




Power Distance in Indonesian Schools: A Study of Public General Schools and Pesantren

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Citation: Afifi, Z., Setiaji, B. and Waston (2025). Power Distance in Indonesian Schools: A Study of Public General Schools and Pesantren, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 10(2), 3119-3127. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v10i2.2063>

Published: November 18, 2025

ABSTRACT

The educational sphere in Indonesia is inherently influenced by the cultural dimension of Power Distance. Pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) and Public General Schools represent two educational models that exhibit contrasting orientations toward power distance. This study describes the characteristics of power distance in pesantren and public general schools, and examines the hierarchical relational patterns that emerge within these institutions. Employing a qualitative approach with a comparative design, data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis conducted in three pesantren and two public general schools in Indonesia. Data were analyzed thematically by comparing power distance patterns observed in each institution. The findings indicate that pesantren demonstrate a high power distance culture rooted in institutional history, Islamic educational ideology, and local morality. In contrast, Public General Schools exhibit a low power distance culture based on modern educational paradigms and the democratic and rational principles of the national education system. These power distance patterns shape the nature of interactions, teacher dominance, and learning processes in both settings. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of power distance dynamics in Indonesian educational institutions and offers insights for school leaders and policymakers to balance authority and participation in education.

Keywords: Culture, Education, Power Distance, Pesantren, Public General School

INTRODUCTION

Power Distance (PD) refers to the extent to which inequality in power is perceived as natural and accepted within a society (Hofstede 2011). In high PD cultures, differences in status and authority are viewed as natural, while societies with low PD emphasize equality. Indonesia is known as a country with a high level of PD (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010), as reflected in the respect shown toward parents, teachers, and leaders. In this context, obedience is often regarded as a moral value rather than merely a manifestation of power relations.

In the educational sphere, PD is evident in the teacher–student relationship. Teachers are positioned as the main authority figures, while students are expected to follow their guidance. The significant influence of PD on educational dynamics has made it a focus of various studies. These studies have revealed, for example, that a high level of PD increases teacher support but decreases students' sense of school belonging (G Johnson, Allen, and Gallo Cordoba 2024), weakens the impact of Professional Learning Communities (Liu and Yin 2023), and differentiates teaching practices across countries (Bijani, Jamali, and Orabah 2022; Ertürk and Ziblim 2022).

Moreover, PD has been found to be a stronger predictor of school belongingness than individualism or collectivism (Cortina, Arel, and Smith-Darden 2017).

However, research directly comparing PD practices across different school models in Indonesia remains limited. In fact, Indonesia has two contrasting educational models: Pesantren and Public General Schools (PGS). PGS are governed by formal regulations with an academic and bureaucratic orientation, whereas pesantren integrate academic and spiritual teacher–student relationships. These contrasting characteristics are likely to produce distinctive manifestations of PD both in terms of intensity and meaning, as well as in their implications for the learning process.

This study aims to describe the characteristics of power distance in PGS and pesantren and to examine the hierarchical relationship patterns that emerge within these two educational settings. The study is expected to enrich the understanding of educational culture in Indonesia by identifying the role of power distance in schooling, enabling policymakers to leverage its positive aspects while anticipating its potential negative impacts. Furthermore, it serves as a reflection for school leaders to adapt educational practices to the evolving demands and needs of the times.

Culture is the software of the mind that encompasses individuals' patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting, shaped by lifelong social environments and experiences, and distinguishing one group from another (Hofstede et al. 2010). Power Distance (PD), one of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, refers to the degree to which inequality of power is accepted as legitimate or functional within a society (Daniels and Greguras 2014; Hofstede 2011).

At the educational level, Hofstede et al. (2010) describe several characteristics of high PD cultures. Students show strong respect for teachers both inside and outside the classroom. Teachers hold full initiative and control classroom communication through strict rules. Knowledge transmission emphasizes personal wisdom rather than objective truth, and learning quality depends largely on teachers. Both the educated and less educated share similar authoritarian values, whereas low PD cultures emphasize equality and reduced authoritarianism among the educated. Moreover, education in high PD contexts tends to privilege universities over secondary schools, reinforcing social and academic hierarchies. Higher degrees serve as the main source of legitimacy, while secondary school graduates are positioned as implementers rather than decision-makers.

