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Conversational Patterns in Halaqah-Based Spiritual Counseling at *Pesantren*: A Discourse-Analytic Study

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Abstract

Although halaqah is widely practiced in Islamic boarding schools, its role as a form of spiritual counseling has received limited discourse-analytic attention, particularly in relation to how authority, intimacy, moral guidance, and student participation are constructed through conversation. This study aims to examine the conversational patterns of halaqah-based spiritual counseling at Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah and to explain how such interaction functions as both individual guidance and collective moral education. Employing a qualitative discourse-analytic design, the study draws on non-participant observation, audio-recorded halaqah interactions, field notes, and semi-structured interviews with ustadz and santri. The data were analyzed by identifying recurrent interactional structures, linguistic strategies, religious references, verbal responses, silence, and the moral-educational functions embedded in the counseling process. The findings reveal six major patterns: hierarchical intimacy, spiritual reframing of personal problems, soft directive strategies, religious intertextuality as discursive authority, silence and short responses as expressions of adab, and halaqah as collective moral education. The study contributes theoretically by introducing the concept of hierarchical intimacy, which reframes hierarchy not as oppressive domination but as affectionate pedagogical-spiritual authority grounded in trust, adab, knowledge, and moral responsibility. Analytically, this study expands discourse analysis into pesantren-based counseling by showing how spiritual transformation is produced through everyday religious conversation.

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INTRODUCTION

In many Islamic boarding schools, spiritual counseling does not always take place in a formal counseling room; rather, it is often embedded in everyday educational interaction, religious mentoring, and collective learning circles. One important form of such interaction is halaqah, a dialogic-religious forum in which teachers and students engage in moral advice, spiritual reflection, correction of behavior, and transmission of pesantren values. At Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah, halaqah is not only associated with language and religious learning activities but also with the cultivation of discipline, adab, and moral-spiritual awareness among students (Anggara et al., 2024; Ramli et al., 2025; Abidin et al., 2021). Recent studies on pesantren education have emphasized that pesantren functions not merely as a traditional religious institution but also as a

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socio-educational space where character, morality, spirituality, and communal identity are continuously formed through daily practices (Arif et al., 2024; Cahyono et al., 2024).

However, although halaqah is widely practiced in pesantren culture, its conversational structure as a form of spiritual counseling remains insufficiently explored. Previous studies have discussed pesantren education, character formation, indigenous counseling, Sufistic counseling, and Islamic-based counseling models, yet fewer studies have examined how counseling actually unfolds at the level of talk: how ustadz opens the conversation, how santri narrate their problems, how advice is softened, how religious texts are used as discursive authority, and how silence or short responses function as signs of adab and acceptance (Umriana et al., 2023; Mufrihah & Nurihsan, 2025; Suhertina, 2025). This gap is important because spiritual counseling in pesantren is not only a matter of content, but also a matter of interactional pattern, language choice, turn-taking, emotional positioning, and moral framing (Jones, 2024; Sybing, 2021; Hennessy et al., 2023).

The state-of-the-art shows that Islamic counseling research has increasingly moved toward culturally and spiritually responsive approaches. Studies on Islamic psychotherapy and Islamic counseling have shown that Muslim students' psychological and spiritual well-being can be supported through counseling models that integrate religious values, prophetic ethics, tazkiyatun nafs, Sufistic practice, and culturally grounded therapeutic communication (Akib et al., 2025; Khusumadewi et al., 2024; Cucchi, 2022; Rassool, 2024; Suhertina, 2025). The integration of faith-based approaches into counseling has been further supported by systematic reviews showing that Islamic psychotherapy contributes meaningfully to mental health and rehabilitation in Muslim communities (Haramain & Afiah, 2025; Rassool, 2024). In the pesantren context, Umriana et al. (2023) found that counseling practices are often shaped by unequal but meaningful relationships between kyai or ustadz and santri, marked by obedience, humility, and spiritual trust. Similarly, Mufrihah and Nurihsan (2025) argue that indigenous counseling in pesantren should be understood through the worldview, spirituality, and educational culture of pesantren itself.

From the perspective of discourse analysis, educational interaction is never neutral. Teacher-student dialogue can shape participation, authority, reflection, and learning opportunities. Studies on classroom discourse have demonstrated that patterns of questioning, response, feedback, dialogic opportunity, and student discourse moves play a crucial role in shaping educational meaning and learner engagement (Sybing, 2021; Hennessy et al., 2023; Nennig et al., 2022). Yet, discourse-analytic studies have rarely been applied to halaqah-based spiritual counseling in pesantren, especially in relation to how religious authority, intimacy, hierarchy, and moral education are constructed through conversation. This study therefore positions halaqah not merely as a pedagogical activity, but as a spiritually charged discourse practice where personal problems are transformed into moral and religious reflection (Jones, 2024; Johnson et al., 2024).

