

Pesantren-Based Character Education: The Dzuriyah Strategy in Shaping the Character of Santri Ndalem

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the core character values and formation strategies implemented by dzuriyah (descendants of the founders) in shaping the character of santri ndalem (resident student-assistants) at Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo HM Al-Mahrusiyah. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. The findings reveal that key character values instilled include tafaqquh fi ad-din (deep religious understanding), honesty, responsibility, discipline, and independence. These values are internalized through daily acts of service, emotional closeness, and consistent spiritual practice. The character-building strategies consist of habitual training, role modeling, situational advice, and spiritual reinforcement through prayer. The relationship between dzuriyah and santri ndalem resembles a familial bond that fosters a holistic and humanistic learning environment. Challenges include role conflict between academic obligations and service duties, as well as cultural diversity among students. Despite its single-site limitation, this study contributes conceptually to the development of community-based and spiritually grounded character education in Islamic boarding schools, aligning with Global Citizenship Education values of empathy, tolerance, and moral responsibility.

Kata kunci:

Pendidikan karakter,
pesantren, dzuriyah,
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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis penanaman nilai-nilai karakter dan strategi pembinaan yang dilakukan oleh dzuriyah terhadap santri ndalem di Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo HM Al-Mahrusiyah. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus, teknik pengumpulan data berupa wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa nilai-nilai karakter utama yang ditanamkan mencakup tafaqquh fi ad-din, kejujuran, tanggung jawab, kedisiplinan, dan kemandirian. Nilai-nilai tersebut dibentuk melalui pengabdian harian, relasi emosional, dan pembiasaan spiritual. Strategi pembinaan yang digunakan meliputi pembiasaan melalui tugas nyata, keteladanan (modeling), nasihat situasional, dan penguatan spiritual melalui doa. Relasi antara dzuriyah dan santri menyerupai hubungan keluarga yang membentuk atmosfer pendidikan yang holistik dan humanistik. Tantangan dalam proses ini meliputi konflik peran antara pengabdian dan akademik, serta keberagaman budaya santri. Meskipun terbatas pada satu lokasi penelitian, temuan ini memberikan kontribusi konseptual terhadap pengembangan pendidikan karakter berbasis komunitas dan spiritual di lingkungan pesantren, serta relevan dengan prinsip Global Citizenship Education yang menekankan empati, toleransi, dan tanggung jawab moral.

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INTRODUCTION

Character education is an essential component of human development, aiming not only to produce intellectually competent individuals but also morally and socially mature ones. In the global context, character education has become a central agenda of 21st-century education, as emphasized by UNESCO through the concept of Global Citizenship Education, which highlights values such as responsibility, empathy, and tolerance as integral parts of the educational process (UNESCO, 2015). In Indonesia, the government has responded to this challenge by strengthening the national curriculum through the Character Education Strengthening Program (Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter or PPK), integrated into the 2013 Curriculum. This program mandates the cultivation of 18 core character values, including religiosity, honesty, responsibility, hard work, and peace-loving attitudes (Hendarman et al., 2018).

Amid various social and cultural challenges faced by today's youth, pesantren (traditional Islamic boarding schools) continue to play a significant role as institutions consistently committed to fostering students' character in a comprehensive manner. Pesantren adopt a distinctive educational approach by integrating religious knowledge, worship practices, spiritual nurturing, and moral exemplification (Riswadi, Roibin, Mustofa, Barizi, & Jamilah, 2024). More than just centers of learning, pesantren function as institutions for holistic personality and value formation through daily interactions between students (santri) and their kyai (Islamic scholars). Within this framework, pesantren are often considered more successful than formal schools in shaping students' character in practice (Husni & Rohmah, 2024).

One particularly unique community within the pesantren system that deserves scholarly attention is that of the santri ndalem. Unlike regular students, santri ndalem live with and serve the kyai or his family (dzuriyah). In this relational dynamic, they do not only receive formal instruction but also undergo character formation through service, observation of the kyai's daily conduct, and direct involvement in domestic and social responsibilities. Their role is significant, as they experience a more intensive, personal, and continuous process of character building. However, academic studies on this group remain very limited.

