



Character Education For The Modern Generation: Revitalizing The Traditional Istighotsah Program In An Indonesian Madrasah

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Abstract

Forming religious character is an urgent component of Islamic education in the modern era; this study examines how a traditional spiritual practice is revitalized as a tool for character education in an Indonesian madrasah. This research aims to describe the implementation of the traditional Istighotsah (collective prayer) program and analyze its contribution to fostering students' religious character, specifically focusing on discipline, responsibility, and politeness. This study employed a qualitative descriptive method, gathering data through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation with school leadership, teachers, and students. The findings reveal that the routine Friday Istighotsah program, implemented through spiritual habituation, functions as an effective medium for character education. Students demonstrated measurable improvements in punctuality (discipline), active participation (responsibility), and respectful behavior (politeness), reflecting a successful internalization of Islamic values. This study concludes that revitalizing the traditional Istighotsah program offers a significant and replicable model for impactful character education, demonstrating that spiritual practices can be effectively integrated into modern schooling to foster tangible religious character.

Keywords:

Istighotsah, Character Education, Islamic Education

A. INTRODUCTION

Character education is a fundamental endeavor to shape individuals who possess noble morals and uphold ethical values. Amidst the challenges of the modern era, characterized by rapid technological advancements and the potential for moral degradation, instilling religious character has become increasingly crucial, especially in Islamic educational institutions. Within the context of Islamic Religious Education, the objective extends beyond mere knowledge transfer; it is aimed at the holistic formation of personality based on religious values (Hartanti, 2021) and aligned with Indonesia's National Education goals. The ultimate aim is to cultivate *akhlakul karimah* (a noble character), which ideally encompasses the internalization of faith (*akidah*), rituals (*ibadah*), and moral behavior (*akhlak*).

Despite this objective, educational institutions frequently encounter a significant gap between students' cognitive understanding of religious values and the actualization of these values in their daily behavior. This phenomenon is evident at the *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* (MI) level, where issues such as a lack of discipline in worship, minimal internalization of responsibility, and an erosion of politeness due to digital and environmental influences are commonly found. While research by Azizah et al. (2023) highlights the urgency of bridging this 'cognition behavior' gap, previous studies have methodologically limited their scope to general religious activities. Unlike these broad descriptive approaches, this research specifically examines *Istighotsah* not merely as a ritual, but as a distinct pedagogical intervention to solve this issue.

In response to this challenge, *madrasahs* implement various development strategies (Marzuki & Imron, 2023). Theoretically, the formation of religious character requires a shift from

cognitive instruction to affective internalization, a process best achieved through consistent spiritual practice. One effort with significant potential is the revitalization of the *Istighotsah* program. *Istighotsah* is a traditional spiritual practice involving collective prayer and *dhikr* (remembrance) to seek assistance from Allah SWT. In this educational context, the program is revitalized from a mere ritual into a pedagogical tool. Its primary mechanisms are "habituation", where routine participation is believed to internalize values, and "modeling" (*uswah*), where actively participating teachers provide direct examples of etiquette and solemnity.

Previous research has extensively covered the role of religious programs in character formation. Several studies focus on specific activities like *Khitabah* (public speaking) (Husna, 2018) or *Infak* (charity) (Damayanti, 2018). Other studies examine a broad range of general religious activities (Sulistiyani, 2017; Wardani, 2021) or focus on habituation as a general method (Salsabila, 2023). Research by Ismi (2023) also confirms that religious programs contribute to religious character. However, specific research on the *Istighotsah* program as a character-building method remains limited. While a study by SAFITRI (2022) examined *Istighotsah*, it focused on a different educational level (Madrasah Tsanawiyah/MTs). Therefore, a clear research gap exists: an in-depth study analyzing the implementation, process, and success level of the *Istighotsah* program as a means of forming specific character traits (discipline, responsibility, and politeness) at the *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* (MI) or elementary level has not been widely conducted.

Based on this gap, this article aims to (1) describe the forms of religious character developed in students, (2) describe the implementation process of the *Istighotsah* program in shaping this character, and (3) analyze the success level of the program. This research is based on a qualitative case study at MI Wahid Hasyim III Dau, Malang, which intentionally implements this program. This study contributes empirical evidence on how a traditional spiritual practice can be effectively revitalized as an impactful and relevant character education program for the modern generation at the elementary school level.

B. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative field research design, grounded in a constructivist paradigm (Rukminingsih et al., 2020). While the *Istighotsah* program involves the entire student body of 257 students, this study specifically draws data from six purposively selected participants (comprising two school officials and four fifth-grade students) to gain a deep and holistic understanding of their subjective experiences and the meanings they construct from the program.

The research was conducted at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) Wahid Hasyim III Dau, in Malang, Indonesia. This site was purposively selected based on its unique characteristic as an educational institution that integrates the *Istighotsah* program not merely as a ritual, but as a systematic pedagogical strategy aligned with its vision of forming IMTAQ (faith and piety). Methodologically, this location offers a 'rich case' for qualitative inquiry because it involves the active participation of the entire school community, from leadership to students, thereby creating a distinct religious culture that allows for a holistic observation of the character internalization process in its natural context.

In this qualitative study, the researcher acted as the primary instrument (*human instrument*). Data were collected using three primary techniques: (1) Participant observation, which involved the researcher directly attending the *Istighotsah* sessions to observe the implementation process, teacher-student interactions, and student behaviors; (2) In-depth, semi-structured interviews with all participants to explore their perceptions, experiences, and the meanings they attributed to the program; and (3) Documentation analysis of school records, such as the school's vision-mission statements, program schedules, and activity photographs, to triangulate and contextualize the primary data.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, data validation was performed using data triangulation. This included source triangulation (cross-checking data from different participants, e.g., comparing teacher responses with student responses) and technical triangulation (comparing data from different methods, validating interview claims against observation notes). Data were analyzed using an interactive analysis model, which involved three

concurrent flows (Sugiyono, 2013) : data reduction (selecting, simplifying, and coding data from field notes and transcripts) , data display (organizing the reduced data into narrative text) , and conclusion drawing/verification (interpreting the displayed data to answer the research questions).

C. RESULT & DISCUSSION

The findings from observations, interviews, and documentation analysis indicate that the *Istighotsah* program is a structured and routine activity, not merely a ceremonial one. It is formally implemented every Friday morning before regular classes begin, held in the school's main hall (aula). The implementation follows four distinct stages: (1) a congregational reading of *Shalawat* (praises upon the Prophet) and *Asmaul Husna* (the 99 Names of Allah); (2) the core *Istighotsah* prayer, which is led by students themselves on a rotating basis; (3) a collective *Dhuha* (mid-morning) prayer; and (4) a concluding prayer led by a teacher . This structure is confirmed by the Coordinator of Student Affairs, who noted the goal is to "accustom them to leading the *Istighotsah* reading".



Figure 1. Students participating in the weekly *Istighotsah* program at MI Wahid Hasyim III Dau. The photo illustrates the collective and solemn atmosphere of the activity.

The primary result of this structured implementation is the observable formation of three key religious character traits: discipline, responsibility, and politeness.

1. **Discipline.** Discipline was identified as the most prominent character trait developed through the program. This trait is fostered through the program's strict routine. Students are required to arrive at school earlier than on other days (before 7:00 AM), prepare their own prayer equipment (such as *peci* for boys and *mukena* for girls), and follow the entire series of activities in an orderly and calm manner . This finding was corroborated by multiple sources. An Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teacher stated:

"The children become more polite... They also show discipline, such as coming earlier to school on Fridays, preparing their worship equipment neatly, and following the activities without always needing to be reminded." (Faris Romansyah, personal communication, April 14, 2025)

A fifth-grade student, Naurin Aulia Rafifa, confirmed this from a personal perspective:

"I learned discipline, because i have to come on time and am not allowed to chat during the event." (Naurin Aulia Rafifa, personal communication, April 11, 2025)

2. **Responsibility.** Character of responsibility emerged through the program's emphasis on active student participation. By assigning students the task of leading the *Istighotsah* readings in front of their peers and teachers, the school actively cultivates a sense of confidence and accountability . Students must prepare themselves, read clearly, and fulfill their role as leaders. This method showed tangible results, as detailed by the PAI teacher:

"There was a student who was initially reluctant to join spiritual activities and was often late... After a few months of following *Istighotsah*, he slowly became active. Now, he often becomes a leader for the *Istighotsah*... and is rarely late anymore." (Faris Romansyah, personal communication, April 14, 2025)

This internal shift from passive participation to active ownership was also verbalized by students. Fajar Rifqi Ananta stated, "I learned responsibility for my worship, because every Friday we practice prayer discipline" , and Dewi Nafisa Azmi added, "The important lesson is responsibility for prayer and not being lazy".

