

From Murabbi to Service Provider: The Loss of Adab and Commodification of Teachers in Indonesia's Elite Islamic Schools

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Abstract

This article explores the transformation of teachers in Indonesia's elite Islamic schools from moral exemplars (murabbi) to service providers, set against processes of middle-class social reproduction. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital conversion and symbolic violence, complemented by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's concept of the "loss of adab"—the erosion of knowledge's proper moral hierarchy—the study reveals how high-fee institutions (annual costs often exceeding IDR 70–300 million in 2025, as seen in schools like X Islamic School and modern pesantren) prioritize quantifiable religious credentials (tahfidz, MTQ victories, Arabic fluency) as markers of class distinction. Through qualitative multiple case studies of five urban schools, involving interviews with parents, teachers, administrators, and alumni, findings highlight teachers' displacement: evaluated via KPIs and parental surveys, they internalize subordinated roles, fracturing their exemplary authority. This commodification perpetuates performative piety among students while eroding authentic adab transmission. The paradox is stark: institutions meant to foster spiritual formation instead reinforce stratification, producing generations adept in religious forms but often deficient in inner virtue—a subtle de-islamization masked as excellence.

Keywords: Elite Islamic Education, Teacher Role Shift, Social Reproduction, Loss of Adab, Commodification Of Knowledge, Indonesia



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Introduction

In contemporary Indonesia, elite Islamic schools have emerged as prominent institutions catering to the aspirations of the expanding Muslim middle class. With annual fees ranging from IDR 70 to 300 million (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025), these schools promise a blend of rigorous religious education, modern academics, and character formation rooted in Islamic values. Parents enroll their children not merely for academic excellence but for the acquisition

of prestigious religious credentials—full Qur’anic memorization (tahfidz), national-level competition victories (e.g., Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur’an or MTQ), and fluency in Arabic—that serve as markers of distinction in an increasingly competitive social landscape (Ayriza et al., 2022; Prasetia et al., 2024)

However, beneath this veneer of religious commitment lies a profound transformation in the structure of Islamic education. Teachers, traditionally revered as *murabbi*—exemplars who transmit not only knowledge but also *adab* (the proper recognition and placement of things in their rightful hierarchy)—are increasingly repositioned as service providers within a market-oriented framework (Prasetia & Warna, 2023). Their performance is measured through quantifiable outputs: student achievement rates, parental satisfaction surveys, and institutional rankings in national religious competitions. This shift reflects broader processes of commodification, where sacred knowledge is converted into symbolic capital for social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1994; Jang, 2024)

Drawing on Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas’s diagnosis of the “loss of *adab*” in modern Muslim education—the systematic confusion between mere information and true knowledge imbued with moral discipline—this study critically examines how elite Islamic schools contribute to the erosion of the teacher’s exemplary role. While effectively reproducing middle-class privilege through the accumulation of religious cultural capital, these institutions inadvertently displace the teacher from their proper place in the educational hierarchy, reducing moral authority to contractual service delivery (Al-Attas, 1980; Hirnawan, 2020).

This article addresses the following questions: How has the role of teachers shifted in elite Islamic schools? What mechanisms drive this transformation? And what are the implications for the transmission of *adab* in Indonesia’s new Muslim middle class? Through qualitative analysis of multiple case studies, the findings reveal a paradoxical dynamic: the very institutions designed to preserve Islamic educational ideals have become sites where the teacher’s role as moral exemplar is subordinated to the demands of class distinction and parental expectations.

Bourdieu (1986) views education as a key field for the reproduction of social inequality. Economic capital (high tuition fees) is converted into cultural capital (religious knowledge, Arabic proficiency, competition achievements) and symbolic capital (prestige derived from tahfidz certificates or MTQ victories). Teachers operate within this field as agents who facilitate this conversion process. In elite schools, their role shifts from autonomous transmitters of knowledge to intermediaries whose value is determined by their contribution to parental distinction strategies. This transformation involves symbolic violence: the implicit imposition of market logic on educational relations, where teachers’ moral authority is subordinated to measurable performance indicators (Bourdieu, 1994; Deer, 2014; Eagleton & Bourdieu, 1992). The resulting habitus among students and parents is one of competitive piety, where religious practice serves as a marker of class differentiation rather than spiritual formation.

