

# Transformational Curriculum Model through Interpretation Epistemology; Islamic Boarding School Curriculum Management Perspective

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**ABSTRACT.** This study examines the epistemological foundations of Qur'anic interpretation (tafsir) within the curriculum of traditional Islamic boarding schools (Pesantren) in the Nusantara, with a focus on integrating classical and contemporary interpretative methodologies into curriculum management. Employing a qualitative approach through library research, historical tracing, and content analysis of canonical tafsir texts (such as Tafsir Jalalayn, Ibn Kathir, and Baidhawi) alongside institutional documents, the research traces the evolution of tafsir education across generations. The study covers *Pesantren* of the *salaf* (classic) (Langitan, Lirboyo, Blokagung), *khalaf* (modern) (Gontor, Al-Azhar Medan, Al-Amanah Sidoarjo), and hybrid (Tebuireng, Al-Munawwir Kranyak, Darunnajah Jakarta) typologies. Findings indicate that while the classical *naqli*-based approach remains dominant, there has been a gradual integration of 'aqli-contextual methods, characterized by thematic and rational interpretations, aimed at addressing contemporary issues such as pluralism, public ethics, and democracy. This study proposes a layered curriculum model grounded in epistemological progression, organizing *tafsir* learning from traditional texts at the foundational level to reformist and thematic interpretations at the advanced level. Such a model bridges the preservation of Islamic scholarly heritage with contemporary relevance (*ṣāliḥ li kulli zaman wa makan*), reinforcing the role of *Pesantren* as centers of Islamic learning that produce graduates with strong textual competence and ethical sensitivity toward social realities.

**Keywords:** *Epistemology of Tafsir, Nusantara Pesantren, Tafsir Curriculum, Naqli and 'Aqli Approaches, Classical-Contemporary Integration.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Islam and the Qur'an have historically occupied a central position in shaping the cultural and intellectual foundations of the Nusantara region. Beyond a theological construct, Islam functions as a civilizational force that dynamically interacts with local traditions, producing distinctive expressions of religious culture and contextualized Islamic practice. (Barir, 2017; Basyir, 2019; Ismail & Asso, 2024; Syawaludin, 2018). Among the institutions most vital to this process is the *Pesantren* (a traditional Islamic boarding school), which plays a pivotal role in safeguarding the continuity of classical Islamic knowledge and in shaping the moral and intellectual fabric of Indonesia's Muslim society (Asror, 2017; Dhofier, 2011; Sumanti et al., 2024).

Since the 16th century, *Pesantren* education has primarily emphasized foundational disciplines such as *fiqh*, *tauhid*, and *nahwu-sharaf* (Arabic grammar). Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), though firmly rooted in the Islamic intellectual tradition, has typically been taught selectively to more advanced students due to its complex methodological nature. (Bruinessen, 1990; Djueni & Usman, 2021) Classical exegetical texts, such as Tafsir Jalalayn, Ibn Kathir, Baidhawi, and Manar, have gradually been incorporated into *Pesantren* curricula, typically delivered through oral transmission methods like *bandongan* and *sorogan*, which emphasize memorization and teacher-led exposition. (Ikhrum et al., 2023; Marhumah, 2014; Rinaningsih et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, the rapidly evolving sociocultural landscape has posed challenges to traditional approaches in *tafsir* education. Contemporary Muslim scholars, such as Fazlur Rahman and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, have introduced hermeneutical frameworks that underscore the importance of contextual, ethical, and historical engagement with the Qur'an. (Mostfa, 2024; Rahman, 1982). These modern methodologies advocate thematic, rational, and sociological approaches that seek to address issues of pluralism, social justice, democracy, and ecological ethics. (Mursyid & Nahdiyati, 2024; Mutalib et al., 2019).

However, the integration of such modern interpretative approaches into the *Pesantren* curriculum remains limited. While extensive research has examined classical *tafsir* methodologies (Gusmian, 2015) or the broader pedagogical dynamics of *Pesantren* (Dhofier, 2011) Few studies have systematically addressed how contemporary *tafsir* methodologies can be incorporated into *Pesantren* education. Recent studies on curriculum transformation in Indonesia's Madrasah Aliyah have highlighted the balancing act between Islamic values and global educational standards. However, they stop short of examining exegetical reform in detail. (Romlah, Warisno, Muslim, & Harun, 2025). Likewise, studies of Islamic schools in Madura and Selangor show various models of integration between religious and scientific knowledge, but they do not explicitly engage with the *tafsir* curriculum. (Hadi et al., 2024).

