

Pious Neoliberalism and the Rise of Middle-Class Muslim Education in West Sumatra

Ika Sandra^{a,1}, Rama Arya Kurniawan^{b,2}, Muhammad Alfian^{c,3}, Muhammad Rizki Alvarizi^{d,4}, Gigieh Cahya Permady^{e,5}

^{a,b,c,d}Universitas Negeri Padang, Jalan Prof Hamka, Air Tawar Padang, Indonesia

^ePoliteknik Pelayaran Sorong, Jl. Tanjung No. 1, Saoka, Distrik Sorong Barat, Kota Sorong, Papua Barat 98411, Indonesia

¹ika.sandra@fis.unp.ac.id; ²ram44rya@gmail.com; ³muhammadalfianfc@gmail.com;

⁴rizkiavarizi14@student.unp.ac.id; ⁵gigieh_permady@dephub.go.id

*Corresponding Author: ika.sandra@fis.unp.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of modern Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia reflects a significant transformation in the relationship between religion, education, and contemporary social aspirations. While previous studies have predominantly examined Islamic education through the perspectives of institutional transformation, educational marketization, and parental school choice, limited attention has been given to understanding how Muslim middle-class families negotiate religious aspirations alongside neoliberal educational values. This study aims to examine the rise of Islamic boarding schools in West Sumatra through the perspective of *pious neoliberalism*, focusing on how families construct Islamic education as a strategy for producing pious, disciplined, and socially competitive children. This study employs a qualitative case study approach conducted in two modern Islamic boarding schools in West Sumatra, namely Ar-Risalah and Nurul Ikhlas. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with parents, school leaders, and teachers, as well as direct observations of institutional practices. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings reveal three interrelated dimensions of the emergence of pious neoliberal educational aspirations among Muslim middle-class families. First, Islamic boarding schools are perceived as controlled moral environments that protect children from contemporary social risks and cultivate religious discipline. Second, Islamic education has shifted into a form of long-term educational investment through which families seek to accumulate religious, cultural, and academic capital for future social mobility. Third, modern Islamic boarding schools contribute to the formation of an ideal Muslim subject who combines Islamic morality with academic achievement, global competencies, and competitiveness. This study argues that neoliberalism does not necessarily diminish the role of religion within education; rather, it reshapes religious aspirations by integrating piety with values of self-improvement, educational investment, and social distinction. The findings contribute to broader discussions on the neoliberal transformation of education, Muslim middle-class formation, and the changing nature of Islamic educational aspirations in contemporary societies.

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1. Introduction

The increasing expansion of Islamic education in many Muslim societies has become one of the most significant educational transformations of the twenty-first century. The resurgence of religious-based schooling does not simply represent a return to traditional forms of religious learning; rather, it reflects the changing relationship between religion, modernity, and contemporary educational aspirations. Across different contexts, Islamic educational institutions have increasingly transformed themselves by integrating religious values with modern educational models, professional management, global competencies, and academic excellence. This transformation indicates that contemporary Islamic education has become a dynamic social arena where religious commitments intersect with broader economic, cultural, and political changes. In Indonesia, this transformation is particularly visible in the development of modern Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), which have moved beyond their conventional role as institutions primarily concerned with the transmission of religious knowledge. Contemporary Islamic boarding schools have adopted integrated educational systems that combine national curricula, intensive religious education, foreign language competencies, technology-based learning, leadership training, and various extracurricular programs. These transformations demonstrate the ability of Islamic educational institutions to adapt to the demands of globalization and the increasing expectations of Muslim families regarding the quality of education (Susiyani, 2021).

The transformation of Islamic boarding schools should also be understood within the broader context of neoliberal restructuring in education. Since the implementation of educational decentralization in Indonesia, educational institutions have been granted greater autonomy in managing their educational programs, financial resources, and institutional development. While decentralization has opened opportunities for educational innovation, it has simultaneously intensified competition among schools, creating an educational marketplace where institutions compete to attract students and gain public recognition (Sandra, Wijanarko, Thi, et al., 2023). Consequently, education has increasingly been framed through the language of competition, quality assurance, efficiency, consumer satisfaction, and institutional branding. The growing competition among educational institutions has fundamentally transformed the relationship between schools and families. Under neoliberal educational governance, parents are no longer positioned merely as participants in educational processes but increasingly become consumers who actively evaluate, compare, and select schools based on the benefits offered for their children's future. Educational choice becomes a strategic family decision influenced by considerations of academic achievement, social mobility, character formation, and future competitiveness. Therefore, the selection of schools is not simply an educational decision but a reflection of class-based aspirations and strategies of social reproduction.