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas defines *adab* as the disciplined recognition and acknowledgement of the proper place of things—knowledge, self, society, and the Divine—in a hierarchical order of reality. The true teacher (*murabbi* or *ustādh*) embodies this *adab*, serving not merely as an instructor but as a living exemplar who instills discipline of body, mind, and soul. In traditional Islamic education, the teacher’s authority derives from personal

embodiment of knowledge-with-adab, not from institutional contracts or parental demands (Al-Attas, 1980; Anugrah & Syahidin; Hirnawan, 2020; Sassi, 2018).

Al-Attas diagnoses modern Muslim education as suffering from the “loss of adab”: the confusion between information (quantifiable skills like memorization) and true knowledge (insight imbued with moral purpose). When teachers are repositioned as service providers—evaluated by student outputs and client satisfaction—this constitutes a profound displacement: the teacher is removed from their rightful place as moral guide and reduced to a technician of religious commodities (Al-Attas, 1980).

Combining Bourdieu and al-Attas provides a powerful analytical tool. Bourdieu explains the structural mechanisms driving the shift (market logic, capital conversion), while al-Attas illuminates its existential consequences (erosion of adab in teacher-student relations). In elite Islamic schools, teachers become the primary site where social reproduction occurs through the commodification of religious knowledge, simultaneously enacting the loss of adab by prioritizing prestige over moral exemplarity.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative multiple case study design to explore the shifting role of teachers in elite Islamic schools. The approach allows for in-depth examination of complex social processes within bounded contexts (Baran & Barutçu, 2025; Yin & Zhao, 2024) particularly the interplay between institutional structures and individual experiences.

Five elite Islamic schools were selected purposively based on criteria of high tuition fees (above IDR 70 million annually), national reputation in religious competitions, and location in urban centers serving middle-class families. The schools include integrated Islamic schools and modern pesantren in Sumatera Island (anonymized as Schools A–E to ensure ethical compliance).

Participants comprised:

1. 25 parents (primarily from households with annual income > IDR 70 million)
2. 15 teachers (full-time faculty with at least 5 years experience)
3. 10 school administrators (principals and board members)
4. 12 alumni (aged 18–25, currently in university or early career)

Sampling combined purposive and snowball techniques to access networks within these closed communities.

Thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clarke (Clarke & Braun, 2014), assisted by NVivo software. Initial coding focused on Bourdieuan categories (capital conversion, habitus) and al-Attas’s indicators of loss of adab (displacement of proper roles). Iterative coding refined themes, with cross-case comparison to identify patterns.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with assurances of anonymity for individuals and institutions. Reflexivity was maintained through researcher journaling to mitigate bias.

Results and Discussion

Results

The analysis reveals four interconnected themes illustrating the shift from murabbi to service provider, intertwined with processes of social reproduction and loss of adab.

1. Economic Pressures and Institutional Evaluation of Teachers

In all five schools, teacher performance is formally bound to quantifiable student outcomes—contracts laden with bonus clauses for tahfidz completion rates, competition victories, or university admissions via religious tracks. An administrator states boldly: “We have clear Key Performances Indicators (KIP) for teachers: how many students advance to local or regional or national or enter university through religious pathways.” Parents reinforce this through annual satisfaction surveys, where ratings directly influence contract renewals—pay exorbitantly, demand swift results. This market logic transforms teachers into mere instruments of symbolic capital accumulation, where holistic qalb formation loses to instant prestige delivery.

Debatable indeed: is this fair, or Bourdieu's symbolic violence in disguise, oppressing teachers for the satisfaction of affluent “clients”? Ghazali would whisper to the soul: where is our hayā', our sense of shame as an ummah inverting the hierarchy of knowledge—once teachers were revered for their adab, now they fear parents for their ratings? Al-Attas would diagnose this as the subtlest loss of adab: sacred knowledge reduced to prestational information, teachers displaced from their noble station into memorization technicians. Many teachers confess quietly that their qalbs fracture—Ibn Sina's psycho-spiritual split: one side the true murabbi calling, the other worldly contract pressure. Ibn Khaldun warns: such luxury kills the ummah's 'asabiyah, birthing new stratification—elite Muslims with tahfidz trophies versus ordinary Muslims with empty qalbs. This is our collective sin: boasting of “successful” schools, yet forgetting to ask—successful for the fleeting world or eternal akhirah? If we've demeaned teachers into market instruments, isn't it time for purificatory muhasabah: return teachers to the place Allah ordained, before our knowledge truly becomes poison without adab?