3. **Politeness.** The third trait, politeness or *adab* (Islamic etiquette), is fostered by the solemn and respectful atmosphere of the *Istighotsah* itself. The collective act of prayer and *dhikr* (remembrance) creates a calm and focused environment where students are habituated to speak and act respectfully. The PAI teacher confirmed that "The children become more polite in speaking to the teachers as well as to their friends". Furthermore, the Coordinator of Student Affairs, Chaula Handayani, observed:

"After participating in *Istighotsah* routinely, students appear calmer, more polite, more diligent in worship, and begin to show polite attitudes, empathy, and good habits like greeting [saying *salam*] or reminding friends to pray." (Chaula Handayani, personal communication, April 14, 2025)



Figure 2. The researcher (left) conducting an in-depth interview with a fifth-grade student (right) in the school library to understand their internal perception of the program.

The findings demonstrate that the *Istighotsah* program at MI Wahid Hasyim III Dau is successful because it has been revitalized from a simple ritual into a deliberate pedagogical strategy. The discussion analyzes *how* this program works by connecting the findings to established theories of habituation and modeling, comparing them with similar research.

The Mechanism of Habituation in Fostering Discipline. The most visible outcome, discipline, is not merely a product of rule enforcement but a direct result of the program's 'spiritual conditioning.' Thematic analysis of the field data reveals that this character is formed through specific Friday routines : the strict requirement to arrive before 07:00 AM and the independent preparation of worship equipment (such as *peci* and *mukena*). This routine forces a shift in the students' behavioral rhythms, fostering what can be termed as 'temporal discipline.' This finding deepens the assertion by Basri et al. (2023) regarding habituation; in this context,

the habituation process functions as a mechanism for 'self-control', where students learn to restrain their behavior, sitting quietly and refraining from chatting, during the solemnity of the *Istighotsah*. Consequently, as corroborated by Muid and Almaghfuri (2006) and Munawir et al. (2024), this consistent religious routine successfully transforms external rules into internal values.

This research expands on this by showing *how* habituation functions: the Friday routine socializes students into a "culture of discipline". It is not just an order, but a shared experience. This result is consistent with Sunardi et al. (2024), who found that the habituation of *Istighotsah* specifically was effective in fostering "spiritual intelligence" in students. This study argues that the discipline observed in students (e.g., punctuality, quiet focus) is a behavioral manifestation of this developing spiritual intelligence. The *Istighotsah* program provides the consistent, repeated, and structured spiritual practice necessary to build that internal self-control.

However, the study also uncovered contradictory findings regarding the consistency of this discipline. Field data revealed that the internalization of 'quiet focus' is not absolute. Interviews indicated that the duration of the activity occasionally led to drowsiness (Kenzo, personal communication, April 11, 2025), and peer distractions such as 'noise at the back' still occurred, disrupting the solemn atmosphere (Naurin, personal communication, April 11, 2025). This suggests that while *Istighotsah* establishes a framework for discipline, the formation of internal self-control is a dynamic and fluctuating process, particularly for younger students who struggle with long attention spans.

Modeling and Participation in Building Responsibility and Politeness The development of responsibility and politeness is not just from the routine, but from the *method* of implementation. Responsibility is taught by delegating it; when students are tasked with leading the prayer, they are entrusted with a genuine *amanah* (trust), which is a practical application of character education.