In sum, these six features of high PD in education manifest in six interrelated aspects: teacher-student relations, teaching dominance, knowledge legitimacy, teacher dependence, equality values, and educational stratification.

METHODS

This study employed a comparative phenomenological qualitative approach, focusing on phenomena that represent the characteristics of PD in pesantren and PGS. The comparative design was chosen to enable analysis of similarities and differences across institutions with distinct characteristics, thereby providing both in-depth case descriptions and cross-case insights into PD dynamics within Indonesian education.

The research was conducted at three pesantren and two public schools. To maintain objectivity and minimize bias, institutional names were anonymized as Pesantren A, B, C and PGS A, B. Pesantren A, located in Sukoharjo, is a modern Islamic boarding school established in 1983 with over 2,000 students at the junior and senior high school levels. Pesantren B, in Semarang, is affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama and combines traditional Islamic learning with formal education. Pesantren C, based in Gresik, also affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama, was founded in 1969 and serves both junior and senior levels. PGS A is a senior high school in Surakarta with approximately 1,000 students, while PGS B is a junior high school in Wonogiri, established as a public school in 1977.

Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Observation focused on daily practices that reflect power relations such as teacher–student interactions, decision-making processes, and school discipline. Interviews with teachers and students explored their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of authority relations. Document analysis, including institutional archives and scholarly materials, traced the historical and structural development of PD patterns.

Data were analyzed thematically with an ethnographic orientation, identifying patterns of meaning and power relations within each institution, followed by comparative interpretation between pesantren and PGS. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of methods, sources, and sites, as well as member checking with key informants.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

Pesantren and PGS represent two fundamentally different educational models in Indonesia. There are 42,433 active pesantren and 31,517 public secondary schools (Data Pokok Pendidikan Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini Pendidikan Dasar dan Pendidikan Menengah 2025; El-Saha 2025). Pesantren are private Islamic institutions that center religious learning around the mosque, where students study classical Islamic texts written

by Muslim scholars and engage in religious propagation (Dhofier 1980; Lathifah and Wulandari 2022). The institution is led by a *kiai* (a charismatic religious leader) assisted by *ustadz* (teachers), and its students, known as *santri*, are expected to show deep respect and obedience to their *kiai* (Harits et al. 2017; Sukowati et al. 2019; Suprayogo 2007; Zulkarnain and Zubaedi 2021).

In contrast, PGS are formal educational institutions organized and funded by the government, either at the national or regional level. Their curriculum follows the National Curriculum established by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia. These schools operate based on the foundational values of national morality: Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, and Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System.

The following section presents the phenomena of PD in pesantren and public general schools, analyzed through six key aspects of PD characteristics, accompanied by excerpts from field data.

Teacher–Student Relations

Teacher–student relations in Indonesia are shaped by the cultural and value systems of each educational institution. In pesantren, respect for teachers is expressed through symbolic actions rich in moral and spiritual meaning. Students usually greet and kiss the teacher’s hand when meeting teachers of the same gender. Shaking hands without kissing the hand is considered disrespectful. As one student from Pesantren A stated,

“When I see a student shake hands without kissing the teacher’s hand, it disturbs my moral sense.”

More formal expressions of respect appear in Pesantren B and C. Students there walk on their knees, lower their bodies in front of teachers, and walk backward for a few meters before turning around. They also turn the teacher’s sandals toward the exit when the teacher enters the mosque, so they are ready to wear afterward. Such gestures (kissing hands, kneeling, walking backward, and preparing sandals) represent *ta’dzim* (reverence), derived from Ta’lim al-Muta’allim (Al-Zarnuji n.d.), a classical Islamic text on ethics of learning. Teachers (*kiai* or *ustadz*) serve not only as educators but also as moral and spiritual exemplars. As a teacher from Pesantren B explained,

“Turning the teacher’s sandals is how students show respect. Making things easier for the teacher is a condition for receiving knowledge.”

This aligns with Ali Mufron et al. (2021), who argue that the benefit of knowledge depends on respecting one’s teacher.

Nevertheless, some pesantren teachers attempt to make interactions more flexible. In Pesantren B, for instance, a *kiai*’s son (who traditionally holds a higher degree of respect than regular teachers within pesantren culture) asked students not to be overly formal when interacting with him. Excessive formality sometimes hindered daily activities, such as when students paused a football game until the *kiai* or his son had passed and permitted them to continue. Even so, students maintained a sense of decorum as a sign of politeness, preserving the hierarchical atmosphere between teachers and students.