2. Teachers' Self-Perception: From Exemplar to Technician

Teachers frequently voiced a profound sense of displacement—as if their souls had been uprooted from their rightful station. A senior ustādh with 12 years of experience spoke with quiet sorrow: “In the past, I was taught to be an exemplar; the children imitated my akhlāq, not merely my memorization techniques. Now, if a student doesn't win, parents complain immediately: ‘Ustadz, the lessons aren't intensive enough—my child must rank first!’” A female teacher reflected even more poignantly: “I feel like a sports coach—the target is medals and trophies, not a qalb that is tranquil and in awe of Allah.” These testimonies reveal an internal conflict of Ibn Sina's psycho-spiritual depth: the teacher's nafs torn asunder—one side yearning for the true murabbi role, planting adab like deep roots in fertile soil; the other compelled by worldly pressures to become a mere technician of hafalan and rankings. Al-Attas would diagnose this as the most tragic loss of adab: teachers displaced from their sacred place as conduits of knowledge's light, reduced to servants of prestige for

parental satisfaction. Ghazali would remind us: knowledge without adab is like fire without fuel—it burns its bearer from within, and here the teachers' qalbs are the ones aflame. Ibn Khaldun would see social decay: the luxury of elite schools erodes the ummah's 'asabiyah, making teachers victims of new stratification. Debatable profoundly: if teachers' qalbs crack under the system we ourselves have built, how can adab's radiance reach the children—or have we forgotten that true exemplarity comes not from medals, but from a qalb in muṭma'innah serenity?

3. The Teacher as Service Provider: Empirical Manifestations

The most evident manifestation of this shift is the parent-teacher relationship, now framed entirely in consumer terms—like a marketplace transaction, not a bond of adab between murabbi and guardians. Middle-class parents proudly describe teachers as "service providers" obligated to "deliver results" because of the exorbitant fees: "We pay a fortune, so teachers must provide a full package—at least 20 juz memorized before junior high, plus district MTQ championships!" Observations of parent meetings reveal demands for "customized programs"—late-night extra tahfidz sessions tailored for competition prep, as if teachers were personal trainers upgradable on demand. School social media flaunts photos of teachers standing beside student trophies, positioning them as "brand assets" of the institution—rather than independent moral authorities revered for their adab's radiance. This is naked commodification in Bourdieu's terms: symbolic violence where teachers are forced to internalize their subordinated role, their qalbs slowly fracturing as they sense their displacement. Al-Attas would call this the deepest loss of adab: teachers uprooted from true murabbi status—conduits of knowledge in its moral hierarchy—reduced to prestige merchants. Ghazali reminds: knowledge without adab is a body without soul, and here the teachers' souls are sacrificed for worldly "outcomes." Ibn Sina sees psycho-spiritual torment: parents' nafs split—outwardly claiming "for the child's religion," inwardly calculating social ROI. Ibn Khaldun foresees: such luxury erodes the ummah's 'asabiyah, spawning new classes—elite Muslims with tahfidz trophies versus ordinary ones with hollow qalbs.