Within this changing educational landscape, the emergence of Muslim middle-class families has played a significant role in reshaping the demand for Islamic education. The expansion of the Muslim middle class in Indonesia has contributed to the emergence of new forms of Islamic consumption, where religious identity is increasingly expressed through modern lifestyles, consumption patterns, and educational choices (Suyatno, 2021), (Nur Azizah, 2021).

For these families, Islamic education represents not only a mechanism for transmitting religious values but also a strategic investment to produce children who are simultaneously pious, disciplined, intellectually competent, and socially competitive. This phenomenon can be understood through the concept of *pious neoliberalism*, which explains the coexistence of religious devotion and neoliberal rationality within contemporary Muslim societies. Rather than viewing religiosity and market values as contradictory forces, the concept of pious neoliberalism demonstrates how religious practices are increasingly articulated through individual responsibility, self-improvement, competitiveness, and investment in personal development. In the educational sphere, this is reflected in the growing expectation that Islamic schools should not only cultivate moral and religious identities but also provide the knowledge, skills, and credentials necessary for success in a competitive global society.

The rise of modern Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia illustrates this intersection between piety and neoliberal aspirations. On the one hand, parents seek Islamic schools because they provide a controlled environment that protects children from perceived moral challenges associated with contemporary society, including the influence of digital culture, changing social values, and declining parental supervision due to increasingly demanding economic activities. Boarding schools are perceived as spaces capable of providing intensive religious discipline through structured daily routines, twenty-four-hour supervision, and the cultivation of Islamic character (Susanto et al., 2025). On the other hand, the decision to enroll children in Islamic boarding schools is simultaneously shaped by calculations regarding educational quality and future opportunities. Parents increasingly evaluate schools based on curriculum innovation, foreign language programs, academic achievements, international networks, educational facilities, and the possibility of upward social mobility. Thus, Islamic education becomes a form of long-term investment in which families convert their economic resources into religious, cultural, and educational capital that can secure their children's future positions in society.

This process is particularly visible in West Sumatra, a region where Islamic education has historically played an important role in shaping social and cultural life. The development of modern Islamic boarding schools in West Sumatra demonstrates how traditional religious institutions negotiate contemporary educational demands. Institutions such as Islamic boarding schools increasingly provide hybrid educational models by combining religious instruction with national curricula, international-oriented programs, foreign language competencies, and achievement-based activities to attract families from different regions. This transformation indicates that Islamic education is no longer only associated with religious authority but also with educational prestige and social distinction. However, despite the increasing scholarly attention to Islamic education, previous studies have predominantly focused on the institutional transformation of pesantren, the commercialization of religious education, or parental motivations in choosing Islamic schools. Less attention has been given to understanding how the educational choices of Muslim middle-class families represent a broader process through which piety and neoliberal aspirations are mutually constructed (Lubis et al., 2026). In other words, there remains limited discussion regarding how parents negotiate their desire for religious

morality with aspirations for academic excellence, social mobility, and future competitiveness within the context of Islamic boarding school education.

