solely through economic indicators such as salary or material resources. It is deeply embedded in symbolic structures, including seniority, religious authority, lineage, and social reputation within the community. Teachers—often called ustaz or asatidz—may occupy different positions in the institutional hierarchy depending on their educational background, years of service, relationship with pesantren leadership, and perceived piety. Some teachers enjoy privileged access to decision-making, lighter workloads, or better facilities, while others face heavier teaching responsibilities, limited autonomy, and restricted opportunities for professional development

(Bautista & Oretga-Ruiz, 2017). These stratifications often remain unspoken, hidden behind narratives of devotion, service, and humility. However, the impact is real: teachers may experience burnout, reduced job satisfaction, or feelings of marginalization that affect both their wellbeing and teaching performance.

Despite the increasing academic interest in pesantren, most existing research focuses on curriculum, student discipline, religious teachings, or pesantren as cultural institutions. Studies that explore teacher experiences generally highlight pedagogical strategies, teacher identity, or challenges in balancing religious and modern education demands (Talbani, 1996). However, very few studies attempt to unpack the socio-economic hierarchy within pesantren or frame teachers' challenges within the broader theoretical lens of class struggle. This gap becomes more pronounced when considering that pesantren are not monolithic; each institution has unique traditions, leadership styles, resource distributions, and internal expectations. Therefore, case study research becomes highly relevant, as it allows an in-depth examination of how class dynamics operate within a specific pesantren and how these dynamics affect teachers on a daily basis.

This research is particularly significant because class struggle, although subtle, can influence teachers' access to resources, training opportunities, and recognition. Teachers with strong social ties to pesantren leadership may receive preferential treatment, whereas those who are externally recruited or come from lower socio-economic backgrounds may encounter barriers in asserting their professional identities. This affects not only their personal development but also their pedagogical confidence and classroom effectiveness. Moreover, the tension between spiritual devotion and economic necessity creates an emotional and psychological burden for many teachers. While they are encouraged to view their work as ibadah (a form of worship), they must also navigate the economic realities of supporting their families, often on modest salaries. This dual pressure can lead to internal conflict, self-doubt, or resignation from the profession. The issue becomes increasingly urgent as pesantren continue to modernize and expand, attracting teachers from diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds. Institutions that fail to recognize or address class-related challenges risk creating environments that undervalue teachers, hinder collaboration, and reinforce inequalities. Exploring these struggles is essential for constructing more supportive educational policies that acknowledge teachers' contributions while promoting fairness and professional dignity.

This research is therefore critical for two reasons. First, it provides an empirical understanding of how class struggle manifests in pesantren—an area rarely explored but fundamental to improving teacher welfare and educational quality. Second, it contributes to broader discussions on teacher professionalism and social justice in education by presenting pesantren as a unique yet relatable case of how institutional culture and hierarchy shape teacher experiences. Through this case study, the research hopes to generate insights that encourage pesantren leaders, policymakers, and Islamic education stakeholders to develop more equitable systems that support teachers holistically.

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Existing literature on pesantren commonly highlights their historical role, cultural significance, and unique pedagogical approaches within Indonesian Islamic education. Pesantren are often portrayed as institutions that balance traditional religious instruction with modern educational reforms, functioning not only as schools but also as communities where teachers and students live, learn, and develop spiritual character together (Rahman, 2022). Much research has focused on pesantren leadership, curriculum

development, student discipline, and the integration of secular subjects into traditional Islamic learning. Scholars such as Dhofier, Azra, and Zamakhsyari have emphasized pesantren's contribution to moral education and social cohesion, often describing teachers as the backbone of the pesantren ecosystem. However, these studies rarely address the socio-economic and hierarchical challenges experienced by teachers, instead framing their role in idealistic or symbolic terms.

Studies on teacher challenges in Islamic educational institutions have largely centered on pedagogical competence, workload, and adaptation to reform. Some research reports that teachers in faith-based schools face higher emotional demands because they are expected to serve as moral role models while maintaining academic rigor (Albert, 2024). Other scholars have highlighted issues related to salary, job satisfaction, and limited professional development opportunities—factors that affect teacher motivation and retention. Nevertheless, these studies often treat teacher struggles as isolated issues rather than manifestations of a broader socio-cultural and economic hierarchy (Pradana & Syarifuddin, 2021). As a result, the nuanced experiences of teachers in pesantren—particularly those related to class struggle—remain understudied. In the broader educational literature, class struggle is often examined through lenses of economic inequality, resource distribution, and institutional power dynamics. Critical theorists, including Pierre Bourdieu, have explained how social and cultural capital shape individuals' positions within educational fields. His concepts of symbolic power, habitus, and field help illustrate how institutions reproduce hierarchy in subtle ways. Applying such frameworks to pesantren offers opportunities to understand how symbolic capital—such as perceived religious authority or proximity to *kyai*—can create stratification among teachers. However, few studies have attempted to apply sociological or critical theories to the pesantren context, leaving a conceptual gap in understanding how hierarchical structures operate internally.