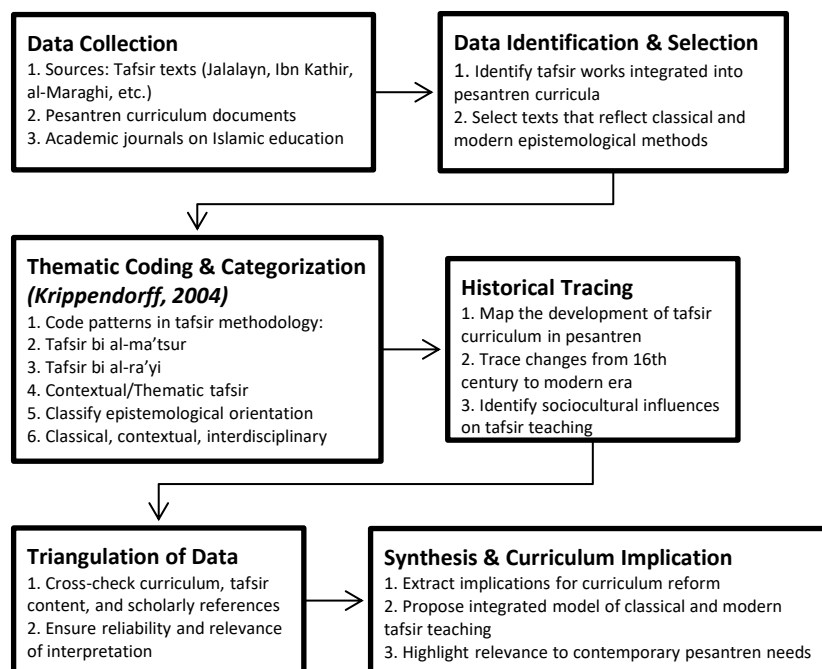
Other local initiatives, such as *Tafsir al-Iklil* by Misbah Mustafa, illustrate the potential for synthesizing Qur'anic values with local cultural wisdom, including Javanese traditions and community-based spiritual leadership. (Supriyanto, Gusmian, & Muttaqin, 2024). Research on multicultural and character education in *Pesantren* settings also indicates an evolving pedagogical landscape aimed at producing contextually grounded Muslim learners. (Ikhrum et al., 2023; Mariyono, 2024). Nonetheless, there remains an absence of a comprehensive curricular framework that integrates classical orthodoxy with contextual responsiveness in *tafsir* pedagogy. This situation raises a critical epistemological question: How can contemporary *tafsir* methodologies be systematically integrated into the *Pesantren* curriculum to address pressing social and intellectual challenges while preserving the classical Islamic scholarly tradition? The lack of a coherent framework that bridges these epistemological paradigms risks reducing *tafsir* to a static textual discipline, rather than a dynamic source of ethical guidance and social transformation. (Efendi, 2022; Ross, 2023; Zaini, 2022).

This study offers a novel contribution to Islamic education by presenting a systematic analysis of the epistemological integration between classical and contemporary *tafsir* methodologies within the context of the Nusantara *Pesantren* curriculum. It proposes a conceptual framework that unites narrative-transmissive and thematic-contextual approaches in *tafsir* instruction. Through qualitative methods and historical mapping, this research not only traces the development of *tafsir* education but also constructs a transformational curriculum model that aligns with present-day realities. By balancing fidelity to the classical tradition with responsiveness to contemporary values, *Pesantren* can reaffirm their strategic role as centers for Islamic scholarship, producing graduates who are deeply rooted in textual mastery while being critically engaged with the modern world.

## METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in library-based research and documentary analysis, appropriate for exploring classical and modern tafsir texts, Pesantren curricula, and Islamic education policies in Indonesia. (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Historical tracing complements this approach to map the epistemological evolution of tafsir education in the transformation of Pesantren institutions. Key texts such as *Tafsir Jalalayn*, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, and *Tafsir al-Maraghi* were purposively selected to represent didactic, transmitted (*bi al-ma'thūr*), and contextual-modernist interpretations. These were sourced from Pesantren libraries and digital repositories, including Al-Maktabah al-Syamilah and the National Library of Indonesia. (Hadi et al., 2024; Supriyanto et al., 2024). Though no primary interviews or surveys were conducted, indirect perspectives from scholars were included via published reflections, institutional reports, and scholarly dialogues.

Data were analyzed using Krippendorff's content analysis method, involving unitizing, coding, categorization, and synthesis based on epistemological (e.g., *naqlī* vs. *'aqlī*) and pedagogical dimensions (e.g., *thematic vs. text-based learning*) (Bowen, 2009; Krippendorff, 2004). The analysis followed a structured coding framework along three axes: tafsir methodologies, epistemological orientation, and pedagogical objectives. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied Lincoln and Guba's criteria for credibility via triangulation and scholarly validation, transferability through thick description, and dependability via audit trails and reflexive journaling. (Abdullah, 2014; Mostfa, 2024). Pesantren were selected based on typology (*salaf, khalaf, hybrid*), founding era, and regulatory responses, including in Langitan (Tuban), Lirboyo (Kediri), and Blokagung (Banyuwangi); the *khalaf* model by Gontor (Ponorogo), Al-Azhar (Medan), and Al-Amanah (Sidoarjo); and the hybrid model by Tebuireng (Jombang), Al-Munawwir Krapyak (Yogyakarta), and Darunnajah (Jakarta). (Romlah et al., 2025; Sumanti et al., 2024)).



**Figure 1.** Method Process

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

#### Development of Qur'anic Interpretation

The interpretation of the Qur'an (*tafsir*) has its roots in the earliest phase of Islam, where the Prophet Muhammad SAW served as the first and most authoritative interpreter. Through his words, actions, and responses to evolving circumstances, the Prophet provided practical

clarification of divine revelation. This foundational phase established *tafsir* not only as a textual engagement but also as a lived moral practice. (Demircigil, 2025; Noh et al., 2014). Following the Prophet's passing, his companions continued the interpretive tradition using their familiarity with the contexts of revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*) and linguistic expertise. As Islam expanded beyond Arab lands, the need for a more systematic and accessible approach to *tafsir* became evident. This gave rise to a scholarly tradition based on oral transmission, memorization, and commentary. (Nawayya, Burhan, & Hajji, 2024).

Between the second and fourth centuries *Hijriyah*, *tafsir* became institutionalized as an independent discipline. (Ross, 2023) Renowned scholars such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, and al-Rāzī introduced diverse methods, including linguistic (*lughawi*), juristic (*fiqhi*), theological (*kalam*), and mystical (*ishbāri*) approaches. Two dominant streams emerged: *Tafsir bi al-Ma'tsur* (transmitted) and *Tafsir bi al-Ra'yi* (reason-based), both of which heavily influenced classical texts such as *Tafsir Jalalayn*, *Ibn Kathir*, and *Baidhawi*, which became central to Islamic educational curricula globally.