Previous research has discussed character education in pesantren, but generally focused on the madrasah diniyah curriculum or classroom learning methods. For instance, Arroyan examined Islamic education reform through the integration of character values into instruction, while Fadhiilah explored the communication strategies employed by pesantren in shaping students' character (Arroyan, 2024; Fadhiilah, Tanjung, & Irfani, 2024). Similarly, Ramadani and Sofa highlighted the use of sermons and role modeling in instilling values such as honesty and responsibility among students (Ramadani & Sofa, 2025). Although these studies provide valuable insights, they do not explicitly address the position of santri ndalem or the character education strategies employed specifically for them, despite their unique educational experiences.

The existence of santri ndalem carries profound educational significance. Huzaimah and Mukhlisin (2020), for example, found that becoming a santri ndalem is often a conscious choice made as an act of service (khidmah) and an effort to gain blessings (barakah) from the kyai or nyai, even at the cost of personal interests. These students experience spiritual joy and blessings through service. Similarly, Lutfiana revealed that the character development of santri ndalem includes values such as sincerity (ikhlas), discipline, patience, responsibility, and humility (tawadhu') (Lutfiana, Luthfi, & Arsal, 2017). However, such studies tend to be descriptive in nature and do not offer a conceptual model or systematic strategies of character education implemented by the dzuriyah for santri ndalem.

This study therefore contributes new insights by exploring in depth the strategies employed by the dzuriyah in shaping the character of santri ndalem through daily service, role modeling, emotional bonds, and spiritual communication. The research goes beyond description by offering analytical and conceptual perspectives with the aim of formulating a character education model rooted in empirical experiences and the unique religious relationships within the pesantren.

This research gap serves as the foundation of the present study. To date, there has been little scholarly attention to the character formation strategies grounded in the relationship between the dzuriyah and santri ndalem within a tarbiyah framework that encompasses spiritual, moral, and social dimensions. Nor has there been a conceptual model explaining how values such as honesty, responsibility, and discipline are transmitted through informal interactions, role modeling, habituation, and direct supervision by the dzuriyah. Moreover, in the modern context, santri ndalem face a dual challenge: intensive service obligations alongside academic demands from madrasah or universities they simultaneously attend. Adding to this is the complexity of diverse cultural and social backgrounds, which requires more flexible and adaptive educational approaches.

Based on this gap, the present study proposes a new approach to understanding character education in pesantren by examining the strategies implemented by the dzuriyah for santri ndalem. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) identify the core character values instilled in santri ndalem at Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo HM Al-Mahrusiyah; and (2) analyze the methods and strategic approaches employed by the dzuriyah in shaping these values.

This study offers novelty in three main aspects. First, it focuses on the domestic sphere of pesantren education, which is rarely addressed – namely, character education through direct service within the kyai's household. Second, it adopts a narrative and experience-based approach, combined with a strategic analysis of tarbiyah methods involving role modeling, habituation, advice, and prayer. Third, it bridges traditional pesantren approaches with contemporary challenges faced by today's generation of students, making the study relevant both theoretically and practically.

By situating the study at Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo HM Al-Mahrusiyah, the research is expected to contribute to the development of character education models

within pesantren and other Islamic educational institutions. A successful character formation model based on dzuriyah-santri ndalem relationships may be replicated in similar contexts and serve as a reference for more inclusive national character education policies grounded in traditional cultural values.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the strategies used by the dzuriyah in shaping the character of santri ndalem at Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo HM Al-Mahrusiyah. The site was purposively selected due to its long-standing tradition of santri's service to the dzuriyah, which is believed to play a strategic role in character education. The focus of this research was directed toward daily practices, social interactions, and the values internalized in the everyday life of the santri ndalem.

Data were collected through three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted with the dzuriyah, santri ndalem, and pesantren administrators to explore their experiences and strategies of character formation. Participant observation was carried out directly within the ndalem environment to capture the dynamics of relationships, students' responsibilities, and patterns of role modeling. Documentation was used to complement the data by reviewing activity archives, financial records, duty schedules, and other relevant informal notes.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources, techniques, and time, along with member checking to confirm the credibility of the findings. The analysis process was conducted simultaneously with data collection, enabling the researcher to adjust the focus of exploration according to the evolving dynamics of the field.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Core Character Values Instilled in Santri Ndalem

The cultivation of character values among santri ndalem at Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo HM Al-Mahrusiyah is carried out intensively and continuously. Based on interviews and observations with both the caregivers (dzuriyah) and the santri ndalem, five core character values were identified: (1) honesty, (2) responsibility, (3) discipline, (4) independence, and (5) tafaqquh fi ad-din (deep understanding of religious knowledge).

