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TRADITION, TRANSFORMATION AND TRAJECTORY: STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN MALAYSIA'S PONDOK EDUCATION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

Pondok schools have long been integral to Islamic education among Malay Muslims in Malaysia, with roots tracing back to the 18th century. While preserving their traditional ethos, these institutions have undergone considerable evolution in the 21st century. This study examines the lived experiences of students in Malaysia's pondok education system, focusing on their motivations, socio-economic backgrounds, satisfaction with learning environments, and future aspirations. Data were gathered through a structured survey involving 107 students from four pondok institutions on the East Coast of Malaysia. The results highlight a dominant self-driven motivation to pursue religious studies, with personal interest cited as the primary reason for enrollment. A noteworthy proportion of students have completed full Qur'anic memorization, underscoring the institutions' success in fostering religious scholarship. Although students reported general satisfaction with teaching quality, peer dynamics, and infrastructure, notable concerns were raised about curriculum standardization, emotional support, and financial sustainability. Many institutions continue to depend heavily on family contributions and limited external funding. Despite these challenges, students expressed pride in their educational journey and acknowledged the societal esteem associated with religious scholars. Interestingly, a significant number also indicated aspirations for further studies, including in secular fields—reflecting a shifting paradigm in pondok education toward broader academic and career pathways. The study recommends the integration of modern pedagogical tools, curriculum reform, centralized accreditation, and increased financial support to ensure the continued relevance and resilience of pondok education in contemporary Malaysia.

Keywords: *Islamic education, pondok schools, curriculum reform, student experience, Malaysia, future aspirations*

INTRODUCTION

The development of Islamic education in Malaysia, particularly pondok studies, is deeply rooted in the Muslim community's commitment to religious values. While traditional in origin, Malaysia's Islamic education system became more structured after independence, beginning with Qur'an memorization and Qira'at classes and evolving into institutions such as Maahad Pondok Wal Qiraat and Darul Quran—now recognized as benchmarks for religious excellence (Rahman, 2017; Ahmad & Abdullah, 2019). This growing awareness among Malaysian Muslims of the Qur'an's centrality in their lives has fostered increased community engagement and institutional expansion (Mahmood, 2016).

Consequently, pondok centers across the country now offer diverse Qur'anic memorization programs, encouraging not only spiritual growth but also serving as a moral compass for society (Zulkifli et al., 2021). The widespread recognition of Qur'anic values has led many parents to enroll their children in these institutions, driven by both religious devotion and a desire to instill character and discipline (Nor & Aziz, 2020). Within the Muslim tradition, the Qur'an holds deep spiritual and communal value through memorization (Jamil & Harun, 2022).

Moreover, pondok schools are instrumental in shaping students' personal and social identities. For some families, this results in strong encouragement—or even compulsion—for enrollment (Said & Kamaruddin, 2020). These institutions foster close-knit environments where spiritual development is closely tied to community norms (Khalid, 2019). Yet, challenges remain: early separation from family can impact children's psychological well-being, requiring balanced support systems (Hassan & Ismail, 2018). Ensuring emotional support alongside religious rigor is vital for holistic development (Said & Kamaruddin, 2020).

Additionally, the long-term sustainability of pondok education hinges on improvements in funding, teaching quality, and infrastructure (Zulkifli et al., 2021). Future research should explore ways to modernize pondok models while preserving their cultural and religious essence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction & Historical Background

The pondok institution has long played a pivotal role in shaping Islamic education in Malaysia, especially before the country's independence. Traditionally, pondok schools were informal centers of learning led by ulama (religious scholars) and supported by community donations. These institutions emphasized memorization of the Qur'an (tahfiz), mastery of classical Arabic, and an in-depth understanding of religious texts. They played a crucial role in preserving Islamic knowledge, particularly during the British colonization era, when secular education dominated state agendas (Rahman, 2017; Mohd Arifin, 2005).

Following independence, the Malaysian government began formalizing the Islamic education system, partly influenced by the Abdul Rahman Talib Report (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1960), which highlighted the importance of religious instruction in national development. Despite the emergence of government-backed madrasahs, pondok institutions continued to survive—mainly due to their deep community roots and flexibility in pedagogy (Zainal & Khadijah, 2018). Their resilience underscores the historical significance of traditional religious education in Malaysia's socio-educational landscape.