The main problem addressed in this study is the lack of micro-level analysis of conversational patterns in pesantren-based spiritual counseling. Two specific scope-related problems are identified. First, halaqah is often treated as a general religious learning activity, while its counseling dimension remains under-theorized. Second, the hierarchical relationship between ustadz and santri is often understood simply as authority, whereas in practice it may also produce intimacy, emotional safety, spiritual trust, and reflective obedience. These two problems require a discourse-analytic approach that can examine not only what is said in halaqah, but also how it is said, by whom, in what sequence,

and with what moral-educational effect (Umriana et al., 2023; Mufrihah & Nurihsan, 2025; Hennessy et al., 2023; Jones, 2024).

Accordingly, this study focuses on the conversational patterns of halaqah-based spiritual counseling at Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah. The study asks: (1) What recurrent conversational patterns characterize halaqah-based spiritual counseling between ustadz and santri? (2) How do linguistic and discursive strategies construct authority, intimacy, reflection, and moral guidance in halaqah interaction? (3) What educational and counseling functions are produced through these conversational patterns? These questions are designed to reveal the interactional logic of pesantren counseling, particularly how personal problems are reframed into spiritual lessons and how santri responses reflect both participation and adab (Anggara et al., 2024; Ramli et al., 2025; Sybing, 2021; Nennig et al., 2022).

The scope of this study is limited to halaqah-based spiritual counseling interactions involving ustadz and santri in the pesantren context. The analysis focuses on discourse features such as opening sequences, problem narration, advice-giving, religious intertextuality, softened directives, short verbal responses, silence, and reflective closure. This study does not aim to measure clinical counseling effectiveness through psychological scales, nor does it claim to represent all pesantren counseling practices in Indonesia. Instead, it offers a qualitative and discourse-analytic account of how counseling meaning is produced through situated religious-educational conversation (Jones, 2024; Hennessy et al., 2023; Suhertina, 2025).

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to social science, education, Islamic counseling, and discourse studies. Empirically, it documents how halaqah functions as a local form of spiritual counseling within pesantren life. Theoretically, it bridges discourse analysis with Islamic educational counseling by showing how authority, adab, moral reflection, and spiritual transformation are interactionally constructed. Practically, the study may help pesantren educators, ustadz, and counselors understand how language can be used more reflectively in guiding santri's emotional, moral, and spiritual development (Rassool, 2024; Mufrihah & Nurihsan, 2025; Umriana et al., 2023; Hennessy et al., 2021).

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative discourse-analytic design to examine conversational patterns in halaqah-based spiritual counseling at Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah. This design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand how spiritual guidance, moral reflection, authority, intimacy, and santri participation are constructed through naturally occurring interaction rather than measured through statistical outcomes. Discourse analysis allows researchers to examine language as a social practice, particularly how meaning, identity, power relations, and educational values are produced through conversation (Jones, 2024; Sybing, 2021). Qualitative research design of this kind prioritizes understanding phenomena from within their natural context, foregrounding the perspectives and meaning-making of participants rather than seeking generalizability through statistical measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The participants in this study consisted of 3 ustadz and 12 santri who were directly involved in halaqah-based spiritual counseling activities at Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah. The ustadz were selected because they regularly guided halaqah sessions and had direct experience in providing moral, religious, and spiritual advice to santri. The santri were selected purposively based

on their active participation in halaqah sessions, their familiarity with halaqah activities, and their willingness to be observed and interviewed. To protect confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. The ustadz were coded as U1, U2, and U3, while the santri were coded as S1 to S12.

The primary data consisted of 6 recorded halaqah sessions, with each session lasting approximately 60–75 minutes, resulting in a total of 420 minutes of audio-recorded interaction. In addition, the researcher conducted 4 weeks of non-participant observation during regular halaqah activities. Field notes were produced to document seating arrangements, turn-taking patterns, non-verbal responses, silence, gestures, emotional expressions, and the overall atmosphere of halaqah interaction. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with **3 ustadz** and **12 santri** to clarify their interpretations of halaqah as spiritual counseling, moral guidance, and collective education within the pesantren context. The data corpus is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Data Corpus of the Study

Data Source	Quantity	Description
Recorded halaqah sessions	6 sessions	Natural halaqah interactions between ustadz and santri
Total audio duration	420 minutes	Audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim
Observation period	4 weeks	Non-participant observation during regular halaqah activities
Field notes	20 pages	Notes on silence, gestures, emotional responses, seating arrangement, and interactional setting
Interviews with ustadz	3 participants	Clarification of counseling strategies, religious advice, and moral guidance
Interviews with santri	12 participants	Interpretation of halaqah, advice-giving, adab, silence, and spiritual reflection

All recorded halaqah interactions were transcribed verbatim. The transcription focused not only on spoken words, but also on interactional features relevant to discourse analysis, including pauses, repetitions, short responses, forms of address, silence, laughter, lowered voice, and non-verbal expressions. Since the interactions were conducted primarily in Indonesian and pesantren-based religious expressions, selected excerpts were first analyzed in the original language and then translated into English when necessary for presentation in the article. The translation was conducted carefully to preserve the religious, cultural, and interactional meanings of the original utterances.