Conversely, in PGS the teacher–student relationship tends to be more relaxed and communicative. Teachers are still respected, but they are not regarded as distant or untouchable figures. At School A, for example, students are not required to stand when a teacher passes by or to kiss the teacher’s hand when greeting them. Warm and open communication occurs both inside and outside the classroom. We observed that some students continued their activities, such as eating or chatting with peers, even when a teacher walked past them outside the classroom.

A similar contrast to the pesantren context was also found at School B. There, students appeared friendly with their teachers, often waving or making casual gestures from a distance. Teachers did not take offense at such behavior. One teacher at School B stated,

“I don’t consider students’ friendliness, jokes, or greetings toward teachers as disrespectful. On the contrary, it helps build emotional closeness.”

This more egalitarian interaction reflects the influence of modern values within the national education system, where emotional intimacy between teachers and students is seen as conducive to effective learning. Teachers are viewed as learning partners rather than distant authority figures.

The clear contrast between these two settings reveals two distinct forms of power relations. In pesantren, teacher and student interactions are rooted in religious and spiritual principles that emphasize deference and obedience, characteristic of a high power distance culture. In contrast, public general schools display more egalitarian and participatory dynamics, reflecting low power distance. Consequently, teacher and student relationships in Indonesia are influenced not only by formal educational policies but also by the cultural values inherent in each institution. Pesantren nurture moral consciousness through hierarchical reverence, whereas public general schools promote relational closeness through openness and dialogue.

Teacher Instructional Dominance

Teacher dominance in the learning process reflects how much control teachers hold over classroom activities and how students position themselves within that dynamic. This phenomenon illustrates how authority and

participation are constructed in the classroom. In this context, pesantren and PGS display significant differences in student participation and space for initiative.

In pesantren, teachers have full control over the learning process. They not only deliver material but also determine the content, method, and pace of learning. Students tend to wait for instructions rather than take the initiative or propose ideas. This pattern is not merely a learning habit but rooted in the pesantren's cultural structure, which places teachers in an authoritative position.

At Pesantren A, the classroom atmosphere reflects a hierarchical yet warm relationship. Students listen attentively, do not interrupt explanations, and refrain from asking questions without permission. The value of *ta'dzim* reinforces the teacher's central role, making their dominance not only acceptable but ideal, as it is believed to preserve the blessing of knowledge.

Pesantren B and C exhibit similar tendencies, with even stronger traditions. Teachers possess authority not only academically but also morally and spiritually. Before teaching, they are expected to prepare their knowledge thoroughly and are often supervised by senior teachers or directly by the *kiai*. This process serves both as quality control and as a mechanism for the regeneration of scholarly authority, ensuring alignment with pesantren traditions.

Consequently, the learning process tends to be one-directional, with limited room for students to negotiate or engage in the exchange of ideas. Discussion methods appear only in specific forums such as *bahtsul masail* (Islamic legal debates), which are strictly regulated. Otherwise, lectures dominate classroom learning. A teacher from Pesantren C explained,

"In pesantren, both general and religious subjects are taught, with teachers largely relying on the lecture method."

Conversely, in public general schools, teacher dominance has shifted toward a more participatory model. Teachers remain the main guides, but interactions are more dialogic and open. At PGS A, for example, teachers create space for discussion during lessons.

The teacher noted that giving students choices increases their enthusiasm and sense of responsibility toward their tasks. This approach fosters intrinsic motivation, teacher dominance decreases without reducing respect. One teacher stated,

"I often negotiate with students. We agree from the start that students can choose one of several assignments I prepare, but the submission time must be on time."

Technology also acts as a balancing factor in this dynamic. At PGS A, teachers use digital media such as videos, online quizzes, and internet-based information searches. Students are allowed to use mobile phones under supervision to support learning. As a result, learning continues even when teachers are not physically present, something rarely found in pesantren, where gadget use is prohibited.