Government Reforms & Educational Integration

The integration of pondok education into Malaysia's national education system has evolved over decades, marked by both progress and persistent challenges. Initiatives to align pondok curricula with national standards—such as introducing Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) recognition for selected religious subjects—have opened new pathways for students (Zainal & Khadijah, 2018). This shift reflects growing institutional support to modernize Islamic education while preserving its religious foundations.

Financial support has also increased. According to the Malay Mail (2020), RM100 million was allocated in 2020 for the maintenance of pondok institutions, reflecting a renewed state commitment. More recently, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim announced an additional RM8.9 million for Islamic schools in Kedah, further strengthening efforts to integrate these schools (Malay Mail, 2023). Additionally, JAKIM's RM119 million fund in 2024 emphasized upgrades in infrastructure and teacher training (Halal Times, 2024).

However, integration is not without criticism. Some scholars argue that standardization can dilute the philosophical and pedagogical uniqueness of pondok learning (Hashim & Langgulung, 2008). Financial dependence on the government may also limit the autonomy of these institutions. Meanwhile, resource disparities and bureaucratic bottlenecks continue to affect smaller or independent pondok schools (Nasir & Ariffin, 2018). Overall, while integration efforts are commendable, a careful balance between modernization and authenticity remains critical.

Institutional Transformation & Lifelong Learning

Over time, pondok institutions have evolved to serve not only young learners but also adults and older people, making them unique platforms for lifelong religious learning. Several modern pondok schools now offer structured adult learning modules, including classes on kitab reading, Arabic grammar workshops, and community lectures on Islamic jurisprudence. For instance, Pondok Bustanul Arifin in Selangor, featured on epondok (2010), provides programs tailored explicitly for elderly students seeking spiritual enrichment.

This transformation reflects the adaptive capacity of pondok schools in addressing the needs of different demographic groups. Zainal & Khadijah (2018) noted a rise in retirees enrolling in pondok centers as part of spiritual preparation for the afterlife. Similarly, Nor & Aziz (2020) highlighted alumi testimonies expressing pride in having received holistic religious education that shaped their lifelong values. These examples demonstrate that pondok schools are not relics of the past, but rather dynamic institutions that cater to evolving spiritual aspirations within Malaysian society.

Parental Perception, Identity, and Social Impact

Parental motivations for sending children to pondok schools are deeply rooted in spiritual aspiration, societal expectations, and perceptions of identity formation. Many Muslim parents view pondok education as a means to cultivate moral discipline, strengthen religious values, and preserve cultural traditions (Mahmood, 2016). In some cases, this belief is so strong that parents may insist—if not pressure—their children to enroll in these institutions (Said & Kamaruddin, 2020).

These choices are also influenced by community perception. Pondok graduates are often regarded with high esteem, seen as spiritually enlightened individuals who embody Islamic virtues (Jamil & Harun, 2022). However, such societal reverence can come with psychological costs. Embong (2023) highlighted the emotional strain faced by children separated from their families at a young age, especially when expectations to perform religiously are high. Khalid (2019) further emphasized the critical role of peer support in mitigating loneliness and enhancing emotional well-being in these settings.

Still, many students report positive transformations in their religious identity and social awareness. Hassan & Ismail (2018) stressed that the school environment, when adequately supported with infrastructure and mentorship, can foster holistic development. Ultimately, pondok institutions play a complex role—not only in religious instruction but in shaping intergenerational Muslim identity in Malaysia.

Curriculum, Accreditation & Pedagogical Challenges

While the pondok system is revered for its traditional Islamic curriculum, it faces significant challenges in standardization, accreditation, and pedagogical practice. Most institutions rely on classical kitab texts and emphasize rote memorization, which may not align with contemporary pedagogical standards (Hashim & Langgulung, 2008). This disconnect has led to growing concerns over the quality of instruction and learning outcomes.

Ahmad & Syed Hassan (2020) noted that many pondok teachers lack formal pedagogical training, often relying on inherited knowledge rather than standardized methods. This results in inconsistencies in curriculum delivery and assessment practices. Moreover, Zakaria et al. (2021) found that limited integration of digital tools and ICT in pondok schools further widens the gap between traditional and modern education models.

