



The Role of the Islamic Youth in Mobilizing Non-Formal Schools for Social Empowerment

If'il Choir¹, Husein Aziz²

^{1,2}Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia

Corresponding Email: ifilchoir95@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article discusses the strategic role of the younger generation in initiating and managing non-formal schools as a tangible form of social empowerment amid limited access to formal education. Through a descriptive qualitative approach, this study reveals various alternative education initiatives driven by young people in urban and rural areas, such as Yogyakarta, Surabaya, and East Flores. This non-formal school is not only a learning space, but also a vehicle for character building, strengthening community values, and resistance to structural injustice. The findings show that the involvement of young people in non-formal education is driven by a spirit of solidarity, social sensitivity, and local innovation based on community assets. However, the movement still faces challenges in terms of sustainability, legality, and policy support. Therefore, synergy is needed between the state, society, and the private sector to recognize and support the work of the young generation in alternative education as part of sustainable social development.

Keywords: Young Generation; Non-Formal Schools; Social Empowerment; Alternative Education; Community Initiatives.

Introduction

During various social challenges that plague the Indonesian nation, such as inequality of access to education, structural poverty, uncontrolled urbanization, and limited access to formal educational institutions, a form of social movement has emerged that deserves appreciation: community-based non-formal schools. Interestingly, many of these initiatives were initiated and run by the younger generation. Across the country, we are witnessing young people emerging as pioneers of change, not through mere demonstrations or rhetoric, but with concrete action: building inclusive, empowering, and hopeful alternative learning spaces for those who are often forgotten by the system (Mardiah et al., 2022, pp. 60–75)

Today's young generation is not only known for their digital identity but also begins to show high social awareness. They are present in the community as agents of change with the spirit of volunteerism, social entrepreneurship, and concern for others. The non-formal schools they establish or manage are not only places to learn to read and count, but also become safe spaces for street children, child laborers, adolescents who have dropped out of school, children from marginalized families, and indigenous peoples who are still left behind in terms of access to education. In these learning spaces, the values of solidarity, participation, diversity, and humanity are instilled from an early age.

Their work represents a paradigm shift in empowerment from an institutional approach to a community approach based on real action.(Shofi & Talkah, 2021) In a condition where the state is not always able to be directly present in all lines of people's lives, non-formal schools become a tangible form of community presence for the community. This is where the strategic position of the younger generation is evident: they can build bridges between knowledge, technology, and the real needs of society. By leveraging social media, digital technology, and volunteer networks, they spread the spirit of social change widely and quickly. Not a few of these schools have succeeded in creating a unique and innovative locality-based learning system.(Ali, 2017, pp. 1–14)

Furthermore, the involvement of the younger generation in non-formal education, especially Islamic education or madrasas, not only shows concern for others but also becomes a medium for character formation, leadership, and empathy. They learn directly about social realities, understand the root of society's problems, and formulate solutions that are not patronizing but collaborative. Non-formal schools become two-way learning spaces, where young volunteers not only teach, but also learn from the lives of their students.

However, the path taken by this young generation is not easy. Lack of support from the state, limited operational funds, legal challenges, and the stereotype that non-formal schools are "second-class education" are still major obstacles. Not to mention the social and emotional burden they have to bear when confronted head-on with the realities of poverty, violence, and social alienation. However, the spirit they bring is not easily extinguished. It is precisely from these various limitations that new forces are born that enrich our perspective on education and empowerment.(Ali, 2017, pp. 1–14)

Through this article, the author invites readers to explore more deeply how Indonesia's young generation has been, is, and will continue to revive the spirit of empowerment through non-formal schools. By drawing on real stories, good practices, and critical reflection, this article aims not only to inspire but also to encourage policy formulation and cross-sectoral collaboration to strengthen the role of non-formal schools as an important pillar in sustainable social development. Their work is not just a complement to the system, but an integral part of a more inclusive, equitable, and humane education future.

Non-Formal Education and Social Empowerment

Non-formal education has become an integral part of the national and global education system as an alternative path to lifelong learning. According to UNESCO (2018), non-formal education includes a variety of learning activities that are intentional, organized, but outside the formal education system. The characteristics of flexibility, based on local needs, and a participatory approach make non-formal education effective in reaching socially and economically vulnerable and marginalized groups (Knowles, 2015). In the Indonesian context, non-formal education such as PKBM (Community Learning Activity Center), reading houses, madrasah diniyah, and skills courses have contributed to increasing literacy, poverty alleviation, and community empowerment (Supriyadi, 2017).

