



Pesantren Culture And Integrated Systems: Two Patterns of Reinforcing Worship Habituation in The Formation of Children's Religious Character

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Abstract:

This study analyzes two institutional patterns for reinforcing worship habituation in shaping children's religious character across two Islamic elementary schools with different educational ecosystems. A qualitative multi-site case study was conducted at MI Ihyaul Islam and MI Nurul Ulum. Fourteen key informants included principals, teachers, and students. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, then analyzed through data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. The findings reveal six relatively similar core habituation practices but different reinforcement mechanisms. MI Ihyaul Islam relies on pesantren culture, religious traditions, teacher modeling, and guided recitation, whereas MI Nurul Ulum relies on an integrated school-home-full-day-boarding system, liaison records, scheduling, and cross-setting monitoring. Four character indicators received adequate empirical support: discipline, respect and politeness, responsibility, and social care with willingness to share. The study's novelty lies in mapping two comparative institutional reinforcement mechanisms rather than claiming a new theory of habituation, emphasizing contextual alignment with institutional assets.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education at the elementary level cannot stop at the acquisition of religious knowledge. The greater challenge is ensuring that the values children understand are reflected in their everyday behavior. At the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah age, children still strongly need concrete examples, repetition, and guidance; therefore, religious character education should be delivered through experiences closely connected to students' daily routines. Lickona (1991) explains that character develops through the interrelationship of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. In a religious context, this relationship requires that knowledge of worship and moral conduct not merely be explained, but also experienced and practiced consistently.

Worship habituation is one pedagogical mechanism through which religious values can be practiced repeatedly. In this study, worship habituation is

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understood as the planned, routine, and consistent cultivation of spiritual practices, social etiquette, and religious behavior toward the surrounding environment. Its core practices include greeting and handshaking, prayers before and after lessons, reciting short Qur'anic chapters or conducting murojaah (reviewing memorized passages), reciting salawat, Friday charitable contributions (infak), and classroom duty and cleanliness. Repetition can be explained psychologically through habit formation. Wood and R nger (2016) show that behavior repeated in relatively stable contexts can form context-response associations, making the behavior easier to perform. In character education, however, repetition cannot be separated from meaning-making, role modeling, and supervision if routines are not to become mere formalities.

The role of educators is crucial in this process. Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory explains that individuals learn by observing models, retaining information, reproducing behavior, and through motivation. For elementary-aged children, teachers are highly accessible social models. When teachers pray alongside students, model greetings, maintain order, give directions politely, and participate in religious activities, students encounter behaviors they can observe and imitate. Munif et al. (2024) reinforce the function of role modeling through qudwah qauliyyah, qudwah fi'liyyah, and qudwah syakhsiyyah, while Munif (2017) frames value internalization as a process moving from value transformation to value transaction and then transinternalization.

Recent studies indicate that habituation, role modeling, and educational environments contribute to the development of character-related behavior. Lestari and Minsih (2023) highlight the importance of teachers' efforts through religious habituation; Solihah et al. (2024) emphasize teachers' roles in religious character education through habituation in elementary schools; and Handoko et al. (2024) show that character education in elementary schools takes place through instruction, habituation, school activities, and role modeling. Hasyim et al. (2026) also found that habituating students to perform the Dhuha prayer in congregation is associated with discipline and spiritual development. Regarding the environment, Hikmah and Rifa'i (2026) show that classroom interactions, religious activities, and the school's social environment can function as an integrated ecosystem for character formation. These studies affirm the importance of habituation but do not fully explain how relatively similar practices are reinforced through different institutional mechanisms.

This gap matters because habituation does not occur in a vacuum. Institutional traditions, educator role models, schedules, monitoring documents, family relationships, and extended educational time can affect how routines are sustained. MI Ihyaul Islam and MI Nurul Ulum offer two contrasting yet comparable contexts. MI Ihyaul Islam is reinforced by the environment of Roudlotut Tholibin Islamic Boarding School, Qur'anic teachers, Yanbu'a, istighotsah, visits to religious sites, and religious traditions embedded in everyday life. MI Nurul Ulum reinforces habituation through Baris Qur'ani, the Buku Penghubung Yaumiyah liaison book, Juz 30 recitation targets, a full-day program, Madrasah Diniyah, a boarding program, and parental involvement. Both schools implement daily worship habituation, but their reinforcement logics are not identical.