This article addresses this gap by examining the rise of Islamic boarding schools in West Sumatra through the perspective of *pious neoliberalism*. It argues that the increasing preference for Islamic boarding schools among Muslim middle-class families reflects a new form of educational rationality in which religious commitment is intertwined with market-oriented aspirations (Fahrurrosi, 2025). Islamic education is no longer understood solely as a means of preserving religious identity; it has become a strategic investment through which families seek to accumulate religious discipline, cultural capital, academic achievement, and social advantages for their children. By focusing on the intersection between piety, class aspiration, and educational choice, this article contributes to broader debates on the neoliberal transformation of education in Muslim societies. It demonstrates that neoliberalism does not necessarily secularize religious institutions; rather, it reconfigures religious education by incorporating market values, competition, and individual aspirations into the production of contemporary Muslim subjects.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine how Muslim middle-class families construct educational aspirations and negotiate the relationship between religious commitment and contemporary educational expectations through their choices of Islamic boarding schools in West Sumatra. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the phenomenon of *pious neoliberalism* is not merely reflected in observable patterns of school selection but is deeply embedded in the meanings, values, and social rationalities that shape parents' educational decisions. Therefore, this study seeks to understand how Islamic education is interpreted as a strategy for cultivating religious morality, academic excellence, and future social mobility. The research was conducted in West Sumatra, Indonesia, a region with a long historical tradition of Islamic education and strong socio-cultural attachment to Islamic values (Sandra, Wijanarko, Hanh, et al., 2023). The study focused on two modern Islamic boarding schools, namely Ar-Risalah Islamic Boarding School and Nurul Ikhlas Modern Islamic Boarding School. These institutions were selected purposively because they represent the transformation of contemporary Islamic education that combines traditional religious values with modern educational demands. The educational programs offered by these schools integrate religious studies with the national curriculum, foreign language competencies, character education, and various academic and non-academic achievement programs (Baedowi & Chamadi, 2022).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and direct observations involving parents, school leaders, and teachers from the selected Islamic boarding schools. Parents were considered the primary participants because this study aims to explore the educational aspirations, moral concerns, and future-oriented expectations that influence their decisions to choose Islamic boarding schools for their children. Meanwhile, interviews with school leaders and teachers provided an institutional perspective regarding how Islamic boarding schools respond to changing parental demands and contemporary educational competition. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to articulate their experiences, motivations, and

considerations in selecting Islamic boarding schools. The interviews particularly explored several dimensions, including perceptions of children's moral development, concerns regarding contemporary social challenges, expectations of academic achievement, and aspirations for children's future success. These aspects are essential for understanding how religious values and neoliberal educational rationalities are simultaneously embedded in parental decision-making.

In addition to interviews, observations were conducted to understand how Islamic boarding schools institutionalize religious discipline and educational excellence through everyday practices. The observations focused on students' daily activities, including congregational prayers, Qur'anic memorization, structured learning schedules, language programs, and extracurricular activities. These institutional practices illustrate how boarding schools create a disciplined environment that reflects the contemporary ideal of Muslim students who are not only religiously devoted but also academically capable and globally competitive (Ihsan et al., 2021).

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The analysis was guided by the concept of *pious neoliberalism* to examine how Muslim middle-class families negotiate religious aspirations with neoliberal educational values, such as self-improvement, discipline, competitiveness, and investment in children's future. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied data triangulation by comparing information obtained from different participants and data collection techniques. The integration of interviews and observations enabled a more comprehensive understanding of how Islamic boarding schools have become spaces where piety, educational aspiration, and middle-class strategies of social reproduction are continuously constructed and reproduced.

3. Result and Discussion

Managing Children's Morality through Institutionalized Religious Discipline

One of the central reasons behind the increasing preference for Islamic boarding schools among Muslim middle-class families in West Sumatra is the growing concern over children's moral development in contemporary society. Parents perceive rapid social changes, particularly the expansion of digital technology, unrestricted social interaction, and the decline of direct parental supervision due to work commitments, as potential threats to their children's religious and moral values. Consequently, Islamic boarding schools are considered a strategic solution because they provide a controlled environment where religious practices and disciplined lifestyles can be continuously monitored. The findings show that the attractiveness of Islamic boarding schools lies not only in their religious curriculum but also in their ability to institutionalize Islamic values through structured daily routines. Students are engaged in intensive religious and educational activities, including congregational prayers, Qur'anic memorization, formal education, language development, and extracurricular programs. The boarding system enables schools to exercise continuous supervision and cultivate self-discipline among students (Arifin, 2024).

This institutional discipline becomes highly valued by parents, particularly those who feel limited in controlling their children's everyday activities at home. Several parents emphasized that boarding schools provide a safer environment that protects children from negative external influences while encouraging them to become more independent and responsible (Dr. URIEN, 2024). The success of Islamic education is therefore measured not merely by academic achievement but by visible changes in children's religious commitment and personal behaviour. From the perspective of pious neoliberalism, this finding illustrates a transformation in the meaning of parental responsibility. Choosing Islamic boarding schools is not simply an expression of religious devotion but also a strategic effort to manage social risks and produce self-regulating individuals. In this context, piety becomes a form of disciplined self-management that prepares children to navigate the uncertainties of modern society.

