

Teachers' and Students' Experiences in Implementing Direct Instruction in Islamic Religious Education Learning: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Perspective

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Teachers' and Students' Experiences in Implementing Direct Instruction in Islamic Religious Education Learning: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Perspective

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Abstract

This phenomenological hermeneutic study explores the lived experiences of teachers and students in implementing the Direct Instruction (DI) model in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at the senior high school level. Using Max van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology approach, this research investigates the pedagogical and spiritual meanings embedded in structured instructional practices. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with PAI teachers and students at SMA Negeri 2 Bandung, complemented by participatory observation and documentation. The findings reveal that Direct Instruction in PAI transcends its technical-procedural nature, functioning as a medium for spiritual internalization of Islamic values such as discipline, responsibility, and sincerity. Teachers experience tension between procedural demands and the search for spiritual meaning in teaching, while students perceive a shift from merely receiving instructions to discovering religious meaning through structure and clarity. This study introduces the concept of "Spiritualized Direct Instruction," integrating the effectiveness of DI with Islamic spiritual values and educational ethics. The research contributes to the development of PAI learning theory that harmonizes modern pedagogical models with Islamic spirituality, offering practical implications for curriculum developers and educators in creating meaningful religious education experiences.

Keywords: *Direct instruction; Hermeneutic Phenomenology; Islamic Education; Lived Experience; Spiritual Pedagogy*

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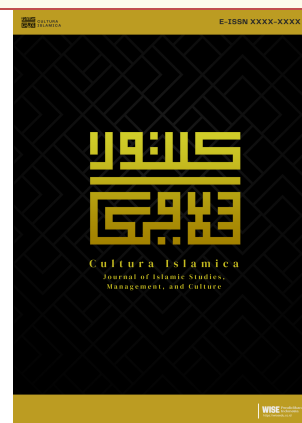
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INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in Indonesia faces complex challenges in balancing academic competence achievements with the formation of students' spiritual character [1], [2], [3]. The Direct Instruction (DI) learning model, developed by Siegfried Engelmann since the 1960s, has been empirically proven to be effective in improving academic performance through structured, sequential, and systematic instruction [4], [5], [6]. DI emphasizes clear learning objectives, directed instructional steps, and the active involvement of teachers in guiding students toward mastery of the material [7], [8], [9]. In the context of PAI learning, the DI model is often used to build a strong conceptual understanding of Islamic teachings, covering aspects such as belief, worship, ethics, and sharia [10], [11], [12]. The systematic structure of DI, which includes orientation, demonstration, guided practice, and independent practice phases, is considered suitable for delivering religious material that requires in-depth understanding and accurate memorization [13], [14], [15]. A meta-analysis conducted by Stockard and colleagues demonstrates that DI has a moderate to large effect on academic achievement across various subjects, including among students with special needs and those in low-achievement risk groups [16], [17].

However, practices in the field reveal an interesting paradox. PAI learning that places too much emphasis on instructional and procedural aspects often loses the spiritual and reflective dimensions that should be the essence of Islamic education [18], [19], [20]. Teachers and students often become trapped in technical routines without internalizing the transcendental values and existential meaning embedded in the learning process [21], [22], [23]. Firdausi emphasize that while explicit instruction is effective in building foundational knowledge, this approach needs to be complemented with spaces for reflection to foster deep understanding and conceptual transfer. Previous studies on DI tend to focus on quantitative aspects, such as test score improvement, competency achievement, or comparisons with other methods [25], [26], [27]. However, very few studies explore the qualitative dimensions, particularly the lived experiences of the learning participants themselves: teachers and students. In the context of PAI, research exploring how teachers interpret their roles as both mu'allim and murabbi within a structured instructional framework, as well as how students experience the systematic learning process as a spiritual journey, is still very limited [28], [29], [30].

