

**MODELING CHARACTER EDUCATION IN ISLAMIC BOARDING
SCHOOL THROUGH ECOLOGICAL SYSTEM THEORY:
A CASE STUDY AT GONTOR 10 JAMBI**

Richa Sucianingtyas^{1*}

riechgontory@gmail.com

Syamsul Arifin²

syamsularifin8890@gmail.com

Rudianto³

ponorogo.rudianto@umpo.ac.id

Salis Masruhin⁴

masruhin79@gmail.com

^{1,2,3} Universitas Muhammadiyah Ponorogo, Indonesia

⁴ Universitas Darussalam Gontor, Indonesia

Abstract

This study examines character education at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, Campus 10 Jambi, using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory (EST). Unlike most studies focusing on formal schools, it highlights the underexplored pesantren context. A qualitative case study was conducted through observations, interviews, and document analysis with leaders, teachers, and students. Findings show that character formation occurs holistically: the microsystem (dormitories, classrooms, mosques) fosters discipline; the mesosystem (teacher-mentor relations) ensures consistency; the exosystem (central policies) provides uniformity; the macrosystem (Panca Jiwa) grounds values; and the chronosystem reflects curricular adaptation. The novelty lies in the development of a Religious Ecological System Theory that integrates spiritual dimensions into EST. Practically, this model serves as a reference for designing adaptive and sustainable strategies in character education.

Keywords: Ecological System Theory, character education, Islamic boarding school

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis implementasi pendidikan karakter di Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor Kampus 10 Jambi melalui *Ecological System Theory* (EST) Bronfenbrenner. Berbeda dari kajian terdahulu yang berfokus pada sekolah formal, penelitian ini menyoroti konteks pesantren yang masih jarang diteliti. Menggunakan metode kualitatif studi kasus, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara, dan analisis dokumen dengan pimpinan, guru, dan santri. Hasil menunjukkan pembentukan karakter berlangsung holistik: mikrosistem (asrama, kelas, masjid) menanamkan kedisiplinan; mesosistem (relasi guru-pembina) menjaga konsistensi; eksosistem (kebijakan pusat) memberi standar seragam; makrosistem (Panca Jiwa) menjadi fondasi nilai; dan kronosistem mencerminkan adaptasi kurikulum. Kebaruan penelitian ini adalah pengembangan *Religious Ecological System Theory* yang menekankan dimensi spiritual. Model ini memberi rujukan praktis bagi lembaga pendidikan lain untuk strategi penguatan karakter yang adaptif dan berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci: Ecological System Theory, pendidikan karakter, pesantren

Introduction

The decline of moral character among Indonesian youth has become increasingly alarming, marked by the rise of deviant behaviors, street violence, drug abuse, alcohol consumption, and the erosion of moral integrity (Mulyadi, Umar, Ilham, & Ainunsa'biah, 2024; Wijayanti & Abdurrahman, 2025). This phenomenon is not merely an individual issue but also a serious national threat, as the quality of future generations' character determines the direction of national development. The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (2024) reported 15,267 cases of child abuse by mid-August 2024, while Indonesia Corruption Watch (2024) recorded 791 corruption cases in 2023 involving 1,695 suspects. These realities underscore the urgent need for holistic, systematic, and contextual character education capable of addressing the complexities of social, cultural, and environmental dynamics.

National policy has emphasized the importance of character education, as reflected in the National Long-Term Development Plan (RPJPN) 2005–2025, which positions character building as a central mission. Character education is viewed as a means to develop moral, cultured, and civilized Indonesians grounded in Pancasila. Without strong character values, the nation risks losing its direction and identity (Basyari, 2013; Iriany, 2014). Thus, character reinforcement must be instilled from an early age to nurture humanistic and productive generations.

In the Islamic perspective, character education is closely tied to cultivating noble morals (*akhlaq*). The Prophet Muhammad SAW affirmed that his mission was to perfect morality, as narrated by Imam Ahmad: *"Indeed, I was sent only to perfect noble character."* The Qur'an also affirms: *"And indeed, you (Muhammad) are of a great moral character."* (QS. Al-Qalam: 4). This highlights that character education is a divine mandate to be upheld by every educational institution, including Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), by integrating cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions.