Investing in Piety: Islamic Education as a Strategy of Middle-Class Social Reproduction

The findings reveal that the increasing preference for modern Islamic boarding schools among Muslim middle-class families in West Sumatra reflects a fundamental transformation in the meaning of Islamic education (Sandra et al., 2025). Traditionally, Islamic boarding schools were primarily perceived as institutions responsible for transmitting religious knowledge, preserving Islamic traditions, and shaping students' moral character. However, the contemporary development of modern Islamic boarding schools indicates a broader shift in parental educational aspirations. Islamic education is no longer understood solely as a pathway toward religious devotion but increasingly becomes a strategic investment through which families prepare their children to succeed within an increasingly competitive educational and social landscape. For Muslim middle-class families, the decision to enrol their children in Islamic boarding schools is closely related to future-oriented aspirations. Parents do not merely expect their children to become obedient Muslims with strong religious commitments, but also individuals who possess academic excellence, leadership abilities, foreign language competencies, and the capacity to compete in national and global contexts (Halima et al., 2023). Therefore, the value of Islamic education lies in its ability to provide a combination of spiritual formation and worldly competencies. This demonstrates a significant transformation in the understanding of religious education, where piety is no longer separated from modern aspirations of achievement, productivity, and competitiveness.

The findings indicate that this aspiration is strongly associated with the willingness of parents to invest substantial economic resources in obtaining what they perceive as high-quality Islamic education. Modern Islamic boarding schools require relatively expensive tuition fees compared to public educational institutions. Nevertheless, this financial burden does not necessarily reduce parents' interest (Dunn et al., 2023). Instead, parents interpret educational expenditure as a long-term investment with expected future returns. Most students attending the observed Islamic boarding schools come from economically stable middle- and upper-middle-class families, demonstrating that access to prestigious Islamic educational institutions is closely connected with the possession of economic capital (Yusuf et al., 2024). In this regard, the ability to choose a modern Islamic boarding school itself becomes a form of class privilege, allowing middle-class families to access educational environments considered capable of producing

desirable social and cultural qualities. This investment logic reflects a broader transformation in the relationship between religion and education. Rather than viewing religious commitment as separate from economic calculation, Muslim middle-class families integrate both dimensions within their educational decision-making. The decision to spend significant financial resources on Islamic boarding schools represents a rational strategy to convert economic capital into other valuable forms of capital. Through education, economic resources are transformed into religious capital in the form of stronger Islamic knowledge, disciplined religious practices, and moral behaviour, while simultaneously being converted into cultural capital through academic achievement, language mastery, leadership experience, and institutional credentials.

The findings further demonstrate that parents' expectations toward Islamic boarding schools are closely related to their evaluation of educational quality. The research findings show that 79.4% of parents considered the curriculum provided by Islamic boarding schools to be appropriate to their children's needs (Fahriany, 2025). However, the notion of curriculum quality among middle-class families extends beyond academic content or religious instruction alone. A high-quality Islamic curriculum is understood as one capable of integrating multiple dimensions of child development, including religious commitment, intellectual achievement, foreign language proficiency, and personal discipline. This expectation has encouraged Islamic boarding schools to transform their educational models in order to respond to the aspirations of contemporary Muslim families. The institutions studied demonstrate the adoption of hybrid educational models combining Islamic studies with national curriculum standards and various programs designed to enhance students' competitiveness. Ar-Risalah Islamic Boarding School, for example, provides educational pathways oriented toward Middle Eastern higher education and strengthens students' Arabic competencies. Meanwhile, Nurul Ikhlas has developed multilingual educational programs including Arabic, English, Japanese, and Mandarin to equip students with skills considered essential in the era of globalization (Mahfud & Astari, 2021). These programs illustrate that the contemporary ideal of Islamic education is no longer limited to producing religious scholars but also globally competent Muslim individuals capable of participating in broader social and economic fields.