The gap in this research becomes even more urgent given that Islamic education cannot be separated from the dimensions of meaning, awareness, and deep spiritual experience. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) should not merely be a transfer of theoretical knowledge, but rather a transformative process that leads to the formation of divine consciousness (taqarrub ilallah) and the internalization of moral values that guide daily life [31], [32], [33]. Such learning should foster a personal closeness with God, relying not only on cognitive understanding but also on a profound immersion in religious teachings. This study employs Max van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understand and interpret the meaning of the lived experiences of teachers and students in the implementation of the Direct Instruction model in PAI learning [34], [35]. Van Manen views phenomenology not only as a description of experiences but also as a reflective and interpretive action to uncover the deepest meanings of a phenomenon as experienced by the subjects themselves [36], [37], [38]. This

approach allows the researcher to explore the pedagogical and spiritual dimensions that lie hidden behind the instructional structure of DI.

The novelty of this research lies in the spiritual reinterpretation of the Direct Instruction learning model. While DI has traditionally been recognized as a technical and cognitive model, this study offers the perspective that DI can serve as a spiritual path for both teachers and students, fostering divine consciousness through order, discipline, and reflection on the meaning of worship in learning. Thus, the aim of this study is to describe the experiences of teachers and students in implementing DI in PAI learning, to illustrate the pedagogical and relational dynamics that occur, and to reveal the profound meanings embedded in those experiences, both pedagogically and spiritually.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with Max van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological method, aiming to understand and interpret the meaning of the lived experiences of teachers and students in the application of the Direct Instruction model in PAI learning. The research focuses on the existential meaning experienced by teachers and students during the learning process. The study was conducted at SMA Negeri 2 Bandung. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, consisting of two PAI teachers who consistently applied the DI model, and six students who actively participated in the learning process and could reflect on their experiences verbally.

The participant criteria included: having direct experience in PAI learning using DI, being willing to provide time for in-depth interviews, and being able to express personal experiences and reflections honestly. Data collection techniques included: (1) in-depth interviews that were open and reflective, aimed at exploring the meaning of the personal experiences of teachers and students, including the teachers' experiences in applying DI, the feelings and reflections of students, and the spiritual meaning they experienced; (2) participatory observation of the PAI learning process, focusing on teacher-student interactions, learning structure, and the emotional-spiritual responses of participants; (3) documentation, including the syllabus, lesson plans (RPP), teachers' reflection notes, and students' work.

Data analysis was conducted in a circular and reflective manner following van Manen's hermeneutic model through the following steps: (1) orientation to the phenomenon; (2) collecting and writing descriptions of lived experiences by transcribing verbatim and converting them into narrative descriptions; (3) thematic reflection to identify meaningful themes; (4) hermeneutic interpretation by reflecting on each theme based on Islamic educational values and spirituality; (5) textual-narrative writing in the form of thick description while maintaining the authentic voice of the participants. Credibility was maintained through source triangulation, member checking, researcher reflexivity, and audit trail. The research adhered to ethical principles, including official permission from the school, informed consent, confidentiality of identities, and data authenticity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Word Frequency Query Analysis in NVivo 12

The results of the Word Frequency Query indicate that there are several keywords that appear dominantly in the interview transcripts of two PAI teachers and twenty students. The dominance of these words reflects the main focus of the experiences, interpretations, and interactions of the informants regarding the application of Direct Instruction in Islamic Religious Education (PAI). Overall, the pattern of word occurrences reveals a consistent thematic structure between the experiences of the teachers and students.

Table 1. Word Frequency Query NVivo 12

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)
Siswa	5	360	621%
Guru	4	300	517%
Direct	6	280	483%
Instruction	11	280	483%
Pembelajaran	12	220	379%
Pai	3	200	345%
Model	5	100	172%
Aktif	5	80	138%
Metode	6	60	103%
Hubungan	8	40	69%

The word "student" (Count 360; 621%) and "guru" (Count 300; 517%) are the two most frequent words. This indicates that the entire conversation of the informants is highly oriented towards the dynamics of the pedagogical relationship between the teacher, as the instructor, and the student, as the recipient of learning. This dominance aligns with the character of the Direct Instruction model, which places the teacher-student interaction at the center of the learning process. The high frequency suggests that their experiences and perceptions are strongly interconnected in describing the quality of the method's implementation. The words "direct" (Count 280; 483%) and "instruction" (Count 280; 483%) appeared with equal frequency, indicating that the main topic of the informants' discussion indeed revolved around the implementation of this model. This shows that all respondents consistently referred to the method, from the perspective of experiencing, managing, and interpreting the explicit, structured, and teacher-centered learning steps. The high frequency ensures that the method was genuinely the core of the conversation, not merely mentioned sporadically.