However, educational practices in Indonesia still tend to prioritize cognitive aspects while neglecting emotional and spiritual intelligence (Sulaiman, Al Hamdani, & Aziz, 2018). This often produces academically capable graduates with weak moral foundations (Abid, 2025). In contrast, *pesantren* consistently serve as centers of moral education, emphasizing discipline, religious habituation, and role modeling by *kyai* and teachers, which have proven effective in shaping students' religious and ethical character (Husni, 2025). Nevertheless, in the era of globalization, *pesantren* face the challenge of innovating and preparing students for modernity and technology while maintaining their Islamic identity and spiritual values. Thus, *pesantren* must adopt new approaches relevant to contemporary demands without abandoning local wisdom (Husen & Husni, 2025; Zulfikar, Al Husaini, & Salabi, 2024).

One relevant approach is Bronfenbrenner's *Ecological System Theory* (EST), which emphasizes that individual development is shaped by complex interactions among multiple layers of environment: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Previous studies have primarily applied EST to early childhood or family education, while its application in modern *pesantren* remains underexplored (Bustomi, 2024). In fact, *pesantren* represent a distinctive, integrative, and holistic educational ecosystem, making EST a highly relevant analytical framework.

Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG) is one of Indonesia's leading pesantren, renowned for its consistent commitment to character building through an integral educational system (Muttaqin, Harun, Ubadah, & Erniati, 2023). At Gontor, education extends beyond classrooms into all aspects of daily life, guided by the philosophical values of *Panca Jiwa*: sincerity, simplicity, self-reliance, Islamic brotherhood, and freedom. At Campus 10 Jambi, character education is implemented through formal curricula, extracurricular activities, and 24-hour dormitory life. Yet, challenges remain, such as disciplinary violations and value gaps between students and their families.

Accordingly, this study is significant in exploring the implementation of character education at Gontor Campus 10 Jambi through the lens of EST. It addresses a research gap in the literature, which has largely focused on formal schools rather than pesantren. The primary contribution lies in developing a more comprehensive and adaptive model of character education by integrating Western theory and Islamic tradition, reinterpreted into a *Religious Ecological System Theory*. Therefore, this study formulates three main questions: (1) How is character education implemented at Gontor Campus 10 Jambi? (2) What are the implications of applying EST to students' character development? (3) Why is EST important in shaping character within the pesantren environment?

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design (Adji, 2024), which was considered appropriate for the research objective: describing the implementation of character education at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor Campus 10 Jambi through the lens of *Ecological System Theory* (EST). A qualitative approach was chosen to explore the phenomenon in depth, interpret the meaning behind social actions and interactions, and understand participants' subjective experiences in their natural context (Bungin & Moleong, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2016). The researcher acted as the primary instrument, designing the procedures, collecting data, conducting analysis, and interpreting the findings.

Participants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in character education. Key informants included two boarding school leaders (*kyyai*), eight teachers, and five dormitory mentors. Supporting informants comprised fifteen students, five alumni, and five parents, ensuring data that was comprehensive and representative of multiple perspectives.

Data were collected through three main techniques: (1) participant observation in dormitories, classrooms, mosques, and extracurricular activities; (2) in-depth interviews using semi-structured guides focusing on experiences, perceptions, and character education practices; and (3) document analysis of curricula, regulations, activity records, and official policies. All techniques were implemented using triangulation to strengthen data credibility.

The study was conducted at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor Campus 10 Jambi, located in Desa Parit Culum I, Muara Sabak Barat Sub-district, Tanjung Jabung Timur Regency. Fieldwork lasted four months (March–June 2025), during which the researcher was intensively present on-site to observe students' 24-hour boarding school life. The study followed ethical guidelines suggested by Spradley,

including respecting participants' rights, ensuring confidentiality, avoiding exploitation, and clearly communicating the purpose of the research.

Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1992) interactive model, which involves three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Reduction was carried out by selecting relevant information from observations, interviews, and documents. Data were presented in descriptive narratives, tables, and matrices to highlight the ecological interactions. Verification was conducted iteratively by cross-checking data across informants, methods, and official documents.

To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were applied: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, source and method triangulation, *member checking* with informants, and peer debriefing with supervisors. Through these procedures, the findings are expected to be valid, reliable, and able to present a comprehensive model of character education implementation based on EST, which can serve as a reference for other educational institutions.

Results and Discussion

Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG) Campus 10 in Jambi is one of the branches of PMDG headquartered in Ponorogo. The establishment of this campus was supported by the local community and the Jambi regional government, particularly the Regent of Tanjung Jabung Timur, Drs. H. Abdullah Hich, who endowed 10 hectares of land. The groundbreaking ceremony took place on November 9, 2010. As an Islamic educational institution, PMDG Campus 10 implements Gontor's modern system that integrates both religious and general curricula. This curriculum is centered on the *Kulliyatul Mu'allimin al-Islamiyyah* (KMI) program, consisting of a six-year regular program and a four-year intensive program, through which students (*santri*) study a wide range of subjects including Arabic, English, religious sciences, mathematics, and social sciences.

Character Formation in Gontor 10

PMDG Campus 10 prioritizes the formation of student character. Interviews with leaders and staff revealed seven key traits that define Gontor's students: religiosity, sincerity, discipline, independence, responsibility, self-confidence, and diligence. These traits are cultivated through a 24-hour integrated system that includes role modeling, habituation, and training. Teachers and leaders act as role models, for instance by arriving punctually and using the official languages of the *pesantren* (Arabic and English) in daily communication. In this way, PMDG Campus 10 aims to produce students who excel not only in knowledge but also in character. Among these, sincerity (*ikhlas*) stands as a central pillar of Gontor's *Panca Jiwa*.

The formation of character is carried out through role modeling, environmental design, and habituation. Leaders and teachers demonstrate sincerity by refraining from personal profit and refusing salaries, instead dedicating institutional income to the advancement of the *pesantren*. Discipline is emphasized in language use (Arabic and English), dress code, and time management. Daily activities are governed by strict schedules marked by bells, and any violation—such as tardiness or language mistakes—is subject to sanctions. Dress code regulations are applied consistently.

Such discipline, reinforced by clear sanctions, ensures that character values are not only taught but also internalized in daily life.

Character Education as an Ecological Process

Findings show that character education at PMDG Campus 10 is an integrated, holistic, and continuous process involving all aspects of students' lives over 24 hours. The shared awareness and strong unity of values, vision, mission, and orientation among teachers and students generate a powerful dynamic in character education. The application of Bronfenbrenner's *Ecological System Theory* (EST) at Gontor 10 can be summarized in the following figure:

Hidden Curriculum

The transition of students from *tsanawiyah* level to *Aliyah*, the status of students from dormitory administrators to OPPM administrators

Hidden Curriculum

Religious beliefs, religious teachings and values, societal norms

Informal + Hidden Curriculum

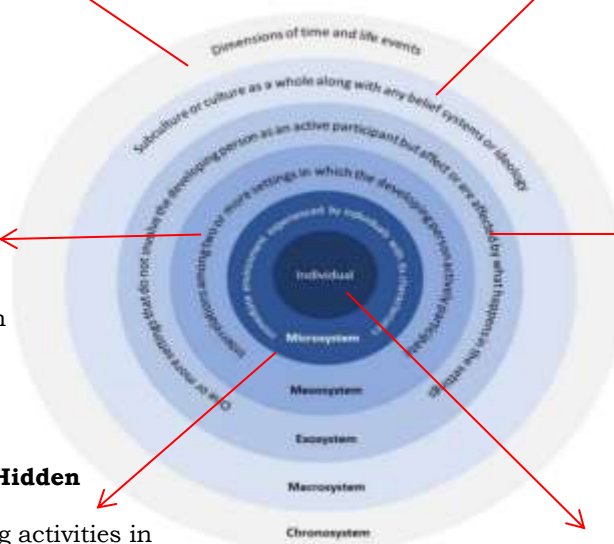
Relationships among dormitories, dormitory-OPPM, dormitory-classroom, dormitory-mosque, kitchen; interactions between *kyai* and teachers, and between teachers and dormitory mentors (*mudabbir*).