Against this background, this study asks how two different institutional

ecosystems reinforce worship habituation in shaping children's religious character. The study's novelty does not lie in creating a new theory, but in empirically and comparatively mapping two reinforcement mechanisms: a pattern based on pesantren culture and one based on an integrated school-home-full-day-boarding system. The analysis identifies the shared core habituation practices, how each institution sustains continuity, which character indicators receive empirical support, and the limits of claims that can be made from the findings. This focus offers an explanation of the relationship between religious routines and institutional ecosystems in character education at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a multi-site case study design. This design was selected to examine worship habituation practices in depth at two schools while comparing the reinforcement patterns that develop at each site (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The research sites were MI Ihyaul Islam and MI Nurul Ulum in Probolinggo. The sites were purposively selected because both implement daily religious habituation but have different institutional characteristics: MI Ihyaul Islam is strongly rooted in pesantren culture, whereas MI Nurul Ulum offers full-day and boarding programs and uses more structured monitoring tools.

There were fourteen key informants. At each school, the informants comprised one principal, two teachers, and four students. They were purposively selected based on their involvement in and knowledge of worship habituation. The principal provided information about policies and management practices; teachers explained implementation, guidance, strategies, and evaluation; and students shared direct experiences of the activities in which they participated. Secondary data came from activity schedules, habituation books, liaison books, evaluation notes, religious-program documents, photographs, and other relevant archives.

Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observation focused on greetings and handshaking, prayers, short Qur'anic chapters or murojaah, salawat, Friday charitable contributions, classroom duty and cleanliness, and supporting activities that shaped the religious environment. Interviews explored implementation sequences, teachers' roles, reinforcement mechanisms, family involvement, supporting and inhibiting factors, and observable student behavior. Documentation was used to check the consistency of information against schedules, liaison books, memorization records, evaluation sheets, and activity evidence.

Data analysis followed the stages of data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification (Miles et al., 2014). The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, within-site analysis was used to understand each school's internal pattern without conflating implementation, strategies, factors, and character outcomes. Second, cross-site analysis compared similarities, differences, and reinforcement mechanisms. Data trustworthiness was supported through source triangulation, method triangulation, persistent observation, and informant confirmation. A claim about character was treated as a finding only when supported by traceable behavioral evidence from interviews, observations, or documentation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Shared Core Habituation Practices at the Two Schools

The findings show that both schools share a relatively similar core of habituation practices: greetings and handshaking, prayers before and after lessons, recitation of short Qur'anic chapters or murojaah, salawat, Friday charitable contributions, and classroom duty and cleanliness. This similarity is important because the main difference examined in this study lies not in the list of activities, but in how they are embedded in each institutional ecosystem. At MI Ihyaul Islam, the main sequence begins when students arrive and continues through mosque activities, classroom learning, Friday activities, and periodic events. At MI Nurul Ulum, the morning sequence continues into the full-day program, Madrasah Diniyah, and the boarding program for participating students.

From a habit-formation perspective, these core activities provide recurring cues. Arrival time, the gate, mosque, classroom, Fridays, duty schedules, and the opening sequence of lessons serve as contexts that help particular behaviors recur. Wood and Rünger (2016) emphasize that contextual stability and repetition are important elements of habit formation. These findings align with Milah et al. (2026), who show that religious character habituation can encompass spiritual, social, and environmental domains. At both schools, prayer and the Qur'an provide spiritual experiences, greetings and charitable contributions provide social experiences, while classroom duty offers experience in taking responsibility for the environment.

Similar practices do not mean that the educational process unfolds automatically. Observations showed that some students still talked, joked, waited for instructions, or were inconsistent in maintaining cleanliness. Repetition should therefore be understood as an ongoing process, not as proof that character formation is complete. This finding helps avoid a methodological error: the existence of a program cannot automatically be equated with the presence of character. Programs provide opportunities for practice; character must be traced through observable behavior and its consistency.