The value of tafaqquh fi ad-din serves as the fundamental orientation of the santri ndalem's education. According to Dr. KH. Reza Ahmad Zahid, this value is prioritized because the identity of a santri ndalem is inherently rooted in the pursuit of religious knowledge. Although they are entrusted with duties of service (khidmah) to the kyai and his family, they are not exempt from the obligation to study, attend madrasah diniyah, and even pursue formal education outside the pesantren. The dzuriyah

consistently emphasize that service responsibilities must never be used as an excuse to neglect the process of seeking knowledge (Zahid, 2025).

Honesty and trustworthiness are also strongly emphasized, especially for santri entrusted with financial or logistical responsibilities. Misbahul Hilmi, a santri ndalem assigned as coordinator of the female dormitory's consumption logistics, explained that he was required to report every expenditure meticulously, keep detailed records of daily purchases, and maintain the integrity of financial reports. The trust placed in him by the dzuriyah served as a moral foundation that encouraged him to act with greater care and honesty in his work (Hilmi, 2025).

Discipline is instilled through strict routines, such as scheduled cleaning of the kyai's residence, preparing vehicles, and adhering to service timetables. When students neglect their duties, they are not punished immediately but are instead advised in ways that build awareness. For example, Sabiq Ahmad Nur, a santri ndalem serving as a personal driver, admitted that he was often reminded when he failed to wash the car on time. However, he recognized such reminders as an educational form of discipline-building rather than mere reprimand (Nur, 2025).

Responsibility develops in line with the trust assigned by the dzuriyah. Aji Saputra, for instance, who is responsible for maintaining the cleanliness of the ndalem, expressed that he was extremely careful to ensure that the kyai's residence remained pure. He realized that even minor negligence, such as leaving impurities (najis) on the floor, could affect the sanctity of the kyai's worship. Thus, the awareness of responsibility was not limited to physical cleanliness but also extended to spiritual consequences (Saputra, 2025).

Independence and maturity are nurtured through tasks requiring initiative, problem-solving, and decision-making. The dzuriyah expect santri ndalem not only to wait for direct instructions but also to demonstrate sound judgment in carrying out their duties. For instance, when facing unexpected problems such as equipment damage or urgent needs, students are encouraged to respond wisely on their own before reporting to the dzuriyah as part of accountability. Overall, these character values are not instilled theoretically but through direct involvement in daily activities. This process creates an authentic learning environment where internal values grow naturally and sustainably.

Strategies of Dzuriyah in Shaping the Character of Santri Ndalem

The character formation of santri ndalem is carried out by the dzuriyah through an approach that combines habitual training, role modeling, advising, and spiritual reinforcement (prayer). This approach is non-formal and contextual, relying heavily on the personal relationship between the dzuriyah and the santri ndalem.

The first strategy is habitual training through practical responsibilities. Santri are entrusted with direct duties such as serving as personal drivers, managing kitchen logistics, or maintaining the cleanliness of the ndalem (the kyai's residence). According to Dr. KH. Reza Ahmad Zahid, this habituation is crucial to ensure that students do not merely understand values theoretically but are able to apply them in real daily tasks.

Through these responsibilities, students learn time management, problem-solving, and maintaining quality in their work (Zahid, 2025).

The second strategy is role modeling, both in behavior and work ethic. The dzuriyah follow the ahwaliyah and aqwaliyah methods inherited from KH. Imam Yahya Mahrus, which emphasize exemplary conduct in both actions and words. The santri ndalem directly observe how the kyai and his family live with discipline, simplicity, precision, and integrity. This naturally motivates students to emulate such behaviors. For example, Misbahul Hilmi stated that he adopted the kyai's habit of meticulously recording daily transactions as an expression of respect for the values of order and honesty (Hilmi, 2025).