In the Indonesian context, this classical *tafsir* tradition was brought home by returning scholars and integrated into the *Pesantren* system through oral methods like *bandongan* and *sorogan* (Gusmian, 2015). These texts and methods remain foundational to *Pesantren*-based Qur'anic instruction, forming a layered epistemological structure that combines fidelity to tradition with tools for interpretive depth. This enduring model ensures that Qur'anic education remains accessible, relevant, and intellectually grounded across generations of Muslim learners. As stated in the research question, this finding confirms that the epistemology of *tafsir* has evolved from prophetic oral transmission to a structured scholarly discipline, institutionalized within the *Pesantren* curriculum through canonical classical texts (Abrorov et al., 2020; Supriyanto et al., 2024; Surahman, 2019).

The integration of *tafsir* into the formal *Pesantren* curriculum can be mapped through key historical milestones, from the use of classical commentaries in traditional settings to the more structured inclusion following independence. Table 1 illustrates this chronological development, contextualizing how national educational reforms and *Pesantren* responses shaped the curricular status of *tafsir*.

**Table 1.** Historical Timeline of *Tafsir* Integration into the *Pesantren* Curriculum

Period	Pedagogical Orientation	Tafsir Method Adopted	Institutional Characteristics
Pre-Independence	Textual transmission (sorogan)	<i>Bi al-Ma'tsur</i> (e.g., <i>Tafsir Jalalayn</i> )	<i>Salaf Pesantren</i> (e.g., Lirboyo – Kediri)
New Order (1970s–1998)	Curriculum standardization	Selective <i>bi al-Ra'yi/Maudhū'i</i>	<i>Khalaf Pesantren</i> (e.g., Gontor – Ponorogo)
Post-Reform (1998–Now)	Epistemological renewal	Interdisciplinary, contextual <i>tafsir</i>	Hybrid <i>Pesantren</i> (e.g., Al-Munawwir – Yogyakarta, Al-Hikam – Malang)

Source: Data Collection, 2025

### **Dynamics of Tafsir in Nusantara**

The development of *tafsir* in Nusantara reflects a rich process of localization, adaptation, and cultural integration. (Gusmian, 2015). As Islam entered the archipelago through trade, *da'wah*, and intellectual exchange, local scholars began interpreting the Qur'an not only with classical Arabic exegesis but also through socio-cultural frameworks specific to their communities. This led to the emergence of a contextualized *tafsir* tradition that balanced fidelity to classical sources with responsiveness to local realities. (Supriyanto et al. 2024)

One of the earliest and most influential contributions to this tradition is *Tarjuman al-Mustafid* by Shaykh Abdurrauf al-Singkili in the 17th century, a Malay-language adaptation of *Tafsir Jalalayn*. (Amin et al. 2025). This work exemplifies early efforts to make Qur'anic interpretation accessible

across linguistic boundaries, illustrating a broader trend of acculturation in which pedagogy and religious understanding were reoriented to meet local needs. (Al-Ayyubi, 2020; Gusmian, 2015). As *Pesantren* developed into centers of Islamic education during the 18th and 19th centuries, *tafsir* gained prominence through verbal instruction (*bil-lisan*), even as formal texts remained limited in circulation. (Murdianto, 2025).

By the 20th century, local scholars began producing *tafsir* works in Arabic, Javanese, Malay, and Bugis, such as *Tafsir al-Balagha* by KH Imam Ghazali, *Rawdah al-Irfan* by KH Ahmad Sanoesi, *al-Ibriḥ* by KH Bisri Mustofa, and *Tafsir Bahasa Boegisnja Soerah Amma* by H.M. As'ad. These works represent the creative articulation of Qur'anic meaning within the linguistic and cultural diversity of Indonesia, further highlighting the role of the kyai as both religious guide and cultural translator. (Al-Ayyubi, 2020).

This finding addresses the research problem by highlighting how the localized development of *tafsir* in the Nusantara represents an epistemological transformation shaped by regional languages, social contexts, and pedagogical adaptation. While *tafsir* activity stagnated during the colonial era, a post-independence resurgence, led largely by revitalized *Pesantren*, reintegrated *tafsir* into formal Islamic education (Murdianto, 2025). Today, many *Pesantren* combine classical texts like *Tafsir Jalalayn* with regionally grounded works that incorporate cultural idioms and contemporary social concerns. This hybrid approach not only affirms the global roots of *tafsir* scholarship but also highlights the evolving voice of Nusantara Islam in its local articulation of the Qur'an (Daneshgar et al., 2016; Supena, 2021; Thahir, 2021; Yusuf et al., 2023).

### ***Pesantren-Based Tafsir Curriculum***

*Pesantren* in Indonesia remain the most enduring institutions for Islamic education and have long served as the central venues for transmitting Qur'anic knowledge, including *tafsir*. (Ni'am, 2015). Traditionally, *tafsir* is taught only after students master prerequisite disciplines such as *nahwu* (grammar), *sharaf* (morphology), *usul fiqh* (legal Theory), and *mantiq* (logic), reflecting the epistemological view that understanding the Qur'an requires a solid intellectual foundation. (Gleave, 2016). Pedagogical methods are primarily oral and teacher-centered, with *bandongan* (lecturing by *kyai*) and *sorogan* (student-led reading with teacher feedback) dominating the classroom environment.

The selection of *tafsir* texts in *Pesantren* varies based on institutional traditions and regional influences. However, certain texts, both classical and reformist, are widely adopted. Commonly used works include *Tafsir Jalalayn*, *Ibn Kathir*, *Baidhawi*, *Maraghi*, *Manar*, and *Tafsir Rahman*. (Baidowi & Ma'rufah, 2022). Some *Pesantren* also use local works such as *al-Ibriḥ* by KH Bisri Mustofa, which combines Arabic and Javanese in a format that resonates with students in Central and East Java. These texts collectively reflect the *Pesantren's* aim to maintain classical integrity while offering space for regional expression and contextual relevance.