A similar pattern appears in PGS B. Teachers act more as facilitators, and students become the center of learning. This student-centered learning approach is based on Indonesia's Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System. One teacher explained,

"I arrange the students' seats in a 'U' shape to make discussion easier and prevent the focus from being only on the teacher. The teacher is a facilitator. We are expected to build student engagement by presenting problems so they can construct their own understanding."

This comparison illustrates two distinct paradigms. In pesantren, teacher dominance is high, and learning revolves around scholarly authority and the pursuit of blessed knowledge. Meanwhile, in public general schools, teachers act as facilitators promoting flexibility and collaboration. Active student participation fosters responsibility and independence in constructing their own understanding.

Knowledge Legitimacy

In the educational context, the legitimacy of knowledge refers to the sources regarded as valid in defining truth. In pesantren, this legitimacy largely derives from the authority of the teacher or *kiai*, while in PGS it is based on scientific sources and students' rational reasoning. Teachers in pesantren are not merely conveyors of information but also guardians of scholarly traditions and moral exemplars for students.

At Pesantren A, teachers teach not only theoretical knowledge but also personal experiences and moral examples. The pesantren holds a philosophical view that a teacher's *ruh* (personality, conduct, and moral inspiration) is more important than teaching methods or materials. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to serve as sources of inspiration, and students treat their advice as behavioral guidance. Although some students are open to alternative sources such as books or modern science, they still prefer direct explanations from teachers, even when similar information is already available in written form.

At Pesantren B, the teacher's legitimacy is more absolute. Students believe that a teacher's or *kiai*'s explanations represent unquestionable truth. One teacher stated,

"The kiai is trusted completely. Students do not question him because they believe they lack the knowledge to do so. They simply follow."

This reflects the belief that knowledge is not solely a product of rationality but also a blessing derived from proper manners and obedience. Even when a teacher's statement seems illogical, students hold that trusting the teacher is better than relying on immature reasoning. Thus, epistemic authority is centered on the teacher, while students' critical thinking is restrained within the bounds of reverence.

A similar phenomenon appears at Pesantren C. The kiai is believed to possess profound religious understanding and perfect adherence to Islamic law. Students who do not comprehend the kiai's perspective refrain from questioning it, as they consider themselves unqualified to judge. Doubting a teacher is even believed to hinder learning success. A teacher said, "It is better to follow the teacher and later understand what he does than to perform *ijtihad* independently." Trust in teachers here is both intellectual and spiritual, requiring teachers to uphold high competence and exemplary conduct. This finding supports previous claims that kiai hold a central, charismatic role with deep religious mastery and expertise in conveying Islamic teachings (Steembrink 1994; Zulkarnain and Zubaedi 2021). They are trusted and obeyed absolutely without opposition (Anwar 2020; Suprayogo 2007). This trust is also extended to teachers or those authorized by the kiai to teach.

In contrast, in PGS, the sources of epistemic legitimacy are more plural and rational. At PGS A, logic and scientific evidence are the basis for determining truth. Teachers do not impose their personal views but encourage students to find truth through argumentation. One teacher remarked, "What the teacher believes does not have to be the same as what students believe." In some cases, teachers even support differing student opinions if they are backed by valid reasoning. The teacher emphasized, "Find the best version of yourself." This reflects epistemic equality between teachers and students, where truth is not a teacher's monopoly but a result of dialogue between reasoning and experience.

At PGS B, the epistemic relationship is more open. Students are allowed to choose whichever source of knowledge they find most credible, whether from teachers, books, or personal experiences. In practice, however, emotional closeness leads students to trust teachers more. When explanations seem inconsistent, students seek clarification through discussion rather than confrontation. A teacher explained,

"Students rarely question teachers, maybe because what we teach already aligns with their beliefs. But it is fine if they do, and we are expected to respond openly."

Thus, pesantren place teachers at the center of epistemic authority, grounding legitimacy in ethics and spirituality. Meanwhile, PGS bases truth on logic and rationality, while maintaining respect for teachers. Teachers in pesantren must embody high competence and moral integrity because students' trust in them is profound. In contrast, knowledge legitimacy in PGS is decentralized, emphasizing objective reasoning that fosters student independence in discovering knowledge.