Selected excerpts were presented in the Results section to provide linguistic evidence for each finding. The excerpts were chosen based on their relevance to the recurring conversational patterns found in the data, particularly hierarchical intimacy, spiritual reframing, soft directive strategies, religious intertextuality, silence, short responses, and collective moral education. Unlike a purely thematic qualitative study, this discourse-analytic research presents selected excerpts from naturally occurring halaqah interactions to demonstrate how spiritual counseling is interactionally produced through turn-taking, religious advice, moral positioning, and culturally meaningful responses of adab. The transcription conventions used in this study are presented in Table 2.

The data were analyzed using discourse analysis. The analysis focused on recurrent conversational structures, including how ustadz opened the session, invited santri to speak, reframed personal problems into spiritual reflection, delivered moral advice, used religious references, and closed the interaction. Particular attention was given to discursive features such as soft directives, Qur'anic and prophetic references, stories of ulama, pesantren values, short verbal responses,

silence, and expressions of adab. The analysis was conducted through repeated reading of transcripts, coding of interactional patterns, categorization of recurring themes, and interpretation of the educational and counseling functions of each conversational pattern. This process follows the principle that educational interaction is not merely a transfer of information, but a dialogic space where authority, reflection, and learning are socially constructed (Hennessy et al., 2023; Howe, 2023; Nennig et al., 2022).

Table 2. Transcription Conventions

Symbol	Meaning
U1, U2, U3	Ustadz participants
S1, S2, S3	Santri participants
(.)	Short pause
(...)	Longer pause
((lowers gaze))	Non-verbal action
((silence))	Moment of silence or reflective pause
[text]	Researcher's clarification
italics	Translation or emphasized expression
...	Omitted part of transcript

To ensure trustworthiness, this study applied triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive analysis. Triangulation was conducted by comparing observational data, interview data, audio transcripts, and field notes. Member checking was used to confirm selected interpretations with participants so that the researcher's analysis did not misrepresent pesantren practices. Peer debriefing was conducted by discussing coding categories and emerging findings with academic peers. Reflexive analysis was also applied to minimize researcher bias, especially because the study dealt with religious authority, spiritual experience, and culturally embedded communication. These strategies were used to strengthen credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability in qualitative research (Ahmed, 2024; McKim, 2023).

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the type of data collected, and their right to withdraw from the research. Informed consent was obtained before data collection. The identities of ustadz and santri were anonymized to protect confidentiality, and all recordings and transcripts were used only for academic purposes. Overall, this method enables the study to reveal how halaqah functions not merely as a religious learning activity, but as a culturally grounded form of spiritual counseling and moral education shaped through everyday discourse between ustadz and santri.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that halaqah-based spiritual counseling at Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah is constructed through a patterned form of religious-educational conversation. The interaction generally moves through several recurring stages: opening, problem narration, clarification, spiritual reframing, moral advice, reflective response, and closing prayer or motivational reinforcement. This structure indicates that halaqah is not merely a religious learning forum, but also a culturally grounded space where spiritual guidance, moral discipline, emotional support, and collective education are produced through everyday discourse. From a discourse-analytic perspective, these conversational patterns reveal how meaning, authority, identity, and

moral values are not simply delivered by the ustadz, but negotiated and internalized through situated interaction (Jones, 2024; Sybing, 2021; Hennessy et al., 2023).

Hierarchical Intimacy as Positive Pedagogical Authority

One of the central findings is the presence of hierarchical intimacy in halaqah interaction. The term "hierarchy" may sound negative, especially when understood in Indonesian academic discourse as domination, rigidity, or an unequal power relation that suppresses the voice of students. However, in the context of pesantren-based spiritual counseling, hierarchy does not necessarily function as oppressive authority. Rather, it appears as a positive pedagogical and spiritual structure that allows the ustadz to guide, supervise, and morally direct santri within a relationship of trust, affection, and respect.

In halaqah, the ustadz occupies a higher position as teacher, spiritual guide, moral supervisor, and representative of religious authority. This position gives the ustadz the legitimacy to correct behavior, advise students, interpret problems, and maintain the moral rhythm of pesantren life. Yet, the authority does not work effectively merely because of institutional status. It becomes meaningful because it is softened by emotional closeness, personal attention, gentle speech, and the ability of the ustadz to "win the hearts" of santri. In this sense, hierarchy becomes not a wall that separates ustadz and santri, but a bridge that enables guidance to be accepted with sincerity.

The data show that hierarchy in halaqah interaction does not operate as rigid domination, but as a positive form of pedagogical-spiritual authority. Although the ustadz holds a higher position as religious teacher and moral guide, his authority is expressed through affection, gentle correction, and personal attention. This can be seen in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 1. Hierarchical intimacy in advice-giving

Turn	Speaker	Original Transcript	English Translation
1	U1	Kamu akhir-akhir ini kelihatan agak diam. Ada yang mengganggu pikiran?	You have seemed rather quiet lately. Is there something troubling your mind?
2	S1	Iya, Ustadz… saya merasa malas belajar dan sering tidak fokus.	Yes, Ustadz… I feel lazy to study and often lose focus.
3	U1	Malas itu manusiawi, tapi jangan dibiarkan jadi kebiasaan. Coba mulai dari niat dulu. Ilmu itu datang kepada hati yang dijaga adabnya.	Laziness is human, but do not let it become a habit. Try to begin with your intention first. Knowledge comes to a heart that preserves its adab.
4	S1	Iya, Ustadz. InsyaAllah saya coba perbaiki.	Yes, Ustadz. God willing, I will try to improve.
5	U1	Saya menegur bukan karena marah. Saya ingin kamu jadi lebih kuat. Kamu di sini sedang dibentuk.	I correct you not because I am angry. I want you to become stronger. You are being formed here.