Table 1. Core Worship Habituation Practices at the Two Schools

Core habituation practice	MI Ihyaul Islam	MI Nurul Ulum	Educational meaning analyzed
Greetings and handshaking	Arrival and encounters with teachers	Arrival and the practice of salim (greeting by hand-kissing/handshaking) with teachers	Respect, politeness, social etiquette
Prayer	Before and after lessons; guided by teachers	Part of Baris Qur'ani and classroom learning	Spiritual awareness and discipline
Short Qur'anic chapters/murojaah	Yanbu'a guidance and recitation	Baris Qur'ani, Juz 30 recitation targets, TPQ, boarding	Closeness to the Qur'an and perseverance

	evaluation	program	
Salawat	Morning religious sequence	Baris Qur'ani sequence/religious activities	Religious atmosphere and collective discipline
Friday charitable contributions (infak)	Class collections and social distribution	Scheduled Friday charitable contributions	Social care and sharing
Classroom duty/cleanliness	Classroom duty schedule	Classroom and boarding duty schedules	Responsibility and environmental care

Source: Research data processed from observations, interviews, and documentation.

Pesantren-Culture-Based Reinforcement at MI Ihyaul Islam

MI Ihyaul Islam demonstrates a reinforcement pattern rooted in pesantren culture. Daily habituation is not a separate program but takes place within an institutional atmosphere shaped by Roudlotut Tholibin Islamic Boarding School. Dhuha prayer, recitation of short Qur'anic chapters, salawat, Asmaul Husna, Yanbu'a, istighotsah, visits to religious sites, and guidance from Qur'anic teachers create symbolic and social repetition. Teachers do not merely maintain the schedule; they are part of the traditions practiced together with students. Culture thus operates as a social norm that makes religious behavior recognizable, repeatable, and meaningful.

The most prominent strength is the guidance provided for Qur'anic recitation. The principal explained, "The practice of reading short Qur'anic chapters is not simply about reciting them; they must be read properly and correctly, under the guidance of a Qur'anic teacher certified in the Yanbu'a method" (Interview, MIII-KS, June 6, 2026). This statement shows that repetition is directed not only toward frequency but also toward the quality of practice. Evaluation sheets for short chapters and TPQ learning reports confirm that certain recitations receive more formal monitoring than other activities.

Role modeling is another key mechanism. Teachers participate in prayer, recitation, Dhuha prayer, maintaining student order, and supervising cleanliness. In Bandura's (1977) framework, this involvement provides models that students can observe and imitate. Munif et al.'s (2024) findings on qudwah qauliyyah, fi'liyyah, and syakhsiyyah are relevant because values at MIII are conveyed not only through advice but also through educators' words, actions, and personalities. Pesantren culture strengthens the influence of role modeling because similar behavior is also visible in the traditions and figures surrounding the school.

However, cultural strength has its limits. Student discipline is not uniform, follow-up between school and home is not always consistent, and written evaluations are not available for every habituation practice. This indicates that a living culture still requires proportionate management mechanisms. Reinforcement need not turn traditions into burdensome administration; it can

instead involve selecting a few priority habits, keeping brief progress notes, and maintaining simple communication with parents. In this respect, culture provides meaning and identity, while a minimal system helps maintain consistency and traceability.

Integrated-System-Based Reinforcement at MI Nurul Ulum

MI Nurul Ulum demonstrates a different pattern. Habituation is reinforced through links among several settings: school, home, the full-day program, Madrasah Diniyah, and the boarding program. Baris Qur'ani structures the start of the day and includes prayer, hadith, murojaah, salawat, and Asmaul Husna. After formal school activities, some students continue with TPQ, tahfiz, Madrasah Diniyah, or boarding activities. Repetition therefore takes place not only in one space or time period but across several contexts in students' lives.

The Buku Penghubung Yaumiyah (daily activity liaison book) is a distinctive tool in this system. The principal stated, "The Buku Penghubung Yaumiyah serves as a means of connecting habituation at school with habituation at home" (Interview, MINU-KS, June 10, 2026). The book records worship activities, etiquette toward parents, relationships with others, study, memorization, and several forms of independence. Its function is not merely administrative; it creates a communication channel between the school and families. Juz 30 recitation targets, TPQ progress sheets, full-day schedules, and boarding schedules further support continuity.

The boarding program provides a longer period of educational engagement. Students participate in congregational prayers, Qur'anic study, murojaah, ziyadah (adding to memorization), tahlil, tilawah, evening study, and scheduled duties. From a habit-formation perspective, expanding the contexts may increase the cues that prompt religious behavior. However, a strong system does not automatically guarantee internalization. Teachers and female religious instructors must remain present as role models and guides. A teacher's statement that activities are "carried out continuously and still accompanied by guidance" indicates that documents and schedules work alongside educators' presence rather than replacing it.