Issues of accreditation also persist. Without standardized benchmarks, pondok graduates often face difficulties when transitioning into higher education or the workforce (Abdullah & Hasan, 2016). Recognizing this, some institutions have begun collaborating with government bodies to gain partial recognition for select subjects (Ahmad & Abdullah, 2019). However, resistance remains from purists who fear that reform might compromise the spiritual integrity of pondok learning.

Hence, balancing educational innovation with the preservation of religious authenticity remains an ongoing struggle within Malaysia's pondok ecosystem.

Financial Sustainability & Infrastructure Gaps

Financial sustainability remains a pressing issue for pondok institutions across Malaysia. Many schools operate with minimal state support and rely heavily on zakat, waqf, and individual donations to survive (Nasir & Ariffin, 2018). However, inconsistent funding flows and weak financial governance can impede long-term development.

Mat Nor et al. (2017) observed that a lack of financial planning frameworks often leads to short-term decision-making and underinvestment in critical infrastructure. Some pondok institutions struggle with basic facilities, including sanitation, libraries, and dormitories, which can negatively impact student well-being and learning environments.

Zulkifli et al. (2021) also pointed out that socioeconomic disparities influence which pondok schools thrive versus those that stagnate. To address these disparities, Halal Times (2024) reported that JAKIM allocated RM119 million in 2024 to upgrade Islamic schools, but the extent of support reaching grassroots-level pondok institutions remains uncertain. Overall, improved financial transparency, strategic planning, and targeted aid are essential to ensure the longevity and impact of pondok education.

Comparative Perspectives from Asia & Beyond

The Malaysian pondok system is part of a broader landscape of traditional Islamic education in Asia and beyond, including Indonesia's pesantren, India's madrasas, and Sri Lanka's madrasah networks. While unique socio-political factors shape each country's system, recurring themes include tensions between tradition and reform, curriculum integration, and external perceptions.

In Indonesia, Azra (2018) and Raihani (2012) describe how pesantren have adapted civic education and life skills training without compromising spiritual core values. Similarly, Sikand (2008) highlighted reform attempts in Indian madrasas that were met with resistance due to fears of secular dilution. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, Masooda Bano (2011) observed that madrasa reforms often succeed only when aligned with community trust and religious legitimacy.

Malaysia's situation parallels many of these concerns. Zaman (2010) and Nuhman (2007) documented how traditional institutions struggle to reconcile modern demands (e.g., employability, digital literacy) with the sacred nature of religious education. However, what differentiates Malaysia is its dual-system advantage: government-sanctioned Islamic education coexists with independent pondok schools, offering both regulation and autonomy.

Cross-country comparisons by Hashim et al. (2011) underscore this diversity. Their study, which compares Malaysia's pondok, Indonesia's pesantren, and Nigeria's madrasah, reveals varied governance structures, curriculum models, and degrees of integration. Park & Niyozov (2008) also emphasized the need for a context-specific reform, noting how donor-led modernization risks alienating grassroots educators.

More recently, Islahuddin et al. (2024) demonstrated that community-led support structures in Indonesia and Thailand have helped traditional schools remain sustainable while gaining informal accreditation. These international reflections offer valuable insights into the balance between authenticity and modernity in Malaysia's pondok transformation.

Islamic Tourism, Public Perception & Future Direction

The evolving public perception of pondok schools offers new opportunities, particularly within Malaysia's growing Islamic tourism sector. Increasingly, these institutions are being reframed not only as religious centers but also as cultural heritage sites and symbols of Malaysia's Islamic identity. For instance, the Kedah state government's initiative to promote pondok schools as part of Islamic tourism has been well received by the public (Malay Mail, 2023).

From a societal standpoint, the image of pondok graduates is shifting. While once considered peripheral to the job market, studies now show that they are gaining respect in community leadership and entrepreneurship (Nasir & Azmi, 2018). However, lingering stigma related to outdated pedagogy and infrastructural conditions continues to influence perceptions.

To counter these challenges, scholars suggest blending traditional narratives with economic perspectives. Abdullah & Hasan (2016) proposed positioning pondok schools within Malaysia's broader educational-tourism ecosystem, offering structured programs for international Muslim visitors, including spiritual retreats and language immersion.