The excerpt illustrates that hierarchy in halaqah interaction does not necessarily function as domination. In Turn 3, the ustadz corrects the santri's behavior, but the correction is softened through the phrase "malas itu manusiawi" or "laziness is human." This expression reduces blame and creates emotional safety. In Turn 5, the ustadz further clarifies that his correction is not based on anger, but on care and moral responsibility. This shows that hierarchy becomes positive when authority is exercised through affection, guidance, and personal attention. The ustadz is able to control and direct the santri not through fear, but through trust and emotional closeness.

This finding is important because it challenges the assumption that hierarchy in education is always negative. In modern educational discourse, hierarchy is often associated with authoritarianism. However, in the pesantren context, hierarchy can function as relational authority: an authority that is accepted because it is rooted in knowledge, moral example, spiritual trust, and affection. Santri obey not merely because they fear punishment, but because they respect the ustadz's knowledge, recognize his moral role, and feel emotionally connected to him. Therefore, the effectiveness of halaqah counseling depends not only on the ustadz's ability to control students, but also on his ability to control with care, guide with wisdom, and discipline with love.

This pattern is closely related to the distinctive culture of pesantren, where adab, obedience, respect for teachers, and spiritual trust are central to the educational process. Previous studies on pesantren-based counseling show that counseling in pesantren often differs from Western professional counseling because it is embedded in unequal yet meaningful relationships between religious guides and students (Umriana et al., 2023; Mufrihah & Nurihsan, 2025). Therefore, the hierarchy found in halaqah should not be reduced to domination. It should be understood as a culturally meaningful structure of guidance in which authority is legitimized by knowledge, softened by affection, and strengthened by the santri's trust and love toward the ustadz.

This is further supported by recent discourse-oriented studies on mentoring relationships, which show that power dynamics in pedagogical settings are not fixed in one direction but are continuously negotiated through relational trust, positioning, and shared responsibility (Van der Kloot et al., 2025).

From Personal Problems to Spiritual Reflection

The second finding shows that halaqah conversations often begin with ordinary personal problems but gradually move toward spiritual reflection. Santri may raise issues such as laziness in studying, difficulty memorizing lessons, emotional instability, homesickness, peer conflict, lack of discipline, or declining motivation in worship. However, these problems are not treated merely as psychological or behavioral difficulties. The ustadz tends to reinterpret them through religious categories such as niyyah, sabr, ikhlas, adab, barakah, istiqamah, and closeness to Allah.

Excerpt 2. Spiritual Reframing of Personal Problems

Turn	Speaker	Original Transcript	English Translation
1	S2	Saya sering merasa berat ikut kegiatan, Ustadz. Kadang ingin sendiri saja.	I often feel burdened when joining activities, Ustadz. Sometimes I just want to be alone.
2	U1	Berat itu tanda hati sedang minta ditata. Bukan berarti kamu buruk, tapi mungkin niatmu perlu diperbarui.	That heaviness is a sign that the heart needs to be reorganized. It does not mean you are bad, but perhaps your intention needs to be renewed.
3	S2	Maksudnya niat belajar, Ustadz?	Do you mean my intention in studying, Ustadz?
4	U1	Iya. Di pesantren, belajar bukan hanya supaya pintar. Belajar itu jalan membersihkan hati dan mencari ridha Allah.	Yes. In pesantren, studying is not only about becoming intelligent. Studying is a path to purify the heart and seek Allah's pleasure.
5	S2	Iya, Ustadz. Saya sering lupa itu.	Yes, Ustadz. I often forget that.

This movement from personal problem to spiritual reflection shows that halaqah-based counseling works through spiritual reframing. A problem is not denied, but it is given a deeper moral and theological meaning. For example, laziness in learning may be reframed as a problem of intention and respect toward knowledge; conflict with friends may be reframed as a test of patience and

humility; difficulty in memorization may be connected to discipline, prayer, and purity of heart. Through this reframing, santri are invited not only to solve practical problems, but also to read their inner condition as part of spiritual formation.

This excerpt demonstrates the process of spiritual reframing. In Turn 1, the santri presents the problem as emotional fatigue. However, in Turn 2 and Turn 4, the ustadz reframes the issue as a matter of intention, inner discipline, and spiritual orientation. The phrase "hati sedang minta ditata" or "the heart needs to be reorganized" shifts the problem from a purely psychological condition into a spiritual process. This pattern shows that halaqah-based counseling does not merely address practical difficulties, but transforms personal problems into opportunities for moral and spiritual reflection.