Furthermore, the provision of modern educational facilities, such as well-developed dormitories, laboratories, libraries, sports facilities, health services, and other supporting infrastructures, also contributes to the construction of educational quality and prestige among Muslim middle-class families (Santika et al., 2021). These facilities are not merely functional resources; they symbolize institutional professionalism and become markers of distinction that differentiate modern Islamic boarding schools from traditional religious institutions. Consequently, choosing a prestigious Islamic boarding school also represents a strategy through which families position themselves within a particular social class and demonstrate their commitment to investing in their children's future. From the perspective of pious neoliberalism, these findings reveal that contemporary Muslim middle-class educational aspirations are characterized by the integration of religious morality with neoliberal ideals of self-development, competition, and future planning. Neoliberal rationality does not replace religious values; rather, it reshapes the way piety is imagined and pursued. Being a "good Muslim child" is no longer

solely associated with obedience in performing religious practices but increasingly linked to personal discipline, educational achievement, global competencies, and the ability to compete successfully in modern society.

This transformation indicates that Islamic education has become a central mechanism for middle-class social reproduction. Through strategic educational choices, families attempt to maintain or improve their social position by accumulating different forms of capital that are recognized as valuable in contemporary society. Economic capital allows families to access prestigious educational institutions, religious education produces moral legitimacy and Islamic identity, while academic achievement and global competencies generate cultural advantages. The combination of these capitals creates a new model of Muslim middle-class subjectivity one in which piety and competitiveness are not contradictory but mutually reinforcing. Therefore, the rise of modern Islamic boarding schools in West Sumatra should not be interpreted merely as a resurgence of religious education. Rather, it represents a broader socio-cultural transformation in which Islamic education functions as a site where middle-class families negotiate faith, class aspirations, and neoliberal ideals of success. The contemporary ideal Muslim child is imagined as a subject who embodies religious devotion while simultaneously possessing academic credentials, international orientation, language skills, leadership capacity, and the competencies necessary to navigate a competitive global society.

The Construction of a New Muslim Middle-Class Identity

The transformation of modern Islamic boarding schools in West Sumatra demonstrates a significant shift in how Muslim middle-class families imagine the ideal characteristics of their children (Kustati, 2023). Traditionally, the success of Islamic education was largely associated with the formation of religious knowledge, moral obedience, and commitment to Islamic values. However, the findings reveal that contemporary Muslim middle-class aspirations have expanded beyond the goal of producing merely pious individuals. The ideal Muslim child is increasingly imagined as a person who simultaneously possesses strong religious commitment, academic excellence, leadership abilities, global competencies, and the capacity to adapt to the demands of an increasingly competitive world. This changing imagination reflects a broader transformation in the meaning of Islamic education among middle-class families. Parents no longer view religious education as an alternative to modern education, nor do they perceive religious commitment and worldly achievement as two contradictory domains. Instead, they seek an educational model capable of integrating both dimensions: Islamic morality as the foundation of personal identity and modern competencies as resources for achieving future success. Therefore, contemporary Islamic boarding schools are valued not only because they produce obedient and morally disciplined children, but also because they are expected to cultivate students who are intellectually capable, socially confident, and professionally prepared for future challenges.

The empirical findings demonstrate that modern Islamic boarding schools have responded to these changing parental aspirations by reconstructing their educational models. The institutions studied no longer focus exclusively on traditional Islamic learning but adopt a hybrid educational system that combines intensive religious instruction with national curricula, foreign

language education, science and technology development, leadership training, and achievement-oriented programs (Barid et al., 2025). This transformation illustrates how Islamic educational institutions actively negotiate between preserving religious traditions and responding to the demands of globalization. The case of Ar-Risalah Islamic Boarding School illustrates this transformation through the development of educational pathways that prepare students to continue higher education in Middle Eastern institutions, particularly through strengthening Arabic language competence and Islamic scholarly knowledge (Insani et al., 2023). Meanwhile, Nurul Ikhlas has developed a multilingual educational environment by emphasizing not only Arabic and English but also Japanese and Mandarin language programs as strategic competencies for engaging with global opportunities (Hady et al., 2025). The inclusion of these foreign language programs indicates that language mastery is no longer merely an educational supplement; it functions as an important form of cultural capital that provides students with greater opportunities to access higher education, international networks, and future professional careers.