Informal + Hidden Curriculum

Boarding school leaders, deputy leaders (*wapeng*), teacher council, pesantren administration staff, relationship between pesantren and families.

Formal, Informal + Hidden Curriculum

Teaching and learning activities in classrooms, dormitory activities, extracurricular programs, pesantren social programs, regular religious gatherings (*pengajian rutin*), *ro'an* (collective work), and interactions among students, teachers, and the *kyai*.



Students with their life backgrounds

Figure 1. Ecological System at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor Campus 10

The Holistic Educational Ecosystem

Character education at PMDG Campus 10 Jambi is highly relevant to Bronfenbrenner's EST because students' lives form an integrated educational ecosystem. Education is seen as a holistic and total process where success is measured not only by academic excellence but also by morality and character. This

is reflected in the statement of the *kyai*: “A diploma for the student is not merely a piece of paper ... it is a symbol of the blessing and approval of the *kyai* or teacher, and a sign of *barakah* for the knowledge acquired.” This principle is reinforced by the maxim *al-adabu fauqal ‘ilmi* (morality above knowledge), indicating the prioritization of ethics over intellectual achievement. All components—formal education (school), informal education (family), and non-formal education (society)—are integrated into the 24-hour dormitory system specifically designed for holistic education.

Integrated and Hidden Curriculum

The curriculum at Gontor combines intracurricular and extracurricular activities into a unified system. Education occurs not only in classrooms but also through daily, weekly, monthly, and annual activities organized into three domains: spiritual, intellectual, and social. Much of this functions as a “hidden curriculum,” where values such as discipline, independence, and sincerity are instilled naturally through daily routines. Activities ranging from congregational prayers to sports and organizational management are part of this unwritten but highly influential curriculum. As emphasized by the vice guardian: “*Man kaana aktsaru fi’lan, kaana aktsaru fadhlan*” (“Whoever engages in more deeds, gains more virtue”), underscoring the pesantren’s encouragement of active participation in all activities as part of both education and worship.

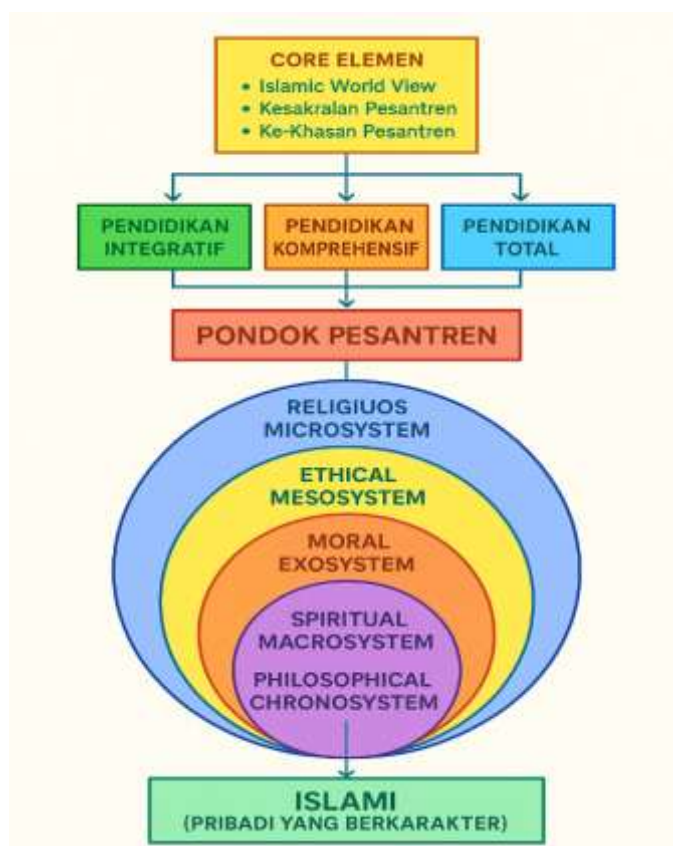


Figure 2. Character Education Model with the Development of EST in Islamic Boarding Schools