This finding confirms that Islamic counseling cannot be separated from the spiritual worldview of the community in which it is practiced. Rassool (2024) argues that Islamic counseling integrates psychological, religious, cultural, and spiritual dimensions in understanding human problems. In the pesantren context, this integration becomes visible in the way ustadz translates everyday student problems into spiritual lessons. Halaqah therefore functions as a discursive space where personal struggles are transformed into opportunities for moral purification, self-discipline, and religious self-awareness. This process of spiritual meaning-making resonates with studies showing that the construction of spiritual meaning can transform emotional struggles into gratitude and moral awareness among young Muslim learners (Pohan et al., 2025).

The significance of this finding lies in the fact that halaqah does not operate like a formal clinical counseling session. It is more fluid, communal, and spiritually embedded. The goal is not only emotional relief, but also moral correction and spiritual growth. This makes halaqah a distinctive form of Islamic educational counseling, where the language of advice is inseparable from the language of faith. This aligns with findings showing that santri engaged in Qur'anic memorization face significant mental and spiritual demands that require holistic support beyond cognitive instruction (Muttaqin et al., 2024), further affirming the necessity of spiritually embedded guidance such as halaqah.

Soft Directive Strategies in Ustadz–Santri Communication

Another important finding is the use of soft directive strategies by the ustadz. Although the ustadz has authority, advice is rarely delivered through harsh command or direct reprimand. Instead, the ustadz often uses reflective questions, gentle suggestions, religious reminders, stories, analogies, and invitations to self-correction. Expressions such as "try to improve your intention," "perhaps you need to reflect again," or "remember that knowledge needs adab" show that moral direction is conveyed in a persuasive rather than coercive way.

The excerpt shows how the ustadz uses a soft directive strategy. In Turn 1, the ustadz does not use a harsh command such as "stop chatting," but uses the softer expression "coba mulai malam ini" or "try starting tonight." This form reduces the coercive force of advice while still giving clear moral direction. In Turn 5, the ustadz further reduces pressure by emphasizing gradual improvement rather than immediate perfection. This strategy enables correction to be accepted without resistance. It also shows that spiritual counseling in halaqah works through gentle discipline, where advice is firm in value but soft in delivery.

These soft directives show that the ustadz's authority is exercised through communicative sensitivity. The ustadz does not simply impose rules, but creates a space where santri can recognize

their mistakes without losing dignity. This is crucial in spiritual counseling because the purpose of advice is not to humiliate the student, but to awaken inner awareness. The language of the ustadz therefore performs two functions at once: it corrects behavior and protects the emotional condition of the santri. This resonates with studies on religious counseling discourse showing that counselors who integrate faith-based values into their communicative practice tend to deliver moral direction through gentleness and narrative rather than command, creating space for self-reflection rather than defensiveness (Pearson et al., 2024).

Excerpt 3. Soft Directive Strategy

Turn	Speaker	Original Transcript	English Translation
1	U2	Coba mulai malam ini kamu kurangi ngobrol setelah jam belajar. Bukan tidak boleh bercanda, tapi ada waktunya.	Try starting tonight to reduce chatting after study time. It is not that joking is forbidden, but there is a proper time for it.
2	S3	Iya, Ustadz. Kadang terbawa teman.	Yes, Ustadz. Sometimes I get carried away by friends.
3	U2	Teman itu bisa menarik ke baik, bisa juga menarik ke lalai. Kamu pilih pelan-pelan lingkungan yang menguatkan.	Friends can pull you toward goodness, but they can also pull you toward heedlessness. Slowly choose an environment that strengthens you.
4	S3	InsyaAllah, Ustadz.	God willing, Ustadz.
5	U2	Tidak perlu langsung sempurna. Yang penting ada usaha yang istiqamah.	You do not need to be perfect immediately. What matters is consistent effort.

From a discourse-analytic perspective, this finding shows that power in halaqah is not only expressed through command, but also through subtle forms of moral guidance. The ustadz directs the conversation, but the direction is softened by empathy, religious wisdom, and relational closeness. Studies on dialogic teaching have shown that productive teacher-student interaction depends not only on the teacher's control of the classroom, but also on the ability to elicit, validate, and extend student participation in meaningful ways (Hennessy et al., 2023; Sybing, 2021). In halaqah, this dialogic principle appears in a culturally specific form: the ustadz guides the santri through advice that is firm in value but gentle in delivery.

Thus, the soft directive strategy becomes one of the main reasons why hierarchy in halaqah can produce intimacy rather than fear. Authority becomes acceptable because it is performed through care. Discipline becomes meaningful because it is delivered as spiritual concern. Correction becomes transformative because it is communicated as love.