Dependence on Teacher Quality

A clear contrast emerges between pesantren environments, which are predominantly teacher-centered, and PGS, which tend to be student-centered. In pesantren, teachers are the core of all learning activities. At Pesantren A, although students have individual project assignments, the learning process remains highly dependent on the teacher's presence. The teacher serves as the primary source of knowledge, the director of learning, and the controller of classroom dynamics. Students are not accustomed to taking initiative without direct instruction, and independent learning only occurs when guided by the teacher. One student remarked,

"Even though we have learning resources for each subject, we still need the teacher's explanation. Many subjects are difficult to understand on our own because the learning materials are in Arabic."

A similar phenomenon is even more pronounced at Pesantren B and C. A teacher from Pesantren C noted, *"When the teacher is absent, students usually sleep in class."* This indicates that students' learning motivation is not intrinsic but depends on external stimuli from the teacher. Without the teacher's presence, learning activities tend to come to a complete halt. At Pesantren B, students also feel incapable of comprehending or developing knowledge without direct guidance. The lecture method remains dominant, and the structure of learning activities is entirely determined by the teacher. The teacher functions not only as a facilitator but also as the sole source and driver of the learning process. This condition is reinforced by pesantren policies that prohibit the use of gadgets in learning, as they are perceived to hinder the mission of character building due to their distracting nature.

Conversely, PGS exhibits a much lower degree of dependence on teachers. At PGS A, the teacher's role is that of a learning facilitator. When the teacher is absent, students can utilize alternative learning resources such as YouTube learning videos, digital education platforms, and their own notes. Teachers still provide guidance and examples, but students are given the freedom to manage their own learning strategies. This reflects low PD and high learner autonomy, where students take responsibility for their own learning process.

At PGS B, project-based and problem-based learning models are implemented to strengthen students' independence. They are accustomed to completing student worksheets independently and even creating learning products based on their creativity, such as making tangrams from paper, cardboard, or designs found on the internet. The teacher acts as a mentor and motivator rather than the sole source of knowledge. This situation

fosters a participatory and collaborative learning culture, where the learning process continues even in the teacher's absence. However, not all learning processes in PGS A and B run ideally; in some cases, learning also stops when teachers are absent because students' motivation remains extrinsic.

In conclusion, students' dependence on teachers in pesantren is caused by several factors: the dominance of the lecture method, the difficulty of accessing foreign-language learning resources independently, the prohibition of gadget use, and the suspension of learning when teachers are absent. These factors reinforce the teacher's position as the primary determinant of learning quality and as the main source of knowledge legitimacy. Meanwhile, in PGS, the principle of student-centered learning promotes learner autonomy through various resources and media. As a result, the quality of learning relies less on teachers and more on students' initiative and active participation.

The Value of Equality in Education

Pesantren place a stronger emphasis on respect for teachers than on equality, as the teacher's position and role are viewed as highly central. The deeply rooted *ta'dzim* culture establishes a high standard of respect toward teachers. Pesantren B and C, for example, adhere to the teachings of Ta'lim al-Muta'allim, which position the teacher as a conduit of both knowledge and blessing.

Pesantren B also preserves Javanese cultural traditions within educational interactions. The members of the pesantren use *basa krama* (the most polite and formal level of the Javanese language) when speaking with teachers. The teacher added that Javanese culture places teachers on the same level as parents, figures to be respected throughout one's life. A teacher explained,

"No matter what background the students come from, once they are here, they automatically use basa krama when talking to teachers. That's the hallmark of this pesantren."

A similar pattern is found in Pesantren C. Even when a student graduates, succeeds, and gains public recognition for their knowledge, respect for the teacher remains a moral obligation. Their success is seen as the result of both the student's hard work and the teacher's sincerity in teaching. A teacher from Pesantren C stated,

"Some alumni are acknowledged to have broader knowledge than their teachers, yet teachers always maintain a position of honor in the eyes of their students, because every success and the breadth of one's knowledge include the teacher's contribution, even from the simplest Qur'an teacher¹."

Thus, pesantren do not highlight equality between teachers and students; rather, they view a person as truly educated if they continue to honor their teachers and place them above themselves even after the formal learning process ends. This respect-based relationship lasts a lifetime.

In Indonesia, it is common to see elderly scholars from pesantren circles still bowing and kissing the hands of other scholars they regard as more knowledgeable. For the pesantren community, this act represents the pinnacle of scholarly virtue, respecting and loving those who possess knowledge. Those considered more learned also return the respect, acknowledging that the recognition comes from fellow scholars.² This phenomenon is part of the pesantren's cultural roots in *akhlak* (ethics) and *tasawwuf* (spiritual refinement), where honoring teachers and scholars is regarded as an act of self-purification.