Social empowerment through non-formal education involves the process of increasing the capacity of individuals and groups to access resources, build confidence, and increase participation in community decision-making (Brookfield, 2005). Freire (1970) emphasized that

education should be a tool of liberation, where students become active agents in social change through critical consciousness.

Non-Formal Education in Social and Islamic Perspectives

Non-formal education has long been recognized as one of the strategic pathways in expanding access to education and community empowerment, especially for groups that are not reached by the formal education system (UNESCO, 2018). In the context of Muslim society, non-formal education not only includes course or training activities, but also includes taklim assemblies, Islamic boarding schools, Qur'anic education parks, and mosque-based learning communities. Non-formal education in Islam has a strong socio-spiritual dimension, because it not only transfers knowledge, but also instills the values of faith, morals, and social concern (Azra, 2012).

The concept of social empowerment in Islam is closely related to the principles of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*, *ta'awun* (helping), and *ukhuwah islamiyah*. Non-formal schools driven by Muslim youth are not only a means of intellectual development, but also a vehicle for social transformation that fosters a work ethic, moral responsibility, and solidarity between people (Nasution, 2005).

The Role of the Younger Generation in Alternative Education

The younger generation plays a strategic role in encouraging social innovation, including the alternative education movement. Giroux (2011) states that youth have the potential to be agents of change who are critical of the status quo. In various cases, they initiated community-based education programs, such as digital literacy classes, social entrepreneurship training, and educational activities based on local arts and culture. Their involvement not only strengthens social solidarity but also becomes a means of actualizing leadership values, social empathy, and civic responsibility (Ho, 2018).

Tarrow's (2019) research shows that educational initiatives by young people are often progressive, adaptive, and rooted in local contexts. In Indonesia, youth movements such as reading house communities, street educators, and non-formal course institutions show that education initiatives are not only the role of the state, but also the domain of civil society, especially young people.

The Role of the Young Generation of Muslims in the Social Education Movement

The young generation of Islam has extraordinary potential in driving social change based on Islamic values. In the history of Islam, the role of youth such as Ali bin Abi Talib, Zaid bin Tsabit, and Usamah bin Zaid became a clear example of the contribution of the younger generation to the development of civilization. In the contemporary era, the work of Muslim youth in non-formal education can be seen through various initiatives such as Islamic reading houses, street schools, creative da'wah communities, and educational digital platforms that instill Islamic values and social concern (Hassan, 2018).

The non-formal education movement initiated by the young generation of Muslims is not only educational, but also transformative. A study by Qodir (2020) shows that youth involvement in community-based education is often based on ideological awareness and the spirit of da'wah, so it has high moral power in inspiring change.

Non-Formal Schools as a Community Empowerment Strategy

Non-formal schools that grow from local community initiatives have proven to be more responsive to the needs and potential of the surrounding community. Models such as community learning centers, local value-based homeschooling, and life skills education have shown a positive impact on the economic and social independence of the community (Widianingsih, 2020). Within the framework of empowerment, non-formal schools also play a role as a catalyst in building social trust, strengthening social capital, and encouraging the creation of new democratic public spaces (Santosa, 2021). This is in line with the principles of social justice-based education, which rejects a top-down approach and emphasizes more community participation.

Non-Formal Schools as a Medium of Da'wah and Empowerment

Non-formal schools in Muslim communities often play a dual role as educational spaces and da'wah spaces. With a humanistic, inclusive, and value-based approach, non-formal schools can reach marginalized communities, both economically, socially, and spiritually. According to Hasan (2016), non-formal Islamic educational institutions such as taklim councils, madrasah diniyah, and Qur'anic education parks have become an important part of building the character of the ummah and strengthening social cohesion.

On the other hand, social empowerment through non-formal education also contains the dimension of economic empowerment of the ummah (empowerment), where students are equipped with entrepreneurship, financial management, and digital literacy skills. This is in line with the idea of *al-tanmiyah al-basyariyah* (human development) in Islam, which emphasizes the integration of the development of spiritual, intellectual, and social potential (Sardar, 2011).

Challenges and Opportunities of the Non-Formal Education Movement by Youth

Although the enthusiasm and creativity of the younger generation in driving non-formal education are quite high, various structural challenges remain at the forefront. Limited funds, access to technology, institutional legality, and lack of policy support are often the main obstacles (Setiawan, 2022). On the other hand, the development of digital technology provides new opportunities, such as community-based online learning, social campaigns through social media, and cross-sector collaboration through digital platforms (Zhou & Kim, 2020). Support from governments, donor institutions, and the involvement of academics and education practitioners are needed to strengthen the capacity of this movement in a sustainable manner.