Religious Intertextuality as Discursive Authority

The findings also reveal that religious intertextuality plays a central role in halaqah-based spiritual counseling. The ustadz frequently refers to Qur'anic values, prophetic traditions, stories of ulama, kitab-based wisdom, pesantren maxims, and moral narratives from Islamic tradition. These references function as discursive authority, meaning that the advice given by the ustadz does not stand merely as personal opinion, but is connected to a broader religious and scholarly tradition. In the tradition of critical discourse analysis, intertextuality refers to the way texts draw on and incorporate elements of other texts, thereby borrowing authority and legitimacy from a broader discursive order (Fairclough, 2013). In halaqah, this mechanism operates through the ustadz's deliberate invocation of Qur'anic values, prophetic narratives, and classical Islamic scholarship.

This use of religious intertextuality gives counseling discourse a deeper legitimacy. When the ustadz advises santri to be patient, the advice may be supported by stories of prophets or ulama. When he reminds santri about discipline, he may connect it to the concept of adab toward knowledge. When he discusses sincerity, he may refer to Islamic teachings on intention and spiritual purification. Through these references, halaqah conversation becomes layered: it is at once personal, educational, moral, and theological.

Excerpt 4. Religious Intertextuality as Discursive Authority

Turn	Speaker	Original Transcript	English Translation
1	S1	Saya merasa hafalan saya sulit masuk, Ustadz.	I feel that my memorization is difficult to absorb, Ustadz.
2	U1	Para ulama dulu menjaga adab sebelum menjaga hafalan. Ilmu itu cahaya, dan cahaya Allah tidak diberikan kepada hati yang lalai.	The scholars of the past preserved adab before preserving memorization. Knowledge is light, and the light of Allah is not given to a heedless heart.
3	S1	Berarti harus memperbaiki adab dulu, Ustadz?	Does that mean I need to improve my adab first, Ustadz?
4	U1	Iya. Hafalan bukan hanya kerja kepala, tapi juga kerja hati. Jaga shalat, jaga lisan, jaga pandangan, dan hormati gurumu.	Yes. Memorization is not only the work of the mind, but also the work of the heart. Guard your prayer, guard your tongue, guard your gaze, and respect your teacher.
5	S1	Iya, Ustadz.	Yes, Ustadz.

This excerpt shows how religious intertextuality strengthens the authority of counseling discourse. The ustadz connects the santri's difficulty in memorization with pesantren-based religious wisdom about adab, knowledge, and spiritual discipline. The statement "ilmu itu cahaya" or "knowledge is light" functions as discursive authority because it situates the ustadz's advice within a broader Islamic moral tradition. As a result, the advice is not perceived as merely personal opinion, but as part of inherited religious knowledge. This pattern shows that halaqah counseling is deeply embedded in the epistemology of pesantren, where knowledge, morality, and spirituality are inseparable.

This finding suggests that halaqah counseling is deeply rooted in the epistemology of pesantren. In pesantren culture, knowledge is not merely cognitive information; it is tied to sanad, adab, barakah, teacherly authority, and religious tradition. Therefore, when the ustadz speaks, he does not speak only as an individual counselor, but as a carrier of pesantren knowledge and Islamic moral inheritance. This makes the counseling process different from secular counseling models that usually emphasize personal autonomy and psychological technique.

The role of religious intertextuality also explains why halaqah can transform personal problems into collective moral lessons. Because advice is anchored in Islamic tradition, the message becomes relevant not only to the santri who speaks, but also to other santri who listen. In this sense, halaqah is both counseling and moral pedagogy. It turns individual experience into shared ethical learning.

Silence, Short Responses, and Adab as Communicative Practices

Another distinctive finding is the presence of short verbal responses and silence among santri. In many halaqah interactions, santri respond with brief expressions such as agreement, acknowledgment, willingness to improve, or respectful confirmation. At a surface level, these

responses may appear passive. However, within pesantren culture, they carry important communicative meanings. Short responses can indicate humility, acceptance, respect, and recognition of the ustadz's authority.

Silence also has a significant role. In many modern educational settings, silence is often interpreted as lack of participation or lack of understanding. Research has shown that learner silence in classroom contexts is rarely simply absence of thought; it can function as cultural protection, a form of emotional regulation shaped by contextual and cultural norms (Peng et al., 2023). In the pesantren context, these dynamics are further shaped by the ethics of adab, giving silence a specifically moral-spiritual meaning. In halaqah, however, silence may function as contemplation, emotional processing, shame, repentance, or inner acceptance. When a santri lowers his gaze, remains silent, or responds briefly after receiving advice, the silence may indicate that the message is being absorbed internally. Therefore, discourse analysis in pesantren must be sensitive not only to what is spoken, but also to what is communicated through restraint, pause, gesture, and respectful listening.

Excerpt 5. Silence and Short Responses as Adab

Turn	Speaker	Original Transcript	English Translation
1	U1	Kamu sudah tahu yang kamu lakukan itu kurang tepat?	You already know that what you did was not quite right?
2	S2	((menunduk)) Iya, Ustadz.	((lowers gaze)) Yes, Ustadz.
3	U1	Apa yang kamu rasakan setelah itu?	What did you feel after that?
4	S2	Menyesal, Ustadz.	Regretful, Ustadz.
5	U1	Penyesalan itu baik kalau membuat kamu kembali. Jangan berhenti di rasa bersalah. Jadikan itu jalan pulang kepada Allah.	Regret is good if it brings you back. Do not stop at guilt. Make it a path of return to Allah.
6	S2	((diam beberapa detik)) Iya, Ustadz. InsyaAllah.	((silence for several seconds)) Yes, Ustadz. God willing.