Challenges at MINU also reveal the limits of the system. Students' motivation and discipline fluctuate, the number of supervisors is limited, independent responsibility for cleanliness is uneven, and some parents do not consistently monitor the liaison book. The integrated system must therefore be maintained so that it does not become meaningless administrative control. Records should be used for feedback and dialogue, not merely for signatures. The more instruments are used, the more important it becomes to select genuinely observable indicators so that teachers and parents are not burdened with recordkeeping that adds no educational value.

Two Reinforcement Mechanisms: Culture and System

Cross-site analysis shows that the main difference between the two schools lies in their reinforcement mechanisms. MI Ihyaul Islam uses culture as its primary medium: traditions, role models, collective rituals, and proximity to the pesantren create shared norms. MI Nurul Ulum uses systems as its primary medium: schedules, liaison books, targets, expanded programs, and family involvement

create continuity across settings. These are not mutually exclusive categories. MIIL also has schedules and evaluations, while MINU also has religious culture and role modeling. The terms “culture” and “system” refer to the dominant emphasis at each institution.

These findings extend the interpretation of habit formation in educational contexts. Habit theory explains the importance of repetition and contextual stability, while educational settings show that such contexts can be created in different ways. In the cultural pattern, stability arises from traditions, institutional identity, role models, and social expectations. In the systemic pattern, stability arises from schedules, documents, role allocation, and continuity across settings. Reinforcement of habituation therefore cannot be reduced to how often activities occur; what matters more is how institutions create contexts that keep repetition meaningful and sustained.

Table 2. Synthesis of the Two Patterns of Worship Habituation Reinforcement

Dimension	MI Ihyaul Islam	MI Nurul Ulum	Comparative synthesis
Basis of reinforcement	Pesantren culture and religious traditions	Integrated school-home-full-day-boarding system	Similar goals, different dominant mechanisms
Key actors	Teachers, Qur'anic teachers, pesantren environment	Teachers, ustaz/ustazah, boarding supervisors, parents	Role modeling remains central to both patterns
Tools	Schedules, recitation books, short-chapter evaluations	Buku Penghubung Yaumiyah, schedules, Juz 30 recitation targets, TPQ progress records	Documentation is more extensive in the integrated pattern
Scope of context	School hours and periodic pesantren activities	School, home, full day, Madrasah Diniyah, boarding	The integrated pattern expands the contexts for repetition
Main risk	Strong culture, but evaluation across activities is uneven	Extensive administration, but risk of formalism	Both need meaningful practice and proportionate evaluation

Source: Synthesis of cross-site analysis.

Hikmah and Rifa'i (2026) show that school environments and educational interactions can function as a system connecting classrooms, religious activities, and social relationships in moral development. This study supports that view in the context of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah while adding a comparative dimension: an ecosystem can be built through a living culture or through the integration of tools

and settings. Miftahuddin et al. (2024) also demonstrate the importance of pesantren-based educational contexts in forming Islamic character. At MIII, pesantren culture is a source of legitimacy and role modeling; at MINU, the integration of home and boarding settings expands opportunities for internalization.

These different mechanisms have practical implications. Madrasahs do not need to copy another institution's programs in their entirety. Institutions with a strong religious culture can draw on existing traditions, role models, and rituals while adding simple evaluation practices. Institutions with full-day or boarding programs can use schedules and liaison books to maintain continuity, while guarding against excessive formalization. In other words, habituation design should begin with institutional assets: culture provides meaning and identity, while systems provide continuity and traceability.

Supported Religious-Character Indicators and the Limits of the Findings

Five theoretical indicators were used to interpret the data: discipline in worship habituation, respect and politeness, responsibility, social care and willingness to share, and honesty and integrity. These indicators were developed based on character theory and recent research. Suhartono et al. (2025) show that the religious character of elementary students can be understood through religious, personal, social, environmental, and national domains; Suryanti and Ikawati (2025) reinforce the values of discipline, responsibility, honesty, independence, and tolerance; and Suryadi et al. (2025) demonstrate the relationship between habituation of religious practices and discipline, responsibility, social care, and respect.