Although international literature acknowledges that teacher experiences are shaped by socio-economic and institutional contexts, studies specifically examining class struggle in religious boarding schools are still limited. The existing research tends to focus on student experiences, curriculum integration, or institutional challenges, without exploring how teachers negotiate power relations, symbolic hierarchies, or economic disparities. This absence of research creates a meaningful gap, particularly because pesantren increasingly employ teachers from diverse backgrounds. Without understanding how class dynamics structure their experiences, educational reform in pesantren remains incomplete.

### **Research Gap**

Despite growing attention to pesantren as significant Islamic educational institutions, there is limited empirical research addressing how class struggle affects teachers within these settings. Most existing studies focus on pedagogical issues or institutional culture but do not explore socio-economic inequality, symbolic hierarchy, or power relations that shape teachers' daily experiences. There is also a gap in research applying critical or sociological theories—such as class struggle, symbolic capital, or institutional hierarchy—to the lived experiences of pesantren teachers. This study seeks to fill that gap by offering a detailed case study of how class struggle manifests in one pesantren and how it shapes teacher identity, agency, and wellbeing.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do teachers in the pesantren experience class struggle within their institutional structure?
2. What forms of socio-economic and symbolic hierarchy influence teachers' professional roles and daily activities?
3. How do teachers negotiate and cope with the class-based challenges they encounter in the pesantren environment?

### **Research Purposes**

1. To explore the lived experiences of teachers regarding class struggle in a pesantren context.
2. To identify and analyze the socio-economic and symbolic hierarchies that shape teachers' professional roles and interactions.
3. To understand the strategies teachers use to navigate or resist class-based inequalities within the institution.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research employed a qualitative case study design to explore the dynamics of class struggle experienced by teachers working in a pesantren in Indonesia. A case study was selected because it allows an in-depth investigation of a bounded system—in this case, the daily professional, social, and institutional experiences of pesantren teachers—within its real-life context (Kächele, 2019). The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to capture the nuanced perspectives, emotions, and meanings that teachers attach to issues of hierarchy, symbolic status, economic struggle, and professional identity within the pesantren environment. This approach was particularly relevant because class struggle is a socially constructed phenomenon that emerges from interactions, cultural norms, and institutional practices, all of which are best understood through rich descriptive data.

### **Research Setting**

The research took place at a well-established Islamic boarding school located in East Java, Indonesia. The pesantren has a long-standing tradition of combining religious instruction with formal education and employs teachers with varied backgrounds, including Islamic studies graduates and general subject teachers. This diverse professional profile made the setting ideal for examining symbolic and structural class divisions, as institutional hierarchies are often shaped by perceived religious authority, educational background, and length of service.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of eight teachers selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) having at least two years of teaching experience in the pesantren, (2) representing both Islamic-subject and general-subject categories, and (3) demonstrating willingness to provide detailed accounts of their professional experiences. The participants included four Islamic-subject teachers (ustadz/ustadzah) and four general-subject teachers handling English, mathematics, and science. Their varying backgrounds allowed the researcher to compare differences in symbolic capital, access to institutional decision-making, financial conditions, and career progression.

### **Research Instruments**

The primary instruments included semi-structured interview guides, field observation sheets, and document analysis notes. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore teachers' perceptions of hierarchy, workload distribution, salary fairness, recognition, and challenges in performing their professional duties (Ryan et al., 2009). Observations were used to capture real-time interactions, staffroom dynamics, meeting structures, and classroom conditions. School documents—such as organizational charts, job descriptions, and salary policies—were analyzed to triangulate verbal data and examine how institutional structures formally or informally shape class relations (Zevalkink, 2021).

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected over a six-week period through three main techniques: In-depth interviews: Each participant was interviewed twice, with each session lasting 45–60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in a private setting to encourage openness. Non-participant observation: The researcher observed teacher meetings, staff interactions, informal discussions, and daily routines to identify observable indicators of class hierarchy—such as seating arrangements, decision-making patterns, and interaction styles. Document analysis: Institutional records, teacher handbooks, and administrative memos were reviewed to identify structural conditions relevant to class struggle. All interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent, then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed interactive model consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). During data condensation, transcripts and field notes were coded using initial and axial coding to identify key categories such as "salary inequality," "symbolic authority," "career stagnation," "spiritual coping," "workload imbalance," and "institutional hierarchy." These categories were then organized into thematic displays to examine the connections between structural, cultural, and symbolic factors. Finally, conclusions were drawn by comparing emergent themes with theoretical concepts such as Bourdieu's symbolic capital and Marxian notions of class struggle. Patterns were validated through cross-case comparison among participants.