Future research should explore how digital platforms, tourism partnerships, and structured public engagement can further reshape the narrative of pondok institutions. With strategic framing, pondok education can evolve from a marginal religious model to a sustainable, respected, and economically relevant pillar of Islamic Malaysian identity.

Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

i. To examine the demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds of students enrolled in *pondok* schools in Malaysia.
ii. To explore the underlying motivations and influencing factors behind students' enrollment in *pondok* institutions.
iii. To assess students' learning experiences, particularly in relation to curriculum relevance, teaching quality, infrastructure, and peer interactions.
iv. To investigate students' reflections on their educational journey and their future aspirations post-*pondok* education.
v. To identify key challenges encountered by students throughout their time in *pondok* schools.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative survey design, utilizing a structured questionnaire to gather data from former and current students of four selected pondok institutions located on the East Coast of Malaysia. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit individuals who had studied in *pondok* schools for at least one year. Eligible participants were aged 15 and above and capable of understanding and responding to the questionnaire independently.

Data Collection Instrument

The self-administered questionnaire consisted of five main sections:

a. Demographic Information
b. Socioeconomic Status
c. Learning Experiences in *pondok*
d. Future Plans and Self-Reflection
e. Societal Perception

All items were closed-ended, primarily in multiple-choice format, to facilitate consistency in quantitative analysis. A pilot test was conducted prior to data collection to ensure instrument clarity and appropriateness. The questionnaire demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.81, indicating good reliability across items measuring learning experiences and self-reflection.

Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

Given the technology-restricted environment in some *pondok* schools, the questionnaire was distributed in physical (paper-based) form. Researchers administered and collected the forms manually to ensure full participation. A total of 120 questionnaires were distributed, and 93 completed responses were returned, yielding a response rate of 77.5%.

The data were analysed using descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, means, and percentages) to summarize respondent profiles and key trends.

Ethical Considerations

All participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the questionnaire. Respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. The data collected are used solely for academic and research purposes and are stored securely in compliance with ethical research protocols.

Sampling Limitations

As a non-random purposive sample, the results may not be generalizable to all *pondok* students nationwide. Moreover, the East Coast focus may reflect regional-specific insights that differ from *pondok* institutions in other states.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Section A: Demographic Information

Table 1 Genders

Genders	Male	Female
Respondents	80 (74.07%)	28 (25.9%)

Out of a total of 108 respondents, 74.07% were male while 25.9 were female. This translates to 80 male and 28 female respondents, indicating a significantly higher representation of male students in the study.

Table 2 Number of years studying at the pondok school

Number of years studying at the pondok school	1 year	2 years	3 years	4 years	5 years	6 years	7 years	More than 7 years
	16 (14.8%)	3 (2.8%)	7 (6.5%)	36 (33.3%)	20 (18.5%)	12 (11.1%)	8 (7.4%)	6 (5.6%)

Out of 107 valid responses (one respondent left the item blank), the data shows varied durations of study in pondok schools. The most significant proportion of students—33.3% (36 respondents)—reported studying for four years. This was followed by 18.5% (20 respondents) who studied for five years, and 14.8% (16 respondents) for one year. Other durations were less common: 11.1% (12 respondents) studied for six years, 7.4% (8 respondents) for seven years, and 5.6% (6 respondents) for more than seven years. The least frequent durations were three years (6.5%, or 7 respondents) and two years (2.8%, or three respondents).

These figures reflect a broad distribution in the length of study, with four years emerging as the most typical duration among students in this sample.

Table 3 *Juz'* (chapters) of quran memorization

No.	*Juz'* (Chapters) of Quran memorization	Respondents (%)
i	Common short verses only	4 (3.7%)
ii	Less than 1 *juz'*	10 (9.3%)
iii	1–5 *juz'*	18 (16.7%)
iv	6–10 *juz'*	17 (15.7%)
v	11–20 *juz'*	16 (14.8%)
vi	21–29 *juz'*	5 (4.6%)
vii	Memorized all 30 *juz'*	39 (36.1%)

Based on the responses from 108 participants regarding their Quran memorization, the data shows a diverse range of memorization levels. A small proportion, 3.7% (4 respondents), reported having memorized only common short verses, while 9.3% (10 respondents) had memorized less than one *juz'*. A larger group, 16.7% (18 respondents), had memorized between one to five *juz'*, followed closely by 15.7% (17 respondents) who had memorized six to ten *juz'*, and 14.8% (16 respondents) with eleven to twenty *juz'* memorized. Meanwhile, 4.6% (5 respondents) reported memorizing between twenty-one to twenty-nine *juz'*. Notably, the largest group, comprising 36.1% (39 respondents), had successfully memorized the entire Quran (all 30 *juz'*), indicating a significant level of Quranic mastery among the respondents.