4. Consequences for Adab Transmission and Student Formation

The shift carries profound implications for adab—the very discipline of recognizing things in their rightful places. Students witness teachers judged not by inner virtue or embodied piety, but by external markers of success: rankings, trophies, university placements. This breeds a habitus of performative religiosity, where practice becomes spectacle rather than sincere submission. One alumnus recalled with quiet pain: "Our teachers were brilliant at hafalan, masters of recitation, but when parents raged over rankings, teachers immediately added extra lesson hours—not counsel on sabr or tawadhu'." This stark confusion—between mere information (mechanical memorization, competition scores) and true knowledge imbued with adab (al-Attas, 1993)—perpetuates a vicious cycle: children internalize that prestige trumps propriety, piety is measured by visibility, and religious achievement serves social ascent rather than qalb purification. Ghazali would see here the fire of knowledge without fuel—burning brightly outwardly yet consuming the soul inwardly. Ibn Sina might diagnose a psycho-spiritual fracture in the young nafs: split between zahir excellence and batin

emptiness. Ibn Khaldun would warn of decaying 'asabiyah: luxury-bred stratification where elite Muslim youth master forms of faith but lose its essence, widening the chasm between "prestigious believers" and those with humble, adab-rich qalbs.

Discussion

The findings illuminate a profound paradox in Indonesia's elite Islamic schools: institutions ostensibly dedicated to Islamic moral formation have become efficient mechanisms of middle-class social reproduction, with teachers at the epicenter of this transformation.

From a Bourdieuan perspective, the teacher's shift to service provider exemplifies the conversion of economic capital (high tuition) into symbolic religious capital (prestige credentials). Parents, as dominant agents in the educational field, impose market logic through satisfaction surveys and achievement demands, enacting symbolic violence on teachers (Amin et al., 2025; Bessell, 2011; Bourdieu, 1994; Shahid et al., 2025). This commodification ensures class reproduction: children acquire a competitive-piety habitus that secures future advantages in higher education and marriage markets. Yet, as the findings show, this success comes at the cost of authentic moral transmission.

Al-Attas's framework reveals the deeper existential crisis. The displacement of teachers from murabbi to technician constitutes a core manifestation of loss of adab—the confusion of information (memorization scores, trophies) with knowledge properly placed in its moral hierarchy (Al-Attas, 1980). When teachers' authority derives from contractual performance rather than embodied virtue, the entire educational process suffers de-islamization: sacred knowledge is reduced to a tradable good. This erosion is collective—parents' complicity in demanding "results" reflects their own internalized habitus of distinction, perpetuating a cycle where adab is sacrificed for prestige (Alcindor et al., 2025; Bourdieu, 1994).

This phenomenon extends beyond Indonesia, echoing Ibn Khaldun's observation of luxury corroding communal solidarity ('asabiyah). In contemporary terms, elite Islamic schooling reinforces stratification within the ummah, creating a new distinction between "prestigious Muslims" and others. Psychologically, it fosters split identities: teachers experience internal conflict, students learn performative piety, and parents rationalize their demands as "investment in the afterlife." (Juhaidi et al., 2025; Karim et al., 2025; Masuwai et al., 2025; Wijaya et al., 2025)

Ultimately, the shift risks producing generations proficient in religious forms but deficient in spiritual substance—a modern jahiliyyah masked as enlightenment.

Conclusion

The findings of this study uncover a poignant paradox in Indonesia's elite Islamic schools: while excelling at reproducing middle-class privilege through the accumulation of prestigious religious capital, these institutions inadvertently accelerate the loss of adab that al-Attas (1993) warns against. Teachers, displaced from their sacred station as murabbi—embodiers of knowledge-with-moral-discipline—become technicians in a market of prestige, their qalbs strained by KPIs, consumer demands, and the subtle violence of parental expectations. Students, witnessing this, inherit a habitus of competitive piety: masterful in external forms yet vulnerable to inner emptiness.

This is not mere institutional failure but a collective complicity: parents' aspirations for distinction, administrators' pursuit of rankings, and society's luxury-driven stratification erode the ummah's 'asabiyah, as Ibn Khaldun foresaw. In 2025, with rising tuition (often IDR 100–400 million annually) and intensified competition, the risk grows: generations proficient in religious spectacle but impoverished in spiritual substance — a veiled jahiliyyah.

Yet, herein lies hope for purificatory renewal. By restoring teachers to their rightful place — as living exemplars of adab rather than deliverers of trophies — we reclaim Islamic education's promise: forming qalbs tranquil in Allah's remembrance, not fractured by worldly ghurur. May this reflection awaken a muhasabah, returning knowledge to its hakiki hierarchy before the poison of commodification consumes us all.

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