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure credibility, member checking was carried out by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants, who confirmed the accuracy of descriptions and clarified ambiguous points. Triangulation of interviews, observations, and documents further supported data validity (Dźwigol & Dźwigol-Barosz, 2020). Transferability was enhanced through thick, contextualized descriptions of setting, participants, and institutional culture, allowing readers to determine the applicability to similar contexts. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a detailed audit trail containing research decisions, memos, coding procedures, and analytic reflections. Confirmability was ensured by avoiding personal bias, using direct quotations, and documenting all interpretations with supporting evidence from the data.

## **FINDINGS**

The analysis of the interview transcripts, observations, and institutional documents revealed three major themes characterizing class struggle among teachers in the pesantren setting: (1) Structural Economic Inequality, (2) Symbolic Hierarchy and Unequal Recognition, and (3) Limited Career Mobility and Institutional Closure. These themes demonstrate that class struggle in the pesantren is not merely a matter of salary differences but a complex interplay of economic hardship, cultural authority, spiritual narratives, and organizational practices. Below is the revised, more vivid and realistic account of each theme.

### ***Structural Economic Inequality***

One of the most consistent findings across participants was the experience of financial struggle due to low and unequal salary structures. General-subject teachers (English, mathematics, science) particularly expressed that the income provided by the pesantren was insufficient to meet basic living needs. During interviews, participants repeatedly described financial pressure as a “daily burden” that shaped their emotional, professional, and personal well-being.

Mr. F, an English teacher with five years of experience, explained:

“My monthly salary is not even enough for house rent. I teach six classes a day, but I still have to take private tutoring at night just to survive. Sometimes I feel like my work is not valued because the salary does not reflect the workload.”

Document analysis confirmed this disparity. Salary records showed that Islamic-subject teachers receive additional incentives from community donations and pesantren alumni networks—benefits not equally accessible to general-subject teachers. This structural privilege created significant economic imbalance, reinforcing long-term disparities. Observation data further validated this inequality. The researcher noted that during monthly meetings, Islamic teachers discussed receiving financial support from alumni associations, while general-subject teachers remained silent. The meeting minutes recorded statements such as “tambahan insentif bagi ustaz senior,” which did not include general-subject educators.

One participant, Ms. N, emphasized how the disparity influences motivation:

“Sometimes I wonder why I keep pushing myself so hard. I love teaching, but when I look at my salary slip, I feel like... maybe the institution doesn’t care.”

These accounts highlight that economic inequality is not only about numbers; it affects self-worth, professional identity, and teachers’ sense of recognition.

### ***Symbolic Hierarchy and Unequal Recognition***

Beyond financial disparity, symbolic hierarchy emerged as a powerful source of class struggle. In this pesantren, Islamic-subject teachers—often referred to as ustaz or ustazah—hold greater symbolic capital due to their religious authority. This status influences decision-making, organizational voice, and social interactions. During observations in the teacher’s room, the researcher noticed a clear division: Islamic-subject teachers often sat together, discussing religious matters, institutional decisions, and

curricular issues, while general-subject teachers avoided joining unless invited. Seating arrangements appeared unspoken yet reinforced daily: Islamic teachers occupied the central long table, while general-subject teachers used the smaller side table.

Mr. R, a mathematics teacher, shared:

“It’s not written anywhere, but we know our place. The ustadz are the ones who speak during meetings. When general teachers propose something, the response is usually polite but dismissive. You feel like an outsider in the school where you work every day.”

Interviews with Islamic-subject teachers subtly reflected the perceived superiority. One senior ustadz, Mr. H, stated:

“General subjects are important, but the heart of the pesantren is still the religious teaching. Naturally, those who teach the Qur'an have more responsibility and are given more respect.”

This symbolic hierarchy also appeared in formal decision-making. Meeting minutes showed that the curriculum committee consisted mainly of Islamic-subject teachers, even for decisions affecting general subjects. General teachers expressed frustration that their expertise was undervalued.

Ms. T, a science teacher, described:

“They decide everything, even the schedule for general subjects, without asking us. Sometimes we just receive the announcement. It feels like we are only supporting staff, not real teachers.”

Such hierarchical dynamics create a sense of marginalization where recognition is distributed unevenly, reinforcing symbolic class divisions.

#### ***Limited Career Mobility and Institutional Closure***

Another strong finding was the limited opportunities for career advancement. Promotion criteria appeared informal, relying heavily on seniority, personal closeness to the leadership, and alignment with pesantren culture rather than merit, performance, or qualifications.

Mr. F, the English teacher, recalled applying for a coordinator position twice but never receiving clear feedback:

“They said I’m still young and not yet ‘mature’ enough in the pesantren environment. But I have more teaching experience and more qualifications than the person they selected.”