These diverse text selections underscore the epistemological duality within the *Pesantren* system, one that seeks to preserve inherited exegetical authority while cautiously opening space for interpretive innovation. To better understand how this epistemological tension manifests in pedagogical practice, Table 2 presents a comparative framework between classical and modern approaches to *tafsir* currently adopted in various *Pesantren* curricula.

**Table 2.** Comparative Approaches of Classical and Modern *Tafsir* in *Pesantren*

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Classical Tafsir (bi al-Ma'tsūr)</b>	<b>Modern Tafsir (Maudhū'i/Contextual)</b>
Epistemological Basis	<i>Naqli</i> (transmitted)	' <i>Aqli</i> -contextual (reasoned and experiential)
Method	Verse-by-verse interpretation	Thematic, problem-based interpretation
Pedagogical Model	<i>Bandongan</i> , <i>sorogan</i>	Integrated, dialogic, interdisciplinary

Objective	Preservation of orthodoxy	Social transformation and critical thinking
Curriculum Position	Supplementary or advanced-level	Core or elective in a formal madrasah

Source: Data Collection, 2025

Field data show that *tafsir* materials are stratified according to education level. Introductory texts like *Tafsir Depag* are used at the *Tsanawiyah* level to build familiarity with Qur'anic meaning. At the *Aliyah* level, more rigorous commentaries such as *Tafsir Jalalayn* and *Tafsir Munir* are introduced, while advanced classes (*Khawash*) explore reformist or thematic works like *Tafsir Maraghi*, *Tafsir Manar*, and *Jami' al-Bayan*. (Al-Ayyubi, 2020). This curriculum structure reflects a tiered epistemological model, starting from memorization and literal comprehension toward deeper engagement with thematic and rational Qur'anic interpretation. In line with our research aims, these findings indicate that *Pesantren* employ a structured progression that not only preserves traditional epistemological foundations but also incorporates modern interpretive strategies, thereby answering how modern methodologies have been gradually adopted. As outlined in the research objectives, this finding confirms how the *Pesantren* curriculum sustains a structured epistemological progression that integrates both traditional and modern interpretive strategies.

To illustrate the structured deployment of these texts in the *Pesantren* curriculum, the following table 3 summarizes the most frequently used *tafsir* books, the regions in which they are taught, and their associated education levels:

**Table 3.** Qur'anic *Tafsir* Curriculum in *Nusantara*

Name of <i>Tafsir</i>	Region	Educational Level
<i>Tafsir Jalalayn</i>	Sumatra, South Kalimantan, West Java, Central Java, East Java	<i>Aliyah</i>
<i>Tafsir Munir</i>	South Kalimantan, West Java, Central Java, East Java	<i>Aliyah</i>
<i>Tafsir Ibn Kathir</i>	Sumatra, West Java, East Java	<i>Aliyah</i>
<i>Tafsir Baidhawi</i>	Sumatra, West Java, Central Java	<i>Aliyah</i>
<i>Tafsir Jamiul Bayan</i>	West Java	<i>Khawash</i>
<i>Tafsir Maraghi</i>	West Java, Central Java	<i>Aliyah/ Khawash</i>
<i>Tafsirul Manar</i>	West Java, East Java	<i>Khawash</i>
<i>Tafsir Depag</i>	Central Java, East Java	<i>Tsanawiyah</i>

Source: Data Collection, 2025

This table demonstrates how *Pesantren* organizes *tafsir* instruction not only by content but also by cognitive level. The classical texts are introduced systematically to facilitate depth of comprehension. At the same time, the more reformist or rationalist *tafsir* are positioned for students who have reached a higher stage of theological and linguistic readiness.

Beyond content, the pedagogical approach also varies. Some *Pesantren*, such as Tebuireng (Jombang) and Darus Sunnah (Ciputat), have integrated reformist and thematic *tafsir* texts like *Maraghi* and *Manar* into their curriculum to address broader social and moral issues. In contrast, *Pesantren* like Gontor (Ponorogo) and Lirboyo (Kediri) continue to emphasize classical interpretation, maintaining fidelity to traditional texts such as *Ibn Kathir* and *Baidhawi* with an emphasis on textual mastery and transmission. This diversity in both content and methodology illustrates the flexibility of *Pesantren* in sustaining tradition while responding to changing intellectual needs. It also highlights that *Pesantren Tafsir* curricula are not monolithic but instead reflect a spectrum of historical, regional, and pedagogical influences.

### **Curricular Shifts and Innovations**

The contemporary period has seen the emergence of curricular innovations in several *Pesantren* across Indonesia, reflecting their responsiveness to both internal educational needs and external societal challenges. (Abubakar et al., 2025; Anshori & Pohl, 2022; Sumanti et al., 2024; Washudin et al., 2023). While traditional approaches to *tafsir*, relying heavily on classical texts and oral pedagogy, remain dominant, several *Pesantren* have begun to introduce more structured, level-based, and thematically relevant models of *tafsir* instruction. (Utama & Akbar, 2023).

This shift is particularly evident in the stratification of *tafsir* materials according to the students' cognitive development and formal education level. As shown in Table 1, texts such as *Tafsir Depag* are commonly assigned to *Tsanawiyah* students due to their accessibility and standardized formatting. At the same time, *Tafsir Jalalayn*, *Ibn Kathir*, and *Baidhawi* are used in *Aliyah* levels for deeper textual engagement. At the *Khawash* or advanced level, more reflective and reformist texts like *Tafsir Maraghi* and *Tafsir Manar* are incorporated, offering students broader thematic and ethical dimensions of Qur'anic interpretation. (Al-Ayyubi, 2020; Baidowi & Ma'rufah, 2022).