The third strategy is advising, delivered either spontaneously or in a structured manner. The dzuriyah often provide light comments as forms of correction or guidance, and occasionally give more formal instructions. Advice is offered within a close and relational atmosphere, preventing resistance and fostering awareness instead. One student mentioned that he often received advice on driving maturity and professional conduct as a personal driver – lessons that applied not only to his duties but also to his broader social life.

The fourth strategy is spiritual reinforcement through prayer. According to KH. Nabil Aly Utsman, praying for students is an integral part of education. Within the tarbiyah approach, teachers not only instruct and model behavior but also pray for blessings and ease for their students. Prayer functions as an expression of spiritual affection, strengthening the emotional bond between teacher and student, and providing unseen support in the process of character formation (Utsman, 2025).

Despite the effectiveness of these strategies, the dzuriyah also face several challenges. The primary challenge lies in balancing service obligations with academic responsibilities. Some santri ndalem struggle to manage their time between domestic duties and study activities, which may lead to the neglect of one responsibility over the other. This requires the dzuriyah to provide continuous guidance in time management and motivation for learning.

Another challenge is cultural diversity. Santri ndalem come from various provinces, each with distinct characteristics and traditions. This sometimes creates differences in communication styles and work habits. The dzuriyah, however, respond to this challenge through an inclusive approach, avoiding discrimination based on background and instead encouraging cross-cultural interaction as a medium for cultivating empathy and social tolerance.

In summary, the strategies employed by the dzuriyah in shaping the character of santri ndalem represent an integrative, spiritual, and contextual model of character education. Values are not primarily transmitted through formal lectures but are nurtured through personal relationships, lived examples, habituation, and sustained spiritual support.

DISCUSSION

Core Character Values Instilled in Santri Ndalem

The findings of this study indicate that the character values instilled in santri ndalem by the dzuriyah of Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo HM Al-Mahrusiyah are essential and deeply embedded within the structure of pesantren life. The core values identified – honesty, responsibility, discipline, independence, and tafaqquh fi ad-din – are not merely conceptual but are contextually and practically formed through mechanisms of daily service.

This reinforces Lickona's framework of the three dimensions of character education – moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral behavior – which must operate in unity (Lickona, 2009). In the case of the santri ndalem, these values are not only understood cognitively and felt emotionally but also enacted behaviorally in daily practice. For instance, honesty is not only acknowledged as a moral principle but is systematically lived out in financial reporting, as illustrated by Misbahul Hilmi. Here, students do not simply "know" honesty as an abstract virtue but directly experience its risks, consequences, and the trust that accompanies it.

The value of tafaqquh fi ad-din – the deep pursuit of religious knowledge – occupies a central position in pesantren education. This aligns with the classical ulūm al-tarbiyah tradition, which places religious knowledge as both the source of dignity and the foundation of morality. The insistence that santri ndalem must not neglect their Qur'anic studies, madrasah diniyah lessons, or formal higher education reflects the principle that character cannot be separated from its epistemological basis – knowledge. This view is reinforced by Muhyiddin et al. (2022), who argue that the excellence of a student's character is shaped by the combination of intellectual depth (tafaqquh) and moral strength (akhlāq).

Within this framework, discipline and responsibility emerge not merely as compliance with formal rules but as the integration of moral duties with spiritual accountability. As noted by Aji Saputra, negligence in maintaining the cleanliness of the ndalem is not simply an administrative failure but may affect the validity of the kyai's worship. This awareness distinguishes between administrative responsibility and moral responsibility, resonating with Mukhlis et al. (2024), who explain that character formation in Islamic education is most effective when linked to eschatological consequences rather than merely social sanctions.

Similarly, independence and maturity are not fostered through constant supervision but through entrusted responsibility in service. This independence extends beyond the ability to complete tasks; it involves initiative, internal accountability, and the capacity to resolve problems without relying solely on external instruction. Such a process reflects the constructivist approach to character development (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008), where moral growth occurs through autonomous experiences that require ethical decision-making in real-life situations.

Therefore, the value system instilled in santri ndalem is neither artificial nor normatively imposed but constructed through lived experiences, relational intimacy,

and spiritual proximity. This makes the process of character formation deeply embedded within the culture of the pesantren itself. Such findings align with Kamaluddin et al. (2024), who argue that the internalization of values in traditional Islamic education is most effective when realized through collective experience and communal role modeling.