Table 4 Main reasons for entering *pondok* school

	Main Reasons for Entering *Pondok* School	Respondents (%)
1	Personal interest	68 (63.0%)
2	Encouragement from family/friends	25 (23.1%)
3	Forced by family	4 (3.7%)
4	No other option	8 (7.4%)
5	Disinterest in regular school system	3 (2.8%)
6	Financial factor (low fees)	0 (0%)
7	Escaping family problems	0 (0%)

The data shows that students entered pondok schools for a variety of personal and external reasons. A clear majority, 63.0% (68 respondents), cited *personal interest* as their primary motivation, highlighting strong individual commitment to religious education. This was followed by *encouragement from family or friends*, reported by 23.1% (25 respondents), suggesting the influence of close social circles in educational choices.

Smaller groups entered due to less voluntary reasons: 7.4% (8 respondents) selected *no other option*, and 3.7% (4 respondents) were *forced by family*. A minority, 2.8% (3 respondents), expressed *disinterest in the regular school system*.

Notably, none of the respondents selected *financial reasons* or *escaping family problems* as their main reason. While these were listed as response options in the questionnaire, they were not chosen by any participant and thus do not contribute to the analysis.

Table 5 Parents' backgrounds

	Father's occupation	Respondents (%)	Mother's occupation	Respondents (%)	Total household monthly income	Respondents (%)
1	Business owner	23 (21.3%)	Business owner	21 (19.4%)	Less than RM500	2 (1.9%)
2	Government sector	31 (28.7%)	Government sector	28 (25.9%)	RM500 – RM999	5 (4.7%)
3	Private sector	44 (40.7%)	Private sector	12 (11.1%)	RM1,000 – RM2,999	43 (40.2%)
4	Unemployed	5 (4.6%)	Unemployed	47 (43.5%)	More than RM3,000	57 (53.3%)
5	Deceased	5 (4.6%)	Deceased	0 (0%)	-	-

Section B: Socioeconomic Status

Father's Occupation:

The majority of respondents' fathers were employed in the private sector (40.7%, n=44), followed by the government sector (28.7%, n=31), and as business owners (21.3%, n=23). A smaller number reported their fathers as unemployed (4.6%, n=5) or deceased (4.6%, n=5). This suggests that most respondents came from households where the father was economically active, particularly in formal or business-related roles.

Mother's Occupation:

A significant portion of respondents reported their mothers as unemployed (43.5%, n=47), reflecting the prevalence of stay-at-home or informally employed mothers. Among those who were employed, 25.9% (n=28) worked in the government sector, 19.4% (n=21) were business owners, and 11.1% (n=12) worked in the private sector. None of the respondents reported their mother as deceased.

Household Monthly Income:

The estimated monthly household income varied, though more than half (53.3%, n=57) reported incomes of more than RM3,000, followed by 40.2% (n=43) within the RM1,000–RM2,999 range. A smaller group earned RM500–RM999 (4.7%, n=5), while only 1.9% (n=2) fell into the less than RM500 bracket. These figures indicate that although many families earn modest incomes, a substantial number still experience economic vulnerability.

The data on the source of educational funding for *pondok* students shows that the vast majority, 90.7% (98 respondents), rely on family support to finance their studies. A small number receive assistance from NGOs or external organizations (4.6%, or 5 respondents) and government sources (2.8%, or 3 respondents), while only 1.9% (2 respondents) are self-funded. This indicates a strong dependence on family contributions for educational expenses, with limited access to institutional or external financial aid among the students.