Conversely, in PGS, respect for teachers is still maintained, but it is not expressed through rigid formalities. At PGS A, relationships between teachers and students are close, open, and communicative, without losing a sense of respect. Teachers are positioned as learning partners who guide rather than distant figures to be revered. Students are still taught to respect their teachers, but they are not required to display stiff gestures such as standing, bowing, or kissing hands. Excessive formality is even viewed as a barrier to emotional closeness and students' willingness to ask questions. A teacher from PGS A explained,

"Some older teachers believe that formal behavior is necessary. It depends on each teacher. But here, not many teachers or students are comfortable with stiff interactions."

At PGS B, teacher–student relationships are warm and participatory. Teachers are respected, but interactions are reciprocal. Teachers honor students just as students honor teachers, within an egalitarian relationship. This pattern is believed to be more effective in fostering confidence and learning motivation. A teacher from PGS B stated,

"I feel happy when students greet me from afar as I walk to class. We joke around, and that's perfectly fine. We embrace the philosophy of 'deep learning' from the Ministry of Education, which encourages teachers to respect students as well."

These explanations show that PGS implementing the national curriculum emphasize the value of equality. PGS promotes rational and functional respect within the context of modern learning, in contrast to pesantren, which highlight a clear hierarchy between teacher and student and express respect through consistently stiff interactions. PGS are more dialogical and contextual in their approach.

¹ informal tutors of basic recitation.

² https://youtu.be/yFAPdIIT7Tc?si=ywqSCYJ6b_k-Mjew, https://youtu.be/yVtyFv_SFoM?si=CT8nnRBRdfkMeas4

From this aspect, it can be concluded that pesantren reflect a high power distance (high PD) culture, whereas PGS demonstrate a low power distance (low PD) culture.

Educational Stratification Polarization

Research indicates that both pesantren and public general schools show tendencies toward social stratification or hierarchy based on educational attainment, although the basis differs. This pattern confirms that both types of institutions exhibit high power distance, with different sources of hierarchy. Pesantren base hierarchy on charisma, spirituality, and religious authority, while public general schools rely on academic achievement and formal educational status.

In pesantren, legitimacy and social hierarchy are not determined by academic degrees but by moral and spiritual authority. In Pesantren A, B, and C, the *kiai* occupies the highest position of authority in the entire educational system. Students who continue their studies at universities are still considered not “equal” to the *kiai*, because the *kiai*’s authority derives from scholarly and spiritual legitimacy rather than degrees. This hierarchy is reinforced through hereditary leadership patterns, where the *kiai*’s children are groomed to continue the institution’s leadership. Social polarization thus arises not from differences in educational level, but from proximity to the *kiai*’s lineage and authority.

Although stratification in pesantren is charismatic, a *kiai*’s child in Pesantren B acknowledged the importance of academic stratification in the modern world. He said,

“We, the children of the kiai, are sent to the pesantren with the hope of continuing its leadership. Currently, I am also pursuing a master’s degree to enhance my capacity to realize that goal.”

This indicates that pesantren leadership now requires not only spiritual legitimacy but also academic competence.

Similarly, Pesantren A actively encourages students to pursue higher education. The school invites tutoring institutions, organizes university visits, and collaborates with several universities. Pesantren A even publishes the names of students accepted to domestic and international universities on its official social media. Meanwhile, encouragement to work after graduation is limited, as shown by the absence of career orientation programs.

In public general schools, stratification is more academic and modern. In PGS A and PGS B, teachers and schools encourage students to continue to university through tutoring and partnerships with external institutions. Non-academic paths such as entrepreneurship or military service are respected, but the most prestigious measure of success is formal education. A teacher from PGS B stated,

“We hope the children can continue to university. If some cannot due to financial constraints or illness, it is very regrettable.”

These findings show that both PGS and some pesantren, like Pesantren A and B, exhibit academic stratification. However, pesantren such as Pesantren C, which does not emphasize higher education as a measure of legitimacy, does not indicate low power distance. Social stratification still occurs, but it is based on the *kiai*’s lineage. This leads to the conclusion that public general schools in Indonesia exhibit high power distance in educational stratification, albeit with different sources of legitimacy and hierarchical forms.