Challenges and Prospects of the Islamic Youth Movement in Non-Formal Education

Although full of potential, the Islamic youth movement in developing non-formal education also faces great challenges. Among them are limited resources, lack of public policy support, resistance from certain groups, and lack of a cadre and mentoring system (Nurcholish, 2019). However, the advancement of digital technology, the spirit of collectivity, and the growth of inclusive religious awareness are important capital for Muslim youth to continue to innovate and expand their work.

Collaboration between Muslim youth, Islamic organizations, zakat institutions, and Islamic higher education institutions can be a solution to strengthen an Islamic-based non-formal education ecosystem that is sustainable, visionary, and responsive to the challenges of the times.

Research method

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to deeply understand the work of the young generation in mobilizing non-formal schools as a means of social empowerment. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore meanings, motivations, and social dynamics that cannot be reached through a quantitative approach. The research was conducted in three regions with different social and geographical characteristics, namely Yogyakarta, Surabaya, and East Flores. These three regions were chosen because they have youth communities that are active in community-based alternative education initiatives.

The subjects of the study were young people between the ages of 18 and 35 who were initiators, managers, or active volunteers in community-based non-formal schools. In addition, this research also involved students from the non-formal schools as well as community leaders who knew the activities of the educational community. Through the involvement of various parties, this study seeks to capture various perspectives on the role and impact of non-formal schools in the context of social empowerment.

Data was collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentation studies. Interviews are conducted in a semi-structured manner with open-ended questioning guidelines, allowing informants to explain their views and experiences freely while remaining focused on the issue being researched. Participatory observation is carried out by the way the researcher participates in teaching-learning activities, training, and social activities organized by non-formal schools, so that they can directly observe the interaction between community members and internal processes that occur. In addition, the researcher also utilizes documentation such as photos, videos, activity reports, social media uploads, and learning materials to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the program being run (Arikunto, 2013, p. 27).

All data obtained were then analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The analysis process begins with reducing data, identifying key themes, such as the motivation of the younger generation, learning models, operational challenges, and social impacts on the community. After these themes were identified, data interpretation was carried out to understand the relationship between aspects in the context of non-formal education and social empowerment. To maintain the validity of the data, the researcher triangulated by comparing data from various sources, methods, and collection times. In addition, provisional results verification was also carried out with informants through member checking techniques to ensure the accuracy and validity of information (Muljono, 2007).

In its implementation, this research upholds the ethics of social research. The researcher ensures that all informants are aware of the purpose of the research and give conscious consent to participate. The identity of the informant is kept confidential by using initials or pseudonyms. This research also emphasizes the principles of transparency, non-commercialization of data, and the use of results for the benefit of science development and social policy advocacy that supports the sustainability of alternative education driven by youth.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study show that the young generation has taken an increasingly strategic and transformative role in initiating and managing non-formal schools oriented towards social empowerment. Their work grew out of a drive of idealism, critical awareness of social inequality, and a collective spirit to create inclusive and liberating educational spaces. These non-formal schools were not born from an established bureaucratic system, but from the social sensitivity and courage of young people to respond directly to the needs of the surrounding community (Andriyani et al., 2018, pp. 47–64)

In the Yogyakarta region, for example, community education movements managed by students and young activists show how non-formal schools can develop into open, participatory, and creative learning ecosystems. The school targets children from poor urban families, informal workers, and street children who are not reached by formal education. The subject matter provided not only includes basic lessons such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also character education, cultural arts, vocational skills, and digital literacy. The learning pattern used is dialogical, with a learning by doing approach, educational games, and open discussions that aim to build students' self-awareness and confidence. This is in line with Paulo Freire's idea of education as a process of liberation, in which teachers and students alike learn and grow together in critical dialogue (Suwito, 2014, p. 67).

In contrast to Yogyakarta, in Surabaya, there is a model of non-formal schools based on poor urban areas that operate in narrow alleys and densely populated neighborhoods. The non-formal school drivers here consist of local youth who also used to grew up in similar socio-economic conditions. They established "community night classes" as a response to high dropout rates and a lack of attention to working children who had to help the family economy during the day. These classes are held at night, using open spaces, residents' homes, or the halls of the local mosque. The approach they use is highly adaptive to the socio-economic conditions of students and reflects the cultural awareness that education cannot be forced in a single format. This is where it can be seen how the young generation is not only a teacher, but also a social facilitator who bridges people's expectations for a more humane education (Abdulmudy, 2017).