According to Bronfenbrenner, the immediate environments (microsystems) significantly shape character. This was evident at Gontor. In classrooms, teachers serve as educators and role models, observed to dress neatly and teach seriously, fostering discipline and earnestness. In dormitories, hierarchical student management systems—from rooms to the OPPM (student council)—train leadership, responsibility, and cooperation. The *kyai* explained: “Managing students is not as easy as raising one’s own children... an effective management system is required to support successful development.”

Observations also showed that students learn social values such as queuing, cleanliness, and disciplined dining etiquette. For instance, in the dining hall, students queued neatly and ate in order, reflecting values instilled through the hidden curriculum. Together, these microsystems consciously and unconsciously shape students’ worldviews, mentality, and behavior, confirming that Gontor functions as a comprehensive educational ecosystem.

Toward a Religious Ecological System Theory

The study identifies fundamental differences between Bronfenbrenner’s EST and its application in pesantren. Bronfenbrenner’s model was developed for secular institutions with a neutral worldview, while pesantren education is explicitly rooted in an Islamic worldview that shapes the educational ecosystem. This research therefore proposes the *Religious Ecological System Theory* (REST), which explicitly integrates the Islamic worldview as the foundation of character development.

PMDG Campus 10 Jambi applies a holistic system unlike the partial approaches common in other educational institutions. Education is understood as a unified ecosystem, where cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains are fully integrated. This aligns with EST’s emphasis on environment but extends it by adding spiritual dimensions. Education at Gontor is carried out 24 hours a day through role modeling, guidance, assignments, and habituation. Moreover, spirituality is central: success is not measured only by academic achievement but by blessing (*barakah*) and divine approval. These sacred values motivate both students and teachers, fostering a strong work ethic and resilience that produce graduates with strong and well-rounded character.

Religious Ecological System Theory (REST)

This study found that character education at PMDG Campus 10 Jambi is implemented holistically, emphasizing religiosity, sincerity, discipline, independence, responsibility, and confidence. These values are realized through direct experience, habituation, and role modeling, supported by strict supervision and effective management, creating a comprehensive educational ecosystem. The novelty of this study lies in proposing *Religious Ecological System Theory* as a reinterpretation of Bronfenbrenner’s model, which does not fully account for spiritual elements such as intention and blessing.

1. Religious Microsystem: direct student interactions with teachers and peers, guided by *Panca Jiwa*.
2. Ethical Mesosystem: interrelations among different environments reinforce moral consistency.
3. Moral Exosystem: the policies and examples of the *kyai* serve as collective moral regulators.

4. Spiritual Macrosystem: Islamic values and Gontor's culture function as the ideological foundation.
5. Philosophical Chronosystem: character develops over time, from passive learners to responsible leaders, with the ultimate goal of achieving divine approval.

The effectiveness of character education at PMDG Campus 10 Jambi derives from its holistic approach, best explained through the *Religious Ecological System Theory*. This theory illustrates how student character is shaped by multiple, interrelated, religiously-structured environments. Sacred values, such as the pursuit of blessing and sincerity, distinguish pesantren from secular institutions. These values motivate students and teachers alike, ensuring that every aspect of daily life contributes to the formation of mature Islamic character.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the implementation of character education at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor Campus 10 Jambi is effective, structured, and sustainable. Its effectiveness lies in the holistic integration of ecological systems that create a total educational ecosystem, where every aspect of student life—academic, social, and spiritual—is intentionally designed to instill core values. The collective awareness and unity among leaders, teachers, and students foster a consistent environment that shapes students to be religious, disciplined, independent, and morally upright.