Table 1: Six Aspects of Power Distance in Pesantren and Public General Schools.

Aspect	Pesantren	PGS	Conclusion
Teacher-student relationship	Hierarchical	Egalitarian	Pesantren: high PD PGS: low PD
Teacher’s Instructional Dominance	Teacher-centered learning	Student-centered learning	Pesantren: high PD PGS: low PD
Knowledge Legitimacy	Teacher authority	Scientific Rationality	Pesantren: high PD PGS: low PD
Dependence on Teacher Quality	High	Low	Pesantren: high PD PGS: low PD
Value of Equality in Education	Hierarchical Respect	Participatory Equality	Pesantren: high PD PGS: low PD
Education Stratification Polarization	Charismatic, spiritual and academic	Academic	Pesantren: high PD PGS: high PD

In general, pesantren reflect a high power distance culture, with hierarchical teacher–student relationships, dominant teacher authority, and teacher-centered learning. The value of *ta’dzim* and the demand for teachers to embody perfect understanding and exemplary Muslim conduct position them as central figures and sources of knowledge legitimacy, limiting student learning autonomy.

High PD in pesantren stems from their historical origins as study circles led by religious scholars, reflecting layered social structures where spiritual and scholarly authority rested with the teacher, a legacy from pre-Islamic Hindu–Buddhist social hierarchies (Geertz 1960; Ghazali 2003; Lathifah and Wulandari 2022). In pesantren,

Islamic educational ideology further reinforces high PD by emphasizing the moral and spiritual dimensions of knowledge. Seeking knowledge must be driven by the intention to earn God's pleasure, achieve success in the hereafter, and preserve Islam. Scholars are expected to act humbly, avoid arrogance, and maintain dignity, while students must choose pious teachers, avoid doubtful matters (*syubhat*), and show utmost respect, because knowledge itself opposes arrogance (Al-Zarnuji n.d.).

Javanese moral values also strengthen this high PD culture, including bowing before teachers, kissing hands, refraining from contradiction, and using *basa krama*. The combination of historical legacy, Islamic educational ideology, and local morality fosters societal acceptance of strict hierarchies in pesantren

Conversely, public general schools (PGS) represent a low power distance culture, with more egalitarian and participatory interactions. They follow the national education system grounded in modern, rational, and democratic paradigms. Teachers act as facilitators, learning is student-centered, and knowledge legitimacy relies on scientific reasoning rather than personal authority. This approach encourages dialogue, autonomy, and student responsibility, creating an open and egalitarian educational culture.

However, in terms of educational stratification, both pesantren and PGS maintain social hierarchies. In pesantren, hierarchy is based on scholarly merit and the spiritual charisma of the kiai, while in PGS, it is linked to academic achievement, formal positions, and educational attainment.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that pesantren embody a high PD culture, shaped by their historical development, Islamic educational ideology, and local community morality. In contrast, PGS reflect a low power distance culture rooted in modern educational principles that form the basis of the national education system. Understanding these PD patterns is crucial as it provides insights into why and how educational processes should be conducted in each institution to achieve effectiveness and efficiency.

Moreover, the study highlights various potentials within PD cultures. For instance, psychological ownership is crucial in high PD groups, as it encourages individuals to take initiative even within hierarchical structures that limit freedom (Pervaiz, Guohao, and Qi 2024). Some high PD groups tend to tolerate authority and inequality more, and can demonstrate innovation when involved in decision-making (Farzana and Charoensukmongkol 2023; Zheng, Chen, and Li 2024). However, this culture also carries risks such as higher emotional fatigue and learning poverty (Gustiawan, Noermijati, and Aisjah 2022; King, Li, and Leung 2023). Findings on PD variations and cultural potentials can guide education policymakers in designing teaching strategies and school management aligned with local values.

This study involved three pesantren and two PGS using a descriptive phenomenological approach. Future research should include other types of institutions or employ approaches based on individual perceptions to enhance generalizability and deepen understanding of power distance in educational settings. Examining Islamic public schools or madrasahs is also crucial, as these institutions blend cultural traits of both pesantren and PGS, potentially enriching the mapping of power distance culture in Indonesia's education system.

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