Meanwhile, in East Flores, a local youth movement emerged that built non-formal schools based on local wisdom. In the context of the 3T region full of limited access and infrastructure, these young people realized that waiting for the government's attention was not the solution. They then developed a learning space that integrates basic academic knowledge with local cultural values such as ikat weaving, traditional music, organic farming, and the values of communal solidarity. This is where education becomes a tool for cultural preservation as well as a strengthening of local identity. This non-formal school is managed independently with the principle of cooperation, where young people become educators, curriculum designers, fundraisers, as well as social campaigners. With limited resources, they show that empowerment is not about the size of the budget, but about the strength of social commitment (Muthi'ah et al., 2024).

From the three research locations, it was found that there are several general patterns that can be identified in the work of the young generation. First, the main motivation of these young

people was born from first-hand experience of seeing inequality in access to education and social injustice in their surrounding environment. Many of them have experienced these limitations themselves, so there is a strong drive to create change, not only for themselves but also for their communities. Second, there are significant learning innovations, which are born from their freedom to design curriculum and learning methods that are not tied to formal standards. This approach creates a more flexible, relevant, and meaningful learning atmosphere, especially for groups that have been alienated from the formal education system (Rifa'i, 2023).

Third, the role of the younger generation in managing non-formal schools shows their capacity in social management. They not only teach but also recruit volunteers, build partnerships with other institutions, make activity reports, manage social media for promotion, and advocate for their programs to the government. This shows that the involvement of youth in non-formal education is a tangible form of civic engagement and citizen participation in the development process, independently and responsibly (*Empowerment of Rice Farmer Groups Through Agricultural Extension | Lifelong Education Journal*, t.t.).

However, the challenges they face cannot be ignored. The lack of funding is the main obstacle that makes the sustainability of the program dependent on donations, volunteers, and collective spirit. On the other hand, the absence of formal recognition from the government of the community-based non-formal school model makes access to assistance and facilities very limited. In addition, the high workload, the lack of formal pedagogic training for young teachers, and the lack of legal protection for community initiatives are serious problems that hinder the development of this movement (Muthi'ah et al., 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, the results of this study reinforce the idea that non-formal education is not a complement to the formal system, but a separate entity that is able to respond to social realities more quickly and flexibly. In the framework of sustainable development, non-formal education driven by the younger generation is an important part of efforts to alleviate poverty, strengthen social capital, and community-based human development. These schools became symbols of resistance to structural discrimination in education, as well as social laboratories for future leaders who understood the reality from the grassroots (Suneno, 2008, p. 56).

Thus, the work of the younger generation in moving non-formal schools is not only appreciative but also needs to be supported by partisan policies. Governments, donor institutions, and higher education institutions need to open up spaces for dialogue and collaboration with these young movers so that their initiatives not only survive but also grow and have a wider impact. Cross-sectoral collaboration is key to creating a robust, sustainable, and non-formal education ecosystem that contributes to more equitable social development (Shofi & Talkah, 2021).

Conclusion

The work of the younger generation in driving non-formal schools has proven to be a transformative social force in efforts to empower the community. With the spirit of independence, solidarity, and social concern, young people in various regions have succeeded in creating alternative educational spaces that are inclusive, adaptive, and rooted in local realities. The non-formal school they pioneered was not just a place of learning, but also a

vehicle for character building, strengthening cultural identity, and a means of social mobility for marginalized groups whom the formal education system had marginalized.

The younger generation shows that education can be carried out without having to wait for state intervention (Akilah, 2018). They move based on social sensitivity and a sense of responsibility for the fate of others. Various creative and contextual approaches used in the teaching-learning process are proof that educational innovation can grow from the bottom, as long as there is a willingness and leadership that is on the side of humanity. The non-formal schools built by them also reaffirmed the importance of education as a right of all citizens, not just those who have access to an established system.

However, the challenges they face are quite complex, ranging from limited resources, lack of institutional recognition, to the absence of legal protection for community education initiatives (Akilah, 2018). For this reason, cross-sector support is needed from the government, universities, the business world, and civil society to ensure the sustainability and expansion of the impact of these community-based non-formal schools.

In the end, the young generation is not only an object of development but has proven itself to be an active subject capable of creating real change. Through their work in non-formal schools, we witness how education can be a tool of empowerment, social reconciliation, and structural liberation. Therefore, encouraging and strengthening the alternative education movement spearheaded by the younger generation is a strategic step in realizing a more just, equal, and civilized society.

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