Several *Pesantren* have also begun to adopt more systematic curricular designs for *tafsir* education. This includes the development of syllabi, clear learning objectives, tiered reading assignments, and integration with subjects such as *ulumul Qur'an*, *usul fiqh*, and contemporary social studies. (Ihsan et al., 2024). For instance, *Pesantren* Tebuireng has integrated *Tafsir Maraghi* into its *Aliyah* curriculum to introduce socio-ethical themes. At the same time, Darus Sunnah employs *Tafsir Manar* to develop students' ability to engage in rational and thematic analysis of verses. In addition to these innovations in content, some *Pesantren* have begun exploring new pedagogical techniques. Alongside *bandongan* and *sorogan*, several institutions now incorporate classroom discussions, collaborative group readings, and guided thematic exploration. (Sauri et al., 2016). This marks a pedagogical diversification, where classical authority is preserved but complemented with active learning practices aimed at deepening critical reflection. (Ma'arif, 2018).

These innovations remain unevenly distributed across the *Pesantren* network. More progressive institutions with access to academic partnerships and modern resources tend to implement reformist materials and methods more effectively. In contrast, *Pesantren* in rural or more conservative contexts often maintain traditional approaches with little modification. (Gusmian, 2015; Ma'arif, 2018). Nonetheless, the emerging pattern suggests a growing awareness of the importance of making *tafsir* relevant and responsive to the realities of contemporary Muslim life in Indonesia. (Baidowi & Ma'rufah, 2022; Sauri et al., 2016).

Despite differences in scope and speed, these curricular developments point to a shared educational trajectory. *Pesantren* are increasingly moving from merely preserving *tafsir* texts to actively curating *tafsir* learning experiences. This evolution affirms the role of *Pesantren* not only as centers of religious transmission but also as incubators of educational adaptation, where the sacred text remains central yet dynamically interpreted within changing times and contexts. (Asrohah, 2011; Budiharso et al. 2023) These results affirm the second research question by demonstrating that while classical methods persist, a growing number of *Pesantren* are actively adopting modern *tafsir* methodologies, such as thematic analysis and contextual interpretation, into their curricular design.

To synthesize the descriptive findings presented across the four subsections above, the following summary table has been constructed. This table serves as a concise representation of the key results obtained from the study, highlighting the layered development of Qur'anic interpretation, its cultural contextualization in the Nusantara, the structured curriculum of *tafsir* in *Pesantren*, and the emerging innovations in pedagogy and content. By summarizing the core elements in tabular form, readers are offered a clearer overview of how the research contributes to understanding the dynamics of *tafsir* education in traditional Islamic institutions.

**Table 4.** Finding Summary

Subsection	Key Findings	References
Development of Quranic Interpretation	<i>Tafsir</i> developed from prophetic explanation to a formal scholarly discipline emphasizing classical Arabic grammar, law, and ethics; institutionalized in <i>Pesantren</i> via canonical texts.	(Rahman, 2009; Reynolds, 2007; Uthman, 2022)
Dynamics of <i>Tafsir</i> in the Nusantara	Local scholars produced contextualized <i>tafsir</i> reflecting regional languages and cultures; early works include Tarjuman al-Mustafid, al-Ibriz, and others; <i>Pesantren</i> helped sustain these traditions.	(Al-Ayyubi, 2020; Gusmian, 2015; C. Ma'arif, 2017; Najiburrohman, Zulfa, & Basid, 2020)
<i>Pesantren</i> -Based <i>Tafsir</i> Curriculum	<i>Tafsir</i> is taught progressively in <i>Pesantren</i> using stratified texts: <i>Jalalayn</i> and <i>Ibn Kathir</i> at <i>Aliyah</i> level, <i>Maraghi</i> and <i>Manar</i> at Khawash level, and Depag at Tsanawiyah level.	(Al-Ayyubi, 2020; Baidowi & Ma'rufah, 2022; Bruinessen, 2009)
Curricular Shifts and Innovations	Some <i>Pesantren</i> adopt structured syllabi, integrate contemporary themes, and combine classical and reformist texts; pedagogical methods include both traditional and active learning.	(Al-Ayyubi, 2020; Baidowi & Ma'rufah, 2022)

Source: Data Collection, 2025

## Discussion

### *Epistemological Tensions and Continuities*

The development and practice of *tafsir* education in Indonesian *Pesantren*, as shown in the research findings, reveals a layered epistemological dynamic characterized by both continuity and gradual transformation. At its foundation, *Pesantren* retains a strong attachment to classical epistemology that views the Qur'an as a divine text whose interpretation must be anchored in authoritative tradition. This is evident in the persistent use of texts such as *Tafsir Jalalayn*, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, and *Tafsir Baidhawi*, which remain the core references across most *Pesantren*. (Baidowi & Ma'rufah, 2022). These works reflect a knowledge model that privileges *riwayah* (transmitted knowledge), linguistic rigor, and theological coherence, in line with the dominant framework of *Tafsir bi al-Ma'tsur*. The pedagogical methods that accompany these texts, *bandongan* and *sorogan*, further reinforce this epistemology, prioritizing oral transmission, memorization, and reverential engagement with authoritative sources. This model is deeply rooted in the classical Islamic tradition and has shaped the learning ethos of *Pesantren* for centuries. (Bruinessen, 2009). It affirms the preservation of meaning and discourages interpretive novelty unless rooted in precedent.

However, amid this enduring classical frame, the findings show signs of an epistemological shift. Several *Pesantren* have begun to integrate modern *tafsir* texts such as *Tafsir Maraghi* and *Tafsir Manar*, especially at the *Khawash* level of instruction. These works offer more than textual exposition; they embed ethical, rational, and thematic concerns, aligning with broader societal questions such as democracy, ecology, interfaith engagement, and public morality. This signals a growing awareness within some *Pesantren* that Qur'anic interpretation must not only be preserved but also recontextualized (Al-Ayyubi, 2020; C. Ma'arif, 2017).