The excerpt demonstrates that silence and short responses are meaningful communicative practices in halaqah. In Turn 2, the santri lowers his gaze and gives a brief response. In Turn 6, the pause after the ustadz's advice suggests emotional processing, reflection, and inner acceptance. Therefore, silence should not be interpreted as lack of participation. In the pesantren context, silence may represent adab, humility, shame, repentance, or contemplative engagement. This finding expands the meaning of participation in educational discourse by showing that attentive listening and restrained speech can also function as active moral participation.

This finding broadens the meaning of participation in educational discourse. Participation is not always loud, verbal, and argumentative. In pesantren-based counseling, participation may appear as attentive listening, reflective silence, and obedient acknowledgment. This does not mean that santri have no agency. Rather, their agency is expressed through culturally shaped forms of response. They participate according to the ethics of adab, where listening can be as meaningful as speaking.

This point is important for positioning the study within discourse analysis. Jones (2024) emphasizes that discourse analysis pays attention to how language works in context, including how social meanings are produced through interaction. In halaqah, meaning is produced not only through extended speech, but also through minimal responses, silence, and embodied respect. Therefore, the

communicative pattern of santri should not be judged using a purely Western model of classroom participation. It must be understood within the moral and spiritual ecology of pesantren.

Halaqah as Collective Moral Education

The final finding shows that halaqah functions not only as individual spiritual counseling but also as collective moral education. When one santri shares a problem or receives advice, other santri present in the halaqah also become listeners and learners. The problem of one student becomes a moral lesson for the group. This collective dimension makes halaqah different from private counseling, because the counseling process is simultaneously personal and communal.

Excerpt 6. Halaqah as Collective Moral Education

Turn	Speaker	Original Transcript	English Translation
1	U2	Ini bukan hanya untuk S3, tapi untuk kita semua. Di pesantren, kesalahan satu orang bisa jadi pelajaran bagi yang lain.	This is not only for S3, but for all of us. In pesantren, one person's mistake can become a lesson for others.
2	S3	Iya, Ustadz.	Yes, Ustadz.
3	U2	Jangan menunggu ditegur dulu baru sadar. Lihat temanmu dinasihati, ambil pelajaran. Itu juga bagian dari adab dalam halaqah.	Do not wait until you are corrected before becoming aware. When you see your friend being advised, take a lesson from it. That is also part of adab in halaqah.
4	Several santri	Iya, Ustadz.	Yes, Ustadz.
5	U2	Kita belajar bersama, saling menjaga, supaya hati kita tidak jauh dari ilmu.	We learn together and protect one another so that our hearts do not become distant from knowledge.

This excerpt shows that halaqah functions not only as individual counseling, but also as collective moral education. In Turn 1, the ustadz explicitly shifts the advice from one santri to the whole group through the phrase "untuk kita semua" or "for all of us." This move transforms an individual problem into a shared moral lesson. The collective response in Turn 4 shows that other santri are not passive listeners; they are positioned as moral participants in the counseling process. Thus, halaqah becomes a communal space where personal experience is converted into collective ethical learning. This collective dimension of learning aligns with collaborative learning research showing that shared witnessing and peer co-participation in problem-solving and moral reasoning can produce deeper cognitive and ethical engagement than individual instruction alone (Hmelo-Silver & Chinn, 2016).

The selected excerpts demonstrate that halaqah-based spiritual counseling is produced through concrete conversational practices. The ustadz constructs authority through gentle correction, religious intertextuality, and moral supervision, while santri respond through short answers, silence, lowered gaze, and expressions of willingness to improve. These interactional features show that counseling in halaqah is not merely about giving advice, but about forming spiritual awareness through language, adab, and relational trust. The bilingual presentation of the excerpts also shows that key pesantren concepts such as *adab*, *niat*, *istiqamah*, and *ridha Allah* carry cultural and theological meanings that cannot be fully reduced to ordinary psychological vocabulary. Therefore, halaqah should be understood as a discourse practice where authority, affection, moral education, and spiritual transformation are woven together in everyday conversation.

Through collective listening, santri learn how problems should be interpreted, how mistakes should be corrected, how emotions should be controlled, and how religious values should be applied

in daily life. Halaqah therefore becomes a living curriculum of moral education. It teaches not only through formal instruction, but through witnessed interaction. Santri learn from the ustadz's words, from the response of their peers, and from the moral atmosphere produced in the gathering.

This finding is consistent with studies that describe halaqah as a model of Islamic tarbiyah for cultivating religious character among santri (Ramli et al., 2025). It also resonates with broader studies on pesantren education, which emphasize that pesantren is not merely a place of textual learning, but a moral community where character is formed through discipline, example, ritual, interaction, and daily habituation (Cahyono et al., 2024). This is consistent with the broader literature on character formation in Indonesian education, which emphasizes that moral values are most effectively internalized through relational and community-based educational practices (Kamaruddin et al., 2023; Cahyono et al., 2024). In this context, halaqah-based spiritual counseling becomes one of the mechanisms through which pesantren reproduces its moral and spiritual culture.