Cross-site data provided adequate empirical support for four indicators. Discipline was evident in regular participation in prayers, recitation, prayer rituals, and scheduled activities, although some students still needed guidance. Respect and politeness were reflected in greetings, handshaking, respect for teachers, and etiquette among peers. Responsibility appeared in adherence to schedules, completion of tasks, assigned duties, and cleanliness. Social care and willingness to share were especially evident in Friday charitable contributions, helping peers, and distributing contributions through social activities. These four indicators are not treated as fully achieved states, but as behavioral tendencies supported by triangulated evidence.

Table 3. Empirical Status of Religious-Character Indicators

Indicator	Main behavioral evidence	Status in the findings
Discipline in worship habituation	Regular participation in prayer, recitation, prayer rituals, and scheduled activities	Supported by data; still developing among some students
Respect and politeness	Greetings, handshaking, respect for teachers, etiquette among peers	Supported by data
Responsibility	Following schedules, completing tasks,	Supported by data

	classroom duty, and maintaining cleanliness	
Social care and willingness to share	Friday charitable contributions, helping peers, social activities	Supported by data
Honesty and integrity	Requires evidence of consistency between words and actions and trustworthiness across varied situations	Insufficient evidence for a principal finding

Source: Research data analysis based on operational indicators.

Honesty and integrity were retained as theoretical indicators but were not identified as principal findings. The field data did not provide sufficient observational situations or evidence to assess consistency between words and actions, trustworthiness, and behavior when unobserved. This decision is methodologically important because character research is vulnerable to overclaiming: a school has a religious program, and all character values are then assumed to have been formed. This article takes the opposite position, reporting only character indicators for which traceable behavioral evidence is available. This limitation also points to the need for longitudinal research on indicators that require longer observation.

Classroom duty and cleanliness are also not treated as a new fifth indicator. Instead, they are interpreted as evidence of responsibility and environmental care. This distinction maintains consistency between activities and character: activities provide opportunities for practice, while indicators are behavioral forms interpreted from the data. By keeping these separate, the article avoids conflating what the madrasah does with the character traits that can be said to be developing in students.

Implications for Islamic Religious Education

The findings indicate that strengthening religious character depends more on the quality of the ecosystem than on the number of programs. Madrasahs that continually add activities without ensuring clear objectives, role modeling, supervision, and evaluation risk producing merely formal routines. Conversely, a few simple activities can have educational value when implemented consistently and given meaning. For Islamic Religious Education (PAI), these findings encourage connections between classroom content and everyday practice. Lessons on etiquette can be linked to greetings, social care to charitable contributions, responsibility to classroom duties, and closeness to the Qur'an to murojaah. In this way, instruction and school culture do not operate as separate tracks.

Family involvement also needs to be designed realistically. MIII indicates a need for stronger continuity between school and home, while MINU already has a liaison tool but still faces varying levels of parental participation. An effective communication system need not be complicated. Madrasahs can select a few priority habits, use concise records, and provide two-way feedback. This approach

is more likely to sustain continuity than extensive recordkeeping that is rarely read or acted upon.

This study has limitations. It was conducted at two madrasahs in a local context, so the findings cannot be statistically generalized. Student informants came from only a few classes, and the observations were not designed to assess long-term changes in character. The indicators of honesty and integrity also require a wider range of observational situations. Future research could therefore use a longitudinal design, include more sites, or combine qualitative observation with careful measurement to trace how habituation develops from guided compliance toward behavioral independence.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that two madrasahs can implement relatively similar core habituation practices while reinforcing them through different institutional mechanisms. MI Ihyaul Islam emphasizes pesantren culture through religious traditions, educator role models, Yanbu'a, guided recitation, istighotsah, and visits to religious sites. MI Nurul Ulum emphasizes an integrated system through Baris Qur'ani, the Buku Penghubung Yaumiyah, schedules, memorization targets, the full-day program, Madrasah Diniyah, the boarding program, and parental involvement. These differences indicate that the strength of habituation lies not only in the frequency of activities but also in the contexts that keep repetition meaningful and continuous.

Four character indicators received adequate empirical support: discipline in worship habituation, respect and politeness, responsibility, and social care and willingness to share. Honesty and integrity remain relevant theoretical indicators but are not claimed as findings because the field evidence is insufficient. The study's novelty lies in mapping two reinforcement patterns—culture and system—as contextual mechanisms rather than a universal model. The implication is that madrasahs can build habituation from their own institutional assets while maintaining role modeling, consistency, meaning-making, proportionate evaluation, and continuity between school and family.

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