This dual tendency represents a tension between two interpretive paradigms, one that prioritizes fidelity to established exegetical tradition and another that seeks relevance through contemporary moral and social insight. However, the field data does not show a rupture between the two. Rather, it illustrates a continuum. Most *Pesantren* do not abandon classical epistemology but expand it selectively, maintaining classical texts as foundational while introducing context-responsive interpretations for more advanced learners. The curriculum structure in some *Pesantren*,

as shown in Table 1, demonstrates this layered approach, with simpler, traditional *tafsir* at lower levels (*Tsanawiyah*, *Aliyah*) and more analytical texts at the *Khawash* stage.

This epistemological strategy is consistent with Fazlur Rahman's concept of the "double movement", an approach to Qur'anic interpretation that moves from the historical and linguistic context of revelation toward universal ethical principles, and then applies those principles back to contemporary issues. (Rahman, 2009; Saihu, 2020). In this light, *Pesantren* that integrate *Tafsir Maraghi* or *Manar* are not undermining classical scholarship, but embodying this hermeneutical balance between text preservation and contextual actualization.

Similarly, the gradual inclusion of socially engaged *tafsir* texts resonates with Abu Zayd's Theory of discursivity, the idea that meaning arises not only from the text itself but from its interaction with the socio-historical context of its readers (Ichwan, 1999; Sulaiman, 2023). While Abu Zayd's proposals remain controversial in some *Pesantren* circles, the shift toward thematic and problem-based *tafsir* teaching reflects his influence indirectly. Nonetheless, the epistemological shift remains partial and varies widely between institutions. In *Pesantren* such as Tebuireng and Darus Sunnah, this integration is more visible, supported by *kyais* with university exposure and progressive networks. In contrast, *Pesantren* such as Gontor and Lirboyo continue to emphasize classical methodology, with limited incorporation of contemporary *tafsir* discourse.

The current state of *tafsir* epistemology in *Pesantren* reflects a complex interplay of preservation and adaptation. Rather than a binary between classical and reformist approaches, the field reflects a gradual transformation that retains reverence for tradition while cautiously engaging with modern contexts. This continuum offers a realistic and sustainable path forward, allowing *Pesantren* to remain anchored in classical Islamic authority while incrementally preparing *Santri* to become critical, contextual readers of the Qur'an in the modern world. These results confirm our second research question by illustrating that, despite a continued reliance on classical methods, a growing number of *Pesantren* are innovating their curriculum through the integration of thematic and contextual *tafsir* approaches.

#### *Contemporary Relevance of Tafsir in Pesantren*

As contemporary Muslim societies face increasing social complexity and moral pluralism, the function of *tafsir* education in *Pesantren* is also undergoing reconsideration. Traditionally framed as a textual and linguistic discipline, *tafsir* is now being repositioned in several *Pesantren* as an ethical, civic, and even reformative domain of Islamic learning. The research findings show that while classical texts such as *Tafsir Jalalayn* and *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* remain integral to the curriculum, there is a growing awareness among educators that the interpretive scope of the Qur'an must extend beyond classical jurisprudence into the ethical and social fabric of modern life. (Baidowi & Ma'rufah, 2022; Bruinessen, 2009).

This awareness is reflected in the selective integration of thematic and contextual *tafsir* works that respond to present-day challenges. *Tafsir Maraghi*, for example, is used in *Pesantren*, such as Tebuireng (Jombang), not merely for its accessibility, but also its moralistic tone and social themes. *Tafsir Manar*, adopted in Darus Sunnah (Ciputat), introduces students to rational interpretation and modern reformist perspectives, encouraging them to link Qur'anic verses to contemporary realities, including good governance, gender justice, and environmental ethics. (Al-Ayyubi, 2020; C. Ma'arif, 2017).

These curricular inclusions indicate a conceptual repositioning of *tafsir*, from a tool of doctrinal reinforcement to a source of ethical reasoning and civic engagement. In discussion sessions, students are guided to relate Qur'anic messages to issues such as religious pluralism, poverty, and climate justice. This approach not only nurtures interpretive competence but also positions *Santri* as potential social thinkers grounded in Islamic epistemology. The Qur'an is not read solely as a book of law (*ahkam*) or theology (*aqidah*), but as a living text that informs public ethics and social responsibility. (Baidowi & Ma'rufah, 2022; Gusmian, 2015).

Fazlur Rahman's call for ethical universalism through the "double movement" methodology is manifest in this practice. According to (Rahman, 2009). The Qur'anic ethos must be distilled from its historical milieu and translated into universal principles, which are then reapplied to new circumstances. By including texts like *Maraghi* and *Manar*, *Pesantren* are implicitly engaging in this hermeneutical operation, even if the terminology is not formally adopted in curriculum documents.

The findings also indicate that this shift is not merely theoretical or textual, but is accompanied by innovations in pedagogy and learning design. Several *Pesantren* now structure *tafsir* classes thematically or issue-based. For instance, certain lessons are organized around topics such as environmental stewardship (*kehalifah fil-ardh*), gender roles in Islam, or interreligious tolerance, all based on Qur'anic foundations. These changes mark a pedagogical turn, from recitation and explanation to exploration and application. (Yusoff, 2023). However, the adoption of these reforms is uneven. While *Pesantren* in urban or academically connected environments may adopt these approaches more freely, rural or conservative *Pesantren* often retain a text-centered model with limited topical relevance. Even in progressive settings, a tension remains between maintaining doctrinal integrity and engaging openly with pluralistic social contexts. (Najiburrohman et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, the direction is clear: *Pesantren* are gradually evolving from custodians of classical *tafsir* to interpreters of living ethical texts. This shift is not a rejection of tradition but a reassertion of the Qur'an's relevance to all times and places (*shalih li kulli zaman wa makan*). By positioning *tafsir* as a bridge between divine revelation and contemporary experience, *Pesantren* play a vital role in producing graduates who are not only textually competent but ethically responsive.