Moreover, the construction of the ideal Muslim middle-class child is also reflected in the emphasis on leadership, discipline, independence, and achievement. Through the boarding school system, students are trained to manage their daily routines through structured religious activities, academic schedules, organizational involvement, and extracurricular programs (Geh et al., 2024). The institutionalization of discipline is particularly important because it reflects the emergence of a neoliberal understanding of the ideal individual: a person who is capable of regulating themselves, continuously improving their abilities, and taking responsibility for their own success. This process demonstrates that the contemporary meaning of piety has undergone a significant transformation. Piety is no longer understood solely through ritual obedience such as praying, memorizing the Qur'an, or mastering religious knowledge. Instead, piety is increasingly combined with broader ideals of self-development, productivity, discipline, and achievement. A "good Muslim child" is therefore not only one who obeys religious principles but also one who possesses the capacities required to compete successfully within global educational and economic arenas.

From the perspective of pious neoliberalism, these findings indicate that neoliberal values do not eliminate religious commitments; rather, they reshape the way religion is practiced, valued, and incorporated into everyday aspirations (Atia, 2022). The logic of self-improvement, competitiveness, and future orientation becomes embedded within religious educational projects. Islamic boarding schools thus become institutions where middle-class families cultivate a new form of Muslim subjectivity one that combines spiritual devotion with entrepreneurial attitudes, educational achievement, global awareness, and social adaptability. Furthermore, the emergence of this new Muslim subject can also be understood as a strategy of middle-class distinction and social reproduction. Through access to prestigious Islamic boarding schools, foreign language competencies, academic achievements, and international educational pathways, families accumulate forms of cultural and religious capital that distinguish them from other social groups. Consequently, Islamic education becomes not only a mechanism for transmitting religious values

but also a social strategy through which middle-class families maintain and enhance their social position within contemporary Indonesian society.

Therefore, the rise of modern Islamic boarding schools in West Sumatra should be interpreted as more than a revival of religious education (Wantu et al., 2023). It represents the emergence of a new Muslim middle-class identity in which piety, educational excellence, global competencies, and future competitiveness are intertwined. The ideal Muslim subject produced through contemporary Islamic education is no longer defined by the separation between religious devotion and modern achievement; rather, it is characterized by the ability to integrate Islamic morality with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions required to succeed in a neoliberal global society.

The Construction of a New Muslim Middle-Class Identity: Producing the Pious Neoliberal Subject

The transformation of Islamic boarding schools in West Sumatra represents more than an institutional adaptation to contemporary educational demands. More fundamentally, it reflects a broader transformation in the construction of the ideal Muslim subject among middle-class families. The findings indicate that the desired outcome of Islamic education is no longer limited to producing children who possess religious obedience and moral discipline. Rather, contemporary Muslim middle-class families increasingly aspire to cultivate children who are simultaneously pious, academically successful, globally competent, and capable of navigating competitive social environments. This transformation illustrates a shift in the meaning of piety itself. In traditional understandings, piety was primarily associated with religious devotion, mastery of Islamic knowledge, and obedience to religious obligations (Sadaf Jabbar, 2025). However, the findings reveal that contemporary middle-class families redefine piety by incorporating values that are closely associated with neoliberal ideals, such as self-discipline, continuous self-improvement, achievement orientation, productivity, and competitiveness. Thus, the ideal Muslim child is not merely someone who performs religious practices but someone who is able to transform religious discipline into personal excellence and social success.

This process can be understood through the concept of *pious neoliberalism*, which argues that neoliberal rationalities and religious commitments are not necessarily contradictory. Instead, neoliberalism operates by reshaping the way individuals understand responsibility and success. Parents become responsible for investing in their children's future, while children are expected to continuously develop their abilities in order to become competitive individuals. In this context, Islamic boarding schools become institutions that cultivate a particular type of subjectivity the pious neoliberal subject who combines religious morality with the capacity for self-management, achievement, and global competitiveness. The empirical findings demonstrate how this process is materialized through the educational practices of modern Islamic boarding schools. The institutions studied integrate intensive religious education with national curricula, foreign language mastery, leadership programs, and achievement-oriented activities (Sholihah et al., 2025). For example, Ar-Risalah develops educational pathways connected to Middle Eastern higher education, emphasizing Arabic proficiency and Islamic scholarship, while Nurul Ikhlas provides multilingual education through Arabic, English, Japanese, and Mandarin language