Strategies of Dzuriyah in Shaping the Character of Santri Ndalem

The character formation strategies employed by the dzuriyah of Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo HM Al-Mahrusiyah are distinctive and contextual, reflecting an integral tarbiyah approach that combines affective, cognitive, moral, social, and spiritual dimensions. These strategies are not implemented through structured modules or syllabi but are embodied in lived relationships, expressed through service, role modeling, advice, and prayer.

The strategy of habitual training through practical tasks – such as sweeping the ndalem, managing the kitchen, recording daily expenses, or serving as a driver – aligns closely with David Kolb's principle of experiential learning (Kolb, 2015). Students learn not by listening passively but by engaging directly in situations that demand responsibility and moral decision-making. Kolb's experiential learning cycle (concrete experience-reflection-conceptualization-application) is evident in how students like SAN and MH develop discipline and time management through the feedback of the dzuriyah and their own field experiences.

The strategy of role modeling reflects the strength of modeling in Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1986). The santri ndalem do not merely follow instructions but observe firsthand how the kyai and dzuriyah behave. In this context, moral messages are not delivered through sermons but embodied in daily actions: recording expenditures without delay, maintaining composure when facing problems, and living simply. Role modeling thus becomes the most powerful form of character education, bridging the "gap" between theory and practice.

The strategy of advising, delivered situationally and personally, also enhances the effectiveness of value internalization. Within a relational dynamic resembling that of parent and child, advice is not framed as command but as guidance fostering self-awareness. This supports Hafidh's findings on the effectiveness of emotional relationships in pesantren education as a strong foundation for moral formation (Hafidh, Zuhri, & Sandi, 2019).

A particularly noteworthy and rarely addressed dimension in contemporary character education studies is spiritual reinforcement through prayer, as emphasized by KH. Nabil Aly Utsman. This approach highlights that character formation is not solely a pedagogical task but also a transcendent one. The teacher not only instructs and models but also serves as a spiritual mediator who prays for the inner transformation of the student. This expands the concept of affective pedagogy into spiritual pedagogy, resonating with Palmer's spiritual pedagogy framework (Palmer, 2017) and contextualized within Islamic education (Azme, 2024; Masbur, 2022).

At the same time, these strategies demonstrate adaptive flexibility in response to the diverse backgrounds and characteristics of the santri. Challenges such as ethnic differences, variations in communication styles, or differing levels of discipline are not met with uniformity but with personalized and situational approaches. This aligns with Tomlinson's model of context-responsive pedagogy (2001) and the principles of multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2020), where diversity is not erased but managed as a source of learning and character enrichment.

Ultimately, the strategies applied by the dzuriyah are not only suited to the pesantren context but also resonate with the framework of Global Citizenship Education (UNESCO, 2015), particularly in strengthening empathy, social responsibility, tolerance, and intercultural relationships. Although rooted in a traditional educational environment, the dzuriyah's approach demonstrates its capacity to address modern challenges, positioning the pesantren not merely as a center of religious education but as a hub for holistic character development across generations.

CONCLUSION

The character formation of *santri ndalem* at Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo HM Al-Mahrusiyah is carried out through a value-oriented service-based approach. The core values instilled include *tafaqquh fi ad-din* (deep understanding of religion), honesty, discipline, responsibility, and independence. The strategies employed by the *dzuriyah* consist of role modeling, habituation through daily tasks, personal advising, and spiritual reinforcement through prayer. A strong emotional bond between the *dzuriyah* and the *santri* serves as a crucial foundation for value internalization, positioning the *pesantren* not only as an educational institution but also as a community-based arena for character formation grounded in religious values.

This study is limited by its single-site focus and qualitative approach, which is inherently contextual and therefore not representative of all *pesantren* models. Nevertheless, its strength lies in the depth of empirical narratives and the integration of local *pesantren* practices with contemporary theories of character education. Future research is recommended to expand into comparative studies across different *pesantren*, employ quantitative or longitudinal approaches, and explore more deeply the psychological, spiritual, and gender dimensions of character formation among *santri*.

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