#### *Curriculum Management and Epistemological Renewal*

The management of *tafsir* curriculum in *Pesantren* reflects both the institutional continuity of Islamic education and emerging signs of epistemological renewal. While many *Pesantren* remain grounded in established pedagogical traditions, particularly the oral-based *bandongan* and *sorogan* methods, the findings indicate an increasing trend toward structured curriculum planning, text stratification, and thematic engagement. This shift suggests that curriculum development in *Pesantren* is not static, but responsive to both internal intellectual maturation and external educational demands. (Al-Ayyubi, 2020; Baidowi & Ma'rufah, 2022; Bruinessen, 2009; Gusmian, 2015; Mursyid & Nahdiyati, 2024; Supriyanto et al., 2024).

One notable aspect of curriculum management is the intentional mapping of *tafsir* texts to student levels. As shown in Table 1, *Pesantren* now commonly align *Tafsir Depag* with *Tsanawiyah* learners, *Tafsir Jalalayn* and *Ibn Kathir* with the *Aliyah* level, and *Tafsir Maraghi* or *Manar* with *Khawash* or advanced learners. This structured progression is not merely pedagogical; it reflects an epistemological strategy to build interpretive capacity gradually, beginning with textual fidelity and culminating in thematic and contextual analysis. (Baidowi & Ma'rufah, 2022). This staged approach also enables *Pesantren* to manage internal pluralism in interpretation. Classical texts are retained as anchors of theological legitimacy, while reformist *tafsir* are introduced as complementary sources that promote critical reasoning. Such a model aligns with Fazlur Rahman's hermeneutic sequence, from textual context to ethical principle to modern application. (Rahman, 2009). Importantly, the adoption of this layered method ensures that innovation does not undermine orthodoxy but enriches it through thoughtful sequencing.

Curriculum renewal is also evident in the growing inclusion of written *tafsir* assignments, structured group discussions, and intertextual comparisons across *tafsir* books. In some *Pesantren*, teachers now design modules that explore Qur'anic themes, such as justice, environmental ethics, or gender relations, across multiple commentaries. This model mirrors contemporary Islamic pedagogy, which integrates *ulumul Qur'an*, *tafsir*, and social thought as interconnected domains. (Alkouatli, 2018). Leadership plays a central role in facilitating such renewal. *Pesantren* with *Kyais* or senior teachers who have academic exposure, especially those connected to Islamic universities, tend to experiment with integrated and interdisciplinary models. *Pesantren* Darus Sunnah, for instance, applies a thematic *tafsir* method supported by curriculum guides and bibliographic

frameworks. Similarly, *Pesantren* Tebuireng implements an open-text model where classical and modern *tafsir* are compared critically, fostering balanced intellectual development.

However, the renewal process is not without constraints. In many *Pesantren*, especially in rural areas, limited resources, rigid hierarchies, and the absence of institutional curriculum planning hinder innovation. In these settings, the curriculum often depends on the teaching legacy of previous generations, with minimal documentation or syllabus standardization. Even where innovation is present, it is often *kyai*-driven and not systemically embedded in institutional governance. (Gusmian, 2015). Despite these limitations, the trajectory of epistemological renewal is discernible. The inclusion of *tafsir* texts that address contemporary issues, the incorporation of analytical pedagogy, and the move toward formal curriculum structures reflect a gradual but significant transformation. These developments suggest that *Pesantren* are not only preserving the tradition of *tafsir* but are also reclaiming their role as centers of intellectual *ijtihad*, where sacred texts are interpreted not only for preservation but for purposeful engagement with the world. (Mustofa et al., 2024).

Compared to earlier studies such as (Hadi et al. 2024), which emphasized the growing trend of thematic *tafsir* in urban *Pesantren*, the findings of this research confirm and extend their conclusions by mapping how such approaches are systematically embedded across multiple educational levels and regions. This study shows that thematic *tafsir* is not only emerging in urban institutions but is gradually entering broader *Pesantren* ecosystems through stratified curricular design and progressive pedagogy. In contrast to (Abdullah, 2014), who suggested a binary epistemological divide between traditional and modern interpretations, this study presents evidence of epistemological layering. Rather than a rupture, most *Pesantren* exhibit a continuum of integration, where classical *tafsir* remains foundational while selected modern interpretations are carefully introduced for higher-level students. This layered model challenges the dichotomy often assumed in earlier analyses and offers a more nuanced account of curriculum development in traditional Islamic institutions.

Meanwhile, (Zaini, 2022) Focused on challenges in institutionalizing reformist *tafsir* approaches due to resistance from senior clerics. While this barrier is acknowledged in our field data, the current study reveals that *kyais* often lead curriculum innovation with dual backgrounds, both *Pesantren*-based and university-trained, who act as epistemological brokers. This finding contributes to the literature by identifying leadership agency and academic exposure as critical enablers of curricular transformation. Thus, this study contributes original insights by synthesizing prior findings into a multi-level model of *tafsir* curriculum evolution, one that accounts for classical continuity, modern responsiveness, and pedagogical pluralism. It offers both theoretical enrichment and practical implications for Islamic curriculum development in the contemporary Indonesian context.

The findings of this study offer practical guidance for Islamic educators, curriculum developers, and institutional leaders seeking to modernize *tafsir* instruction without compromising theological integrity. First, the stratified use of *tafsir* texts, from Depag at the basic level to *Maraghi* and *Manar* at the advanced level, can serve as a template for designing level-specific curriculum modules in *Pesantren* and other Islamic institutions. Second, the integration of thematic and contextual *tafsir* approaches can be systematized through dedicated curriculum planning, teacher training programs, and the development of supporting materials such as workbooks, discussion guides, and thematic indexes. Third, institutions can consider adopting a "*hybrid pedagogy*" that retains traditional methods like *bandongan* and *sorogan* while incorporating discussion-based learning and issue-based *tafsir* seminars. These strategies not only enhance students' interpretive competence but also equip them to address contemporary issues from an Islamic ethical perspective. More broadly, these curricular innovations may serve as a model for other Islamic educational systems worldwide that face similar challenges in balancing tradition and modernity.