programs (Muradi et al., 2020). These programs indicate that contemporary Islamic education does not reject globalization; rather, it selectively incorporates global competencies into the construction of an ideal Muslim identity.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, these educational practices can also be interpreted as mechanisms for accumulating and converting different forms of capital. The mastery of foreign languages, academic achievements, leadership experiences, and access to international educational pathways function as forms of cultural capital that increase students' opportunities within future educational and occupational fields. At the same time, intensive religious training, Qur'anic memorization, and Islamic moral discipline produce religious capital, which provides moral legitimacy and strengthens students' identities as ideal Muslims. Through access to these forms of capital, middle-class families attempt to maintain and enhance their social position. Moreover, the importance of these educational resources is closely connected with class distinction. The ability to access prestigious Islamic boarding schools, which generally require significant financial investment, demonstrates the conversion of economic capital into religious and cultural capital (Zaki et al., 2022). Therefore, the choice of modern Islamic boarding schools is not merely a spiritual decision but also a class strategy through which families secure symbolic advantages for their children.

The intersection between these forms of capital illustrates how social reproduction operates within contemporary Islamic education. Middle-class families strategically utilize Islamic boarding schools to reproduce a particular social identity: a child who is not only recognized as morally pious but also possesses the competencies valued in a neoliberal society. The ideal Muslim subject is therefore characterized by the ability to combine Islamic ethics with academic credentials, global skills, leadership, and individual competitiveness. Consequently, the rise of modern Islamic boarding schools in West Sumatra should be understood as a transformation in the relationship between religion, class, and education (Fuady et al., 2024). These institutions function as spaces where piety is reconstructed through neoliberal values of self-development and achievement. The contemporary ideal Muslim child is no longer defined through the opposition between religious devotion and modern success; instead, piety itself becomes a form of competitive advantage and a resource for achieving social mobility in an increasingly globalized educational landscape.

4. Conclusion

The increasing preference for Islamic boarding schools among Muslim middle-class families in West Sumatra reflects a significant transformation in the meaning and function of Islamic education in contemporary society. This study demonstrates that the choice of Islamic boarding schools is no longer solely motivated by the desire to preserve religious traditions or strengthen children's Islamic identity. Rather, it represents a complex educational strategy through which families negotiate religious commitments with contemporary aspirations for academic achievement, global competence, and future social mobility. Through the perspective of pious neoliberalism, this article argues that the relationship between religion and neoliberal educational values should not be understood as contradictory. Instead, neoliberal rationalities

such as self-discipline, individual improvement, competitiveness, and long-term educational investment are increasingly embedded within religious aspirations. The findings reveal that parents seek Islamic boarding schools not only because they provide moral protection and intensive religious socialization but also because these institutions are perceived as capable of producing disciplined, high-achieving, and globally competitive individuals. Furthermore, the transformation of Islamic boarding schools illustrates the emergence of a new Muslim middle-class educational culture in which piety functions as a form of capital that can be combined with academic credentials, foreign language competencies, and other forms of cultural advantage. In this context, educational investment becomes a mechanism through which middle-class families convert their economic resources into religious and cultural capital to maintain or improve their social position. Therefore, this study contributes to the broader discussion on the neoliberal transformation of education by showing that neoliberalism does not simply commercialize or secularize religious education. Rather, it reconstructs the meaning of religious education itself by integrating Islamic values with aspirations for achievement, competitiveness, and social distinction. The case of Islamic boarding schools in West Sumatra demonstrates the emergence of a new model of Muslim subject formation, one in which the ideal Muslim is imagined not only as a pious individual but also as a disciplined, productive, and globally competent subject. Despite these contributions, this study is limited to the experiences of parents and Islamic boarding schools in West Sumatra. Future research may further investigate how these processes operate across different regional contexts, socioeconomic groups, and types of Islamic educational institutions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between religion, class aspiration, and neoliberal educational transformation in contemporary Muslim societies.

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