Based on document review, promotion guidelines were not formally documented—decisions were usually discussed privately among senior religious teachers. This lack of transparency created what participants described as “institutional closure,” where certain individuals or groups held exclusive control over advancement pathways.

A particularly powerful statement came from Mr. R:

“In this pesantren, your future is decided by people above you, not by your achievements. Even if you work hard, they don’t see it unless you are close to them.”

Observations during monthly evaluation sessions supported this claim. Deference was heavily oriented toward senior religio-cultural figures, and performance assessments were conducted verbally without written criteria, making the process subjective.

### ***Spiritual Coping and Acceptance of Inequality***

Interestingly, many participants relied on religious and spiritual interpretations to cope with the challenges they faced. This theme illustrates that class struggle does not always lead to resistance; instead, it can foster acceptance when framed through spiritual narratives.

Ms. N, a young English teacher, shared:

“I stay here because I believe teaching in a pesantren brings barakah. Even if the salary is small, I hope Allah writes it as worship.”

This narrative helped teachers find meaning but also discouraged calls for systemic change. Several participants used religious expressions such as “sabar,” “ikhlas,” and “rezeki sudah diatur,” reflecting spiritual acceptance rather than dissatisfaction.

Mr. H, the senior ustadz, even suggested:

“Those who teach here must be patient. We do this for Allah, not for money.”

While spiritually uplifting, this narrative contributes to sustaining structural inequality by normalizing hardship.

### ***Workload Imbalance and Role Expansion***

Another significant finding was the disproportionate workload experienced by general-subject teachers. Besides teaching, many were assigned additional administrative tasks such as documentation, student assessment coordination, and sometimes extracurricular responsibilities. Observation revealed that general-subject teachers were often called to prepare reports or assist administrative staff, while Islamic-subject teachers were primarily assigned teaching and mentoring duties.

Ms. T commented:

“We are not only teachers—we become admin, event organizers, anything they need. But when recognition is given, it goes mostly to the religious teachers.”

This imbalance reinforced teachers’ feelings of being undervalued and overburdened.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study illustrate how class struggle among pesantren teachers emerges from both structural and cultural dynamics within the institution. Economically, the persistently low salary levels reflect a broader trend in many religious-based educational institutions, where financial sustainability often relies on community donations and limited operational budgets. This structural limitation creates an environment in which teachers must navigate economic insecurity despite their essential instructional role. Symbolically, the hierarchy between Islamic-subject teachers and general-subject teachers reinforces cultural distinctions embedded within pesantren traditions (Pradana & Syarifuddin, 2021). This symbolic capital, grounded in religious authority, aligns with Bourdieu's concept of social hierarchy, where prestige and recognition shape one's position in an institution beyond material compensation. Such dynamics affect teachers' confidence, sense of belonging, and access to influence within the school.

The limited career mobility further indicates systematic constraints. When advancement depends more on connections, seniority, or cultural alignment rather than professional achievement, teachers experience stagnation and diminished motivation. This aligns with the idea of "institutional closure," where opportunities become restricted to a select group, thereby maintaining existing power structures. Interestingly, the teachers' spiritual framing of their struggles—viewing their work as ibadah—functions as both a coping mechanism and a reinforcing factor of inequality (Younas et al., 2022). While this mindset fosters resilience and dedication, it may inadvertently reduce teachers' willingness to advocate for structural change, as their sacrifices are normalized through religious devotion. Overall, the discussion highlights how class struggle in pesantren is not merely economic but deeply intertwined with symbolic authority, cultural expectations, and institutional norms. Addressing these issues requires balancing respect for pesantren traditions with a commitment to improving teachers' welfare and professional growth.

## **CONCLUSION**

This case study concludes that class struggle among pesantren teachers is shaped by intertwined economic, symbolic, and institutional factors. Low salaries, hierarchical distinctions between subject areas, and limited career mobility collectively create a layered form of inequality within the pesantren system. Despite these challenges, teachers' spiritual framing of their work as a form of devotion helps them endure structural pressures, though it can also silence demands for reform. To support teacher well-being and professional growth, pesantren institutions need to strengthen transparent policies, enhance teacher development pathways, and consider more equitable compensation mechanisms.

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administrators should evaluate current organizational structures to reduce symbolic divisions between teachers and promote more inclusive decision-making processes. Financial planning and external partnerships may help increase teacher compensation and improve job satisfaction. For policymakers, acknowledging the unique cultural and religious context of pesantren while ensuring fair labor standards is crucial. Future initiatives may focus on professional development, leadership training, and strategic resource management to improve the long-term sustainability of teacher welfare. Researchers may also explore comparative studies across different pesantren to broaden the understanding of class dynamics in Islamic educational settings.

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