Table 6 Source of educational funding for *pondok* students

Item	Self-funded	Family	Government	NGO / External Org
Source of educational funding	2 (1.9%)	98 (90.7%)	3 (2.8%)	5 (4.6%)

Section C: Learning Experience at *Pondok*

Table 7 Problem sharing with family

	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Never
How often do you share your *pondok* problems with your family?	1 (0.9%)	2 (1.9%)	88 (81.5%)	17 (15.7%)

The data indicate that most respondents (81.5%) share their challenges at the pondok only occasionally, suggesting that communication about personal difficulties occurs but is limited. Notably, 15.7% of respondents reported never discussing such matters with their families, which may reflect emotional distance, cultural norms around self-reliance, or perceived lack of understanding from home. Only a small number engage in frequent emotional disclosure—1 respondent (0.9%) very often and 2 respondents (1.9%) frequently share their concerns.

Table 8 Self-satisfaction at *pondok*

Items	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
How satisfied are you with the subjects taught in the *pondok* curriculum?	30 (28.0%)	32 (29.9%)	42 (39.3%)	3 (2.8%)	0 (0%)
How would you rate the quality of teachers at your *pondok*?	32 (29.6%)	34 (31.5%)	36 (33.3%)	5 (4.6%)	1 (0.9%)
Are you satisfied with the way the administration manages student affairs and daily activities?	14 (13.1%)	37 (34.6%)	51 (47.7%)	3 (2.8%)	2 (1.9%)
How satisfied are you with the infrastructure facilities (dorms/study areas)?	23 (21.3%)	41 (38.0%)	39 (36.1%)	5 (4.6%)	0 (0%)
How satisfied are you with the fairness of tuition fees charged?	18 (16.7%)	40 (37.0%)	48 (44.4%)	2 (1.9%)	0 (0%)
Are you satisfied with the quality of food provided at the *pondok*?	23 (21.3%)	28 (25.9%)	49 (45.4%)	5 (4.6%)	3 (2.8%)
How satisfied are you with the spirit of cooperation and mutual help among your peers at the *pondok* ?	26 (24.1%)	39 (36.1%)	37 (34.4%)	6 (5.6%)	1 (0.9%)

This trend highlights a communication gap between students and their families regarding emotional or experiential sharing. It may also highlight the influence of *pondok* culture, where students are expected to adapt independently, or where discussing personal hardship is discouraged in favor of spiritual endurance.

Overall, the results indicate a generally positive level of satisfaction among students with multiple aspects of their *pondok* experience. Below is a synthesis by theme:

Academic Experience

Students showed moderate satisfaction with the curriculum (57.9% satisfied/very satisfied) and teaching quality (61.1%). While a substantial portion remained neutral—especially for subjects (39.3%) and teacher quality (33.3%)—low dissatisfaction levels suggest broad contentment with room for pedagogical enhancement.

Administrative & Infrastructure Management

Satisfaction with administrative affairs (47.7%) and infrastructure (59.3%) was generally favorable, though nearly half of the respondents felt neutral about administrative effectiveness. This neutrality may indicate a lack of engagement or clarity in institutional processes, suggesting a potential area for improvement in transparency and student involvement.

Cost & Support Facilities

Perceptions of tuition fees were generally positive (53.7%), with only 1.9% expressing dissatisfaction. However, 44.4% remained neutral, which may reflect limited understanding or communication about fee structures. For food quality, satisfaction dropped slightly (47.2%), and a higher level of neutrality (45.4%) suggests an opportunity for nutritional or variety improvements.

Social Environment

Peer relations received strong feedback, with 60.2% of respondents being satisfied or very satisfied with the spirit of cooperation, indicating a positive and supportive student culture. A small minority (6.5%) reported dissatisfaction, indicating mostly harmonious peer dynamics.

Section D: Future Plans & Self-Reflection

The data on students' future plans after completing their *pondok* studies indicates a strong inclination toward further education, particularly in non-religious fields. The largest group, 42.6% (46 respondents), plan to pursue further studies in non-religious fields, while 31.5% (34 respondents) intend to continue further studies in the religious field. A small number aim to work as religious teachers (ustaz/ustazah) (2.8%, or 3 respondents) or to work in non-religious fields (6.5%, or 7 respondents).

Table 9 Plans after finishing *pondok* studies

Items	Further studies in religious field	Further studies in non-religious field	Work as religious teacher	Work in a non-religious field	Get married and not work	Not Sure
What are your plans after finishing *pondok* studies?	34 (31.5%)	46 (42.6%)	3 (2.8%)	7 (6.5%)	0 (0%)	19 (17.6%)

Notably, none of the respondents indicated plans to get married and not work. However, 17.6% (19 respondents) were not sure about their future plans, suggesting a need for more career guidance or exposure to future pathways. Overall, the data reflects a strong academic ambition among the students, with a balanced interest in both religious and secular education.