The collective function of halaqah also strengthens the argument that counseling in pesantren is not purely individualistic. It does not isolate the student from the community, but situates personal struggle within shared moral responsibility. A santri's problem is treated as a moment of learning for everyone. This makes halaqah a form of communal care, where spiritual guidance is distributed through collective listening and shared reflection.

Overall, the findings indicate that halaqah-based spiritual counseling at Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah operates through a distinctive conversational logic: hierarchical yet intimate, directive yet gentle, personal yet collective, and corrective yet affectionate. These characteristics show that halaqah cannot be fully understood through a purely clinical counseling framework. It must be understood as a culturally embedded practice where discourse, spirituality, authority, adab, and moral education work together. Beyond halaqah, other Islamic counseling approaches have demonstrated that language-based reflective practices — including expressive writing grounded in Islamic values — can support psychological healing among Muslim students (Kurniawan et al., 2025), suggesting that verbal and reflective modalities share common therapeutic logic.

The concept of hierarchical intimacy is the most important theoretical contribution of this study. It shows that hierarchy in pesantren is not automatically negative. In this context, hierarchy becomes productive when it is guided by compassion, religious knowledge, moral responsibility, and emotional closeness. The ustadz can control and guide santri more effectively not because he dominates them, but because he is trusted and loved. This form of authority is not cold power; it is affectionate authority. It is not merely discipline; it is discipline wrapped in care. This is consistent with a growing body of research showing that religion and spirituality serve as meaningful resources for individual well-being, moral coherence, and psychological resilience across diverse cultural contexts (Koburtay et al., 2023), further affirming the validity of spiritually grounded counseling models such as halaqah.

This study also shows that halaqah produces spiritual transformation through discourse. The ustadz uses soft directives, religious intertextuality, reflective questions, and moral narratives to guide santri from personal complaint toward spiritual awareness. Santri respond through short answers, silence, attentiveness, and embodied adab. These interactional features reveal that counseling in pesantren is not only about solving problems, but about shaping religious subjectivity: forming santri who are obedient, reflective, morally aware, and spiritually connected. While digital

innovations in Islamic counseling continue to emerge (Rosyidi & Nafi, 2025), the findings of this study affirm that face-to-face, relational, and spiritually embedded interaction — as embodied in halaqah — remains irreplaceable as a medium for moral and spiritual formation.

Theoretically, this study contributes to discourse analysis by extending its application to Islamic spiritual counseling in pesantren. It shows that conversational patterns are shaped not only by turn-taking and linguistic strategies, but also by cultural values, religious authority, and spiritual ethics. Practically, the study suggests that ustadz and pesantren educators can strengthen halaqah as a counseling space by maintaining relational authority, using gentle language, recognizing silence as reflection, and connecting personal problems with spiritual growth.

Thus, halaqah-based spiritual counseling can be understood as a form of moral-educational discourse that bridges personal guidance, religious learning, emotional care, and collective character formation. Its significance lies in the way it transforms everyday student problems into opportunities for spiritual reflection, ethical formation, and deeper attachment to pesantren values.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that halaqah-based spiritual counseling at Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah is not merely a religious learning activity, but a culturally embedded form of moral, emotional, and spiritual guidance constructed through patterned conversation. The findings show that halaqah interaction is shaped by hierarchical intimacy, spiritual reframing, soft directive strategies, religious intertextuality, short verbal responses, silence, and collective moral learning. The theoretical novelty of this study lies in the concept of hierarchical intimacy, which reinterprets hierarchy not as oppressive domination, but as a positive pedagogical-spiritual authority grounded in knowledge, adab, affection, trust, and moral responsibility. In this sense, the ustadz's authority becomes effective not because it silences santri, but because it guides them through care, wins their hearts through compassionate communication, and transforms personal problems into spiritual reflection. Contextually, this study contributes to the understanding of pesantren counseling by showing that spiritual guidance in pesantren operates through local discourse practices that cannot be fully explained by modern clinical counseling frameworks alone.

Despite its contribution, this study has limitations. It focuses on halaqah-based interaction in one pesantren context and does not measure the long-term psychological or behavioral outcomes of spiritual counseling among santri. Future studies may compare halaqah practices across different pesantren, examine gender-based differences in spiritual counseling interaction, or combine discourse analysis with longitudinal observation to understand how halaqah shapes students' moral development over time. Practically, the findings imply that ustadz, pesantren educators, and Islamic counselors can strengthen halaqah as a counseling space by maintaining relational authority, using gentle language, recognizing silence as reflection, and connecting students' personal struggles with spiritual growth. Ultimately, this study suggests that pesantren-based halaqah can become a meaningful model of Islamic educational counseling for the future: a model where discipline is not separated from love, authority is not separated from tenderness, and spiritual education is lived through the everyday art of conversation.

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