The main novelty of this study is the formulation of the Religious Ecological System Theory (REST), a reinterpretation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. REST addresses the limitations of the classical EST by incorporating spiritual and inner dimensions such as intention, sincerity, and blessing (*barakah*), which are central to the pesantren tradition. The model identifies five interacting religious layers: the *Religious Microsystem*, *Ethical Mesosystem*, *Moral Exosystem*, *Spiritual Macrosystem*, and *Philosophical Chronosystem*.

The practical implications are significant for other educational institutions. REST offers a valuable framework for designing more structured, adaptive, and sustainable strategies of character education. It highlights that character education should not be confined to classrooms but must be embodied in school culture, value-based leadership, and spiritual reinforcement. Thus, character education not only forms external behavior but also cultivates deeper meaning and lasting values within students.

References

- Abid, A. (2025). Tingkat Kecerdasan Anak dalam Perspektif Spiritualitas Islam: Sebuah Tinjauan Kepustakaan. *Journal of Practice Learning and Educational Development*, 5(2), 402–408.
- Adji, T. P. (2024). Desain Penelitian Kualitatif. *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif*, 27, A27-dq.
- Basyari, I. W. (2013). Menanamkan identitas kebangsaan melalui pendidikan berbasis nilai-nilai budaya lokal. *Edunomic Jurnal Pendidikan Ekonomi*,

1(2).

- Bungin, B., & Moleong, L. J. A. (2007). Jenis dan Pendekatan Penelitian. *Proses Kerja Kbl Dalam Menjalankan Program Corporate Social Responsibility Di PT. Pelindo*, 1.
- Bustomi, A. A. (2024). Penerapan model komunikasi partisipatif dalam pengembangan program pendidikan anak usia dini berbasis pesantren. *Jurnal Penelitian Tindakan Kelas*, 2(2), 121–138.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.
- Husen, K., & Husni, M. (2025). Peran Pesantren Dalam Meneguhkan Identitas Budaya Indonesia di Tengah Arus Modernisasi. *IHSAN: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 3(1), 387–397.
- Husni, M. (2025). Peran pengurus dan ustadz sebagai pembimbing dalam pendidikan karakter santri di Pondok Pesantren Raudlatul Ulum 1 Ganjaran Gondanglegi Malang. *IHSAN: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 3(1), 336–347.
- Iriany, I. S. (2014). Pendidikan karakter sebagai upaya revitalisasi jati diri bangsa. *Jurnal Pendidikan UNIGA*, 8(1), 54–85.
- Mulyadi, W., Umar, U., Ilham, I., & Ainunsa'biah, A. (2024). Pemuda Berkarakter: Mendorong Perubahan Positif Dan Mengatasi Kenakalan Remaja Di Kecamatan Wawo. *Taroa: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat*, 3(2), 134–143.
- Muttaqin, K. Z., Harun, U., Ubadah, U., & Erniati, E. (2023). Peranan Pondok Pesantren Modern Darussalam Gontor Dalam Pembentukan Karakter Santri Pasca Pandemi Covid-19 di Kampus 11 Ittihadul Ummah Poso. *Jurnal Integrasi Manajemen Pendidikan*, 2(2), 55–64.
- Sulaiman, M., Al Hamdani, M. D., & Aziz, A. (2018). Emotional Spiritual Quotient (Esq) Dalam Pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam Kurikulum 2013. *Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Islam,[SL]*, 6(1), 77–110.
- Wijayanti, S., & Abdurrahman, Z. (2025). Analisis Faktor Dekadensi Moral Generasi Z dan Solusinya dalam Konseling Islam. *Al-Ittizaan: Jurnal Bimbingan Konseling Islam*, 8(1), 56–70.
- Zulfikar, Z., Al Husaini, M. D., & Salabi, A. S. (2024). Integrasi Nilai-nilai Kearifan Lokal dalam Manajemen Pendidikan Pesantren: Studi pada Dayah Raudhatul Ma'arif Al-Aziziyah Cot Trueng. *ITQAN: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Kependidikan*, 15(1), 53–64