The students' perceptions of their pondok education indicate a generally positive and transformative learning experience:

Positive Sentiments

A significant majority—40.7% (44 respondents)—expressed great pride in their achievements.

- 29.6% (32 respondents) believed their education had shaped them into valuable contributors to religion, society, and the nation.
- Although fewer in number, 13.0% (14 respondents) felt confident that pondok students could compete with peers from other educational streams, suggesting growing confidence in the relevance of traditional Islamic education in the modern world.
- Only 1.9% (2 respondents) felt they had become excellent religious scholars, perhaps indicating either humility or a need for more structured scholarly progression within the pondok system.

Neutral/Ambivalent Sentiments

- 13.9% (15 respondents) selected "just going with the flow," which may reflect emotional disengagement, passive learning environments, or unclear personal goals.

Negative Sentiment

- Only 0.9% (1 respondent) reported regret about entering the pondok, suggesting very minimal dissatisfaction with the experience.

Section E: Public Perception

Item	Yes	No	Not sure
Do you feel that religious scholars are given a place in today's society?	96 (88.9%)	3 (2.8%)	9 (8.3%)

The responses to whether religious scholars are given their place in today's society reveal a strong sense of recognition and respect for religious figures among the students. A large majority, 88.9% (96 respondents), answered Yes, indicating that they believe religious scholars are valued and hold an important role in contemporary society. Only 2.8% (3 respondents) felt that they are not given their due place, while 8.3% (9 respondents) were not sure. This overwhelming positive perception suggests that the students view the path of religious scholarship as both meaningful and socially respected.

Table 10 Students' perceptions of their *pondok* education

Items	I am very proud of my achievements in *pondok* school	I regret entering *pondok* school	I am just going with the flow	*Pondok* education has shaped me into a useful person	*Pondok* education helped me become an excellent religious scholar	I believe *pondok* students can compete with students from other schools
	44 (40.7%)	1 (0.9%)	15 (13.9%)	32 (29.6%)	2 (1.9%)	14 (13%)

DISCUSSIONS

This study provides a comprehensive examination of contemporary pondok education in Malaysia, focusing on student demographics, learning experiences, and perceived outcomes. Findings reveal that the predominant reason for student enrollment is personal interest, followed by encouragement from family and friends (Table 4). This trend reflects broader societal shifts in how religious education is perceived. No longer seen solely as a last resort, pondok schooling is increasingly chosen for intrinsic reasons. Jamil and Harun (2022) posited that this aligns with evolving views of religious schooling as a meaningful path to personal and spiritual development. These motivations resonate with Mahmood's (2016) observations on Islamic revivalism and identity formation. Ahmad and Abdullah (2019) similarly observed that pondok institutions are no longer limited to traditional religious instruction but also serve to cultivate moral character and community engagement. The minimal reports of external coercion suggest an emerging cultural acceptance of pondok education as a valid and respected choice within Malaysia's educational landscape.

Religious attainment, particularly Quran memorization, emerged as a strong academic focus among respondents, with a substantial number reporting completion of several juz' (Table 3). This finding is consistent with Rahman's (2017) work, which emphasized the social prestige associated with titles such as Al-Hafiz in Malaysian society. Such achievement highlights the rigorous and disciplined learning environment cultivated in pondok schools. However, this emphasis also reveals structural challenges. The absence of a standardized curriculum and lack of formalized teacher training make it difficult to ensure consistent quality across institutions (Ahmad & Syed Hassan, 2020). Although students expressed satisfaction with curriculum and teaching quality (Table 8), a large proportion selected neutral responses, suggesting that while they may not be dissatisfied, there is room for pedagogical enhancement. Said and Kamaruddin (2020) also identified similar ambivalence in earlier studies, attributing it to teaching styles that rely heavily on rote memorization rather than analytical or critical thinking. As Abdullah and Hasan (2016) advocated, there is a pressing need for comprehensive teacher development programs and curriculum reform to improve both academic depth and student engagement.