Building on the comparative insights with prior literature, it becomes essential to position this study within established theoretical frameworks. The following table synthesizes how each core theme engages with key concepts in Qur'anic hermeneutics and Islamic curriculum development, thereby clarifying the study's theoretical contribution.

**Table 5.** Theoretical Positioning and Contribution

Thematic Focus	Theoretical Framework Used	Empirical Contribution	Theoretical Contribution
Epistemological Continuity and Transformation	Fazlur Rahman's Double Movement, Abu Zayd's Hermeneutics	Finds that <i>Pesantren</i> integrates both classical and contextual tafsir in a continuum, not a dichotomy.	Expands Rahman's model by showing how traditional institutions apply the double movement pragmatically.
Contextual Relevance of <i>Tafsir</i>	Ethical Hermeneutics, Text-as-Discourse Theory (Abu Zayd)	Shows that <i>Pesantren</i> begin to use <i>tafsir</i> to address modern challenges such as pluralism, ecology, and democracy.	Strengthens discourse-based hermeneutics by demonstrating its organic emergence in <i>Pesantren</i> practice.
Curriculum and Pedagogical Innovation	Curriculum Theory in Islamic Pedagogy, Epistemological Layering	Reveals structured <i>tafsir</i> teaching models aligned to student level, led by leadership with academic orientation.	Proposes a layered epistemological model in the <i>Pesantren</i> curriculum as a hybrid between conservation and innovation.

Source: Data Collection, 2025

The integration of modern *tafsir* approaches within *Pesantren* curricula carries significant implications beyond pedagogical diversification. At the level of student formation, such integration contributes to the development of ethical agency and critical consciousness among *Santri*. Exposure to *tafsir* texts, such as Maraghi or Manar, which address contemporary themes like social justice, environmental ethics, and governance, enables students to view the Qur'an not only as a sacred source of law but also as a framework for moral reasoning in the face of modern dilemmas. This character formation aligns with broader Islamic educational goals of producing *insān kāmil*, holistically developed individuals rooted in revelation yet responsive to reality. (Rahman, 2009).

Moreover, this pedagogical shift signals a reconfiguration of epistemological authority within the *Pesantren* system. By selectively incorporating thematic and rational *tafsir*, *Pesantren* demonstrate an emergent form of epistemological autonomy, that is, an ability to mediate between inherited classical knowledge and the demands of global modernity without succumbing to either fundamentalism or Westernization. This positions *Pesantren* as active agents in Islamic knowledge production, rather than passive transmitters of tradition. (Abdullah, 2014). In this light, the findings suggest that curricular reform in *tafsir* is not merely an instructional innovation but a strategic adaptation that safeguards the spiritual integrity of the tradition while cultivating intellectual resilience. It enables *Santri* to critically engage with transnational discourses on religion, ethics, and public life, thus preparing them not only as scholars of Islam but as ethical actors in an increasingly pluralistic world. (Zaman & Hefner, 2010).

Nevertheless, this study is not without its limitations. It is primarily based on qualitative document analysis and historical tracing, without the inclusion of field-based ethnographic data or direct interviews with educators and students. As such, while the analysis captures institutional and curricular shifts, it may not fully reflect the lived pedagogical realities or diverse local adaptations within *Pesantren* classrooms. Furthermore, the study focuses on a limited typology of *Pesantren* with

accessible documentation, potentially overlooking variations in more remote, conservative, or less-documented institutions.

In light of these limitations, future research could explore classroom-level dynamics through ethnographic observation or in-depth interviews with *tafsir* teachers and students. Such studies would provide richer insight into how modern interpretive methods are received, negotiated, or resisted within daily teaching practices. Additionally, comparative studies across countries with strong Islamic education traditions, such as Malaysia, Egypt, or Pakistan, could reveal transnational patterns in how *tafsir* is integrated into formal curricula. These avenues not only deepen empirical understanding but also support the global dialogue on curriculum innovation in Islamic education.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the integration of classical and contemporary *tafsir* epistemologies within the Pesantren curriculum reflects a gradual yet significant transformation in the management of Islamic education in Indonesia. Through historical and documentary analysis, the study reveals that Pesantren are no longer merely custodians of tradition but have become agents of renewal by implementing thematic, contextual, and rational approaches to Qur'anic interpretation, structured progressively according to educational levels. The current Pesantren curriculum accommodates classical texts such as *Tafsir Jalalayn* and *Ibn Kathir* alongside reformist works like *Tafsir Maraghi* and *Tafsir al-Manar*, thereby preserving orthodoxy while equipping students with ethical awareness and social responsiveness to contemporary challenges. The layered curriculum model based on epistemological progression refers to a pedagogical strategy that arranges *tafsir* materials in stages from foundational *naqlī* (*transmitted*) texts at the basic level to more advanced *'aqlī* (*rational-contextual*) interpretations, creating continuity between the preservation of Islamic scholarly heritage and the demand for contemporary relevance (*ṣāliḥ li kulli zaman wa makān*) in developing 21st-century Muslim learners.

Nonetheless, this study is limited by its reliance on document analysis and the absence of field-based empirical data. Future research should explore classroom implementation of reformed *tafsir* curricula, investigate how teachers and students perceive modern interpretation methods, and conduct comparative studies across national and typological variations of Islamic schools. Such empirical expansion would enrich our understanding of how Qur'anic interpretation can serve as a bridge between revelation and contemporary experience. Ultimately, this study affirms the Qur'an's enduring relevance (*ṣāliḥ li kulli zaman wa makān*) and highlights the role of *Pesantren* as active contributors to the renewal of Islamic scholarship in the Nusantara.

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