Simultaneously, teacher modeling (*uswah*) is central to fostering politeness. The teachers do not simply supervise; they participate. They sit with students, recite the *dhikr* solemnly, and demonstrate the *adab* of a respectful worship service. As the PAI teacher explained:

"We use the modeling and habituation approach. Children will imitate more easily than just being told. So we as teachers try to be examples: sitting calmly... reciting *dhikr* solemnly, and showing polite attitudes." (Faris Romansyah, personal communication, April 14, 2025)

This pedagogical choice reflects the concept of *uswah hasanah* (good modeling), which Marzuki (2015) identifies as a primary method in Islamic character education. This strategy is also emphasized by Mohammad Maulidin As et al. (2024), who found that school strategies to build religious character rely heavily on modeling and habituation as their main methods. This study's findings are also in line with Badriyah et al. (2023), who specifically identified the "Strategy of PAI Teachers" in using *Istighotsah* as crucial to its success in strengthening character. Furthermore, this confirms the broader theory posited by Nantara Didit (2022) that the "teacher's role" is fundamental in all school-based character formation. By modeling *khusyuk* (solemnity), the teachers are not just managing behavior; they are teaching *adab* as a form of spiritual respect.

Program Effectiveness and Internalization of Values The program's success is evident in the positive outcomes perceived by all participants. Teachers (Chaula Handayani, personal communication, April 14, 2025) measure success not just by attendance, but by "changes in student attitudes, who are more diligent in worship, more orderly, and more polite... with sincerity and full awareness". Students, in turn, report internal benefits such as feeling "closer to Allah" and "more patient", indicating a positive impact on their spiritual and emotional well-being.

This outcome achieves the essential goal of Islamic education, which, as Hartanti (2021) argues, is the "formation of personality... based on religious values," rather than just cognitive knowledge. The *Istighotsah* program provides the crucial *affective* and *experiential* component needed to internalize these values. The program, therefore, functions as a successful strategy for

character formation, as described by Marzuki and Imron (2023), by integrating religious activities into the core life of the school. This finding aligns with the general conclusion of Azizah et al. (2023), who also found that religious activities are a viable method for character education in the *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* setting.

Despite its success, the program is not without limitations. The primary challenge identified is maintaining a consistent atmosphere of *khusyuk* (solemn focus) among young elementary students. As the PAI teacher noted (Faris Romansyah, personal communication, April 14, 2025), "children... sometimes get bored or unfocused". The school's strategy to mitigate this is not punitive, but pedagogical ("patient and loving approaches"), reinforcing that the *process* of character building itself is the objective.

D. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the *Istighotsah* program, when revitalized as a structured pedagogical strategy, is a highly effective model for forming students' religious character. The research provides a concise scientific justification for this conclusion by addressing its three primary objectives. First, the program demonstrably shapes religious character in its three key dimensions: it strengthens *ibadah* (worship) by habituating communal prayer and *dhikr*; it enhances *akhlak* (morals) by fostering tangible improvements in discipline, responsibility, and politeness; and it nurtures *akidah* (faith) by providing students with a sense of spiritual calm and connection. Second, the study confirms that the program's implementation process relies on two critical pedagogical methods: spiritual *habituation* (the consistent routine every Friday) and *uswah hasanah* (the active modeling by teachers who participate in the rituals). Third, the program shows significant success in bridging the gap between students' cognitive knowledge of religion and their actual behavior, as evidenced by their increased spiritual awareness.

The contribution of this study is its empirical demonstration that a traditional spiritual practice, the *Istighotsah*, is not obsolete but can be effectively revitalized as a relevant and impactful educational tool for the modern generation. This research shows how such practices can move beyond ritual to become a deliberate strategy for internalizing values. However, this study is limited by its scope as a single-site case study at MI Wahid Hasyim III Dau, which limits the generalizability of the findings to institutions with different organizational cultures. Additionally, the focus was restricted to three specific character dimensions (discipline, responsibility, and politeness), leaving other potential moral outcomes unexplored.

The practical implication for other educational institutions is that this model can be replicated, provided there is institutional commitment to two key factors: programmatic consistency (routine) and, most importantly, the active participation and modeling of educators. Responding to the findings regarding student engagement, future research should not merely conduct general comparisons, but specifically investigate pedagogical modifications to the *Istighotsah* format that can mitigate boredom in younger students. Furthermore, comparative studies should analyze the efficacy of *Istighotsah* against other collective spiritual methods (such as *Tahlil*) to isolate the specific impact of this practice on character formation.

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