Student well-being and living conditions offer a more complex picture. While many students were satisfied with infrastructure such as dormitories and study areas, a considerable portion remained neutral, and a small group reported dissatisfaction (Table 8). These mixed sentiments likely reflect variations in facility standards across different pondok schools, as previously noted by Hassan and Ismail (2018). Similarly, the quality of food received divergent responses, with a significant number of students expressing neutrality or mild dissatisfaction. Emotional support also appears to be limited. The majority of students reported sharing their personal challenges with their family only occasionally or never (Table 7), potentially indicating a lack of emotional connectivity or support systems. Khalid (2019) emphasized that emotional well-being and family involvement are vital for healthy adolescent development. The limited emotional sharing observed in this study suggests a gap that could leave students vulnerable to psychological stress. Integrating mental health support, such as counseling services or mentorship programs, within the pondok system may be crucial to ensuring holistic student development.

In terms of financial background, most students relied on family for support, with few receiving aid from external organizations (Table 6). Household income data (Table 5) shows that over 40% of students came from lower- to middle-income families, highlighting financial limitations. These findings are consistent with those of Mat Nor, Yaacob, and Mohd Zin (2017), who documented the economic fragility of pondok institutions, which often rely on charitable donations and wakaf (endowments). Nasir and Ariffin (2018) similarly observed that financial instability limits the capacity of many pondok schools to improve infrastructure or hire qualified staff. Although government support for religious education has increased, many pondok institutions are excluded from funding due to administrative constraints or lack of formal registration (Malay Mail, 2020; Halal Times, 2024). These findings underscore the need for centralized policy mechanisms that can offer accessible and equitable funding opportunities to pondok schools while respecting their traditional autonomy. Zainal and Khadijah (2018) emphasized the role of proper registration and institutional accreditation

in facilitating access to resources and promoting sustainable development.

Despite challenges, student perceptions of their pondok education remain broadly positive. A significant number reported feeling proud of their academic and spiritual achievements (Table 10), and many agreed that their pondok education had helped shape them into useful individuals for religion, race, and nation. However, fewer students believed that pondok graduates could compete equally with their mainstream counterparts, indicating lingering doubts about academic parity and employability. This aligns with Nor and Aziz's (2020) findings, which highlighted societal skepticism regarding the competitiveness of pondok graduates in broader educational or employment contexts. Nonetheless, some students expressed interest in pursuing further education in non-religious fields, suggesting an evolving perception of pondok schooling as a foundation rather than a limitation. To facilitate this shift, Hashim and Langgulung (2008) recommended introducing bridging programs, academic accreditation, and modular curricula that align religious instruction with national academic frameworks.

Looking forward, the emergence of hybrid models that integrate religious learning with modern tools presents an opportunity for innovation in pondok education. However, many schools remain digitally under-equipped, which hinders their potential for blended learning and digital literacy. Zakaria, Zainuddin, and Salleh (2021) highlighted the need for targeted infrastructure upgrades and teacher readiness in adopting digital tools. Addressing this technological gap is crucial for preparing students for the contemporary academic and employment challenges they will face. To ensure pondok education remains relevant and competitive, efforts must focus on improving curriculum quality, professionalizing teaching staff, and incorporating technology. These initiatives should be supported by policies that align pondok education with national education goals and human capital development objectives. By doing so, pondok institutions can continue to uphold their religious heritage while adapting to the evolving needs of Malaysian society.

CONCLUSION

Pondok schools remain a vital part of Malaysia's religious and educational landscape, balancing deep-rooted traditions with emerging societal needs. This study reveals that students often choose pondok education out of personal conviction, influenced by family, and experience meaningful growth—spiritually, academically, and socially. While satisfaction with the curriculum, infrastructure, and peer interaction is generally positive, the data highlights areas that require attention, including emotional support systems, pedagogical reform, and sustainable funding. These insights reinforce the importance of modernizing pondok institutions without compromising their core values. Moving forward, policy interventions should focus on teacher professionalization, standardized accreditation, and integration of digital resources to ensure the relevance and competitiveness of pondok graduates. This research contributes to the evolving discourse on Islamic education, offering data-driven recommendations to strengthen its role in national development. Continued collaboration among educators, policymakers, and communities will be crucial to sustaining and enriching the pondok legacy for future generations.

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