The terms "learning" (Count 220; 379%) and "PAI" (Count 200; 345%) also appeared with high intensity. This suggests that the informants discussed the application of the Direct Instruction method specifically within the context of Islamic Religious Education (PAI). The appearance of these words reinforces the focus of their discussions on the teaching and learning process, rather than on institutional or administrative aspects. Thus, these results strengthen the thematic validity that the study is indeed exploring authentic experiences related to pedagogical practices in the PAI classroom. The word "active" (Count 80; 138%) indicates that student participation or activity became an important issue in the informants' narratives. This frequency

activities, including the steps of delivering material, teacher guidance, and the systematic strategies that characterize the Direct Instruction model [39]. The frequent appearance of student and teacher reflects the intense interaction between the two parties, indicating that the learning experience is understood as a relational process involving the active role of the teacher in directing and the role of the students in receiving, responding, and practicing the learning [40], [41].

Furthermore, the presence of terms such as PAI, active, process, explanation, understanding, and delivering emphasizes the participants' focus on the importance of clear instructions, student engagement in following the learning stages, and the need for detailed explanations to ensure accurate comprehension of religious concepts. The occurrence of words like model, concept, material, class, context, and dialog further reinforces the notion that the informants view Direct Instruction not merely as a technical method, but as a pedagogical approach that requires a clear structure, effective communication, and adaptation to classroom dynamics. Additionally, terms like expectations, misunderstanding, and understanding reflect an awareness of potential challenges and the need for improvements throughout the learning process. [42], [43].

Overall, the composition of this word cloud reveals that the experiences of teachers and students in applying Direct Instruction in PAI learning are significantly influenced by the clarity of instructions, the intensity of the teacher's role, student engagement in following the learning steps, and the importance of effective communication. This pattern emphasizes that the success of Direct Instruction largely depends on how the teacher manages the delivery of material systematically and how students respond to those instructions in a structured learning context [44].

Teachers' Experience in Implementing Direct Instruction in PAI Learning

The phenomenological analysis of the teachers' experiences reveals a complex dynamic between procedural structure and the search for spiritual meaning in teaching. The PAI teachers who participated in the study shared their initial experience of implementing the Direct Instruction model with ambivalent feelings. In the interview, the teachers stated that at first, the model felt rigid and overly structured. However, over time, they began to see the benefits of the clarity and order that DI offers. The systematic structure helped students focus more and understand the learning steps clearly [45]. Yet, behind the appreciation for the structural effectiveness of DI, the teachers also experienced internal tension. In their reflection, they expressed feeling more directed in their teaching but were challenged to prevent the classroom atmosphere from becoming too formal and losing its warm relational dimension.

This tension reflects the dilemma between meeting the procedural demands of the DI model and maintaining the spiritual essence that should be at the heart of PAI learning. The teachers acknowledged that the classroom became more orderly with the application of DI, but the interaction sometimes felt one-sided, requiring extra effort to add moments of reflection so that the learning could become more dialogical and meaningful [46]. This experience reveals an important theme regarding the dual role of the PAI teacher as both *mu'allim* (teacher) and *murabbi* (spiritual educator) [47]. Within the framework of Direct Instruction, teachers are required to implement the established instructional steps with high fidelity. However, as *murabbi*, teachers also bear the responsibility of guiding students to discover the spiritual

meaning behind each lesson. This tension is not destructive but rather productive, encouraging teachers to creatively adapt the DI model to align with the spirit of Islamic education [48]. From the teacher's perspective, the DI model has a strong potential to cultivate Islamic values such as discipline and responsibility.

The teacher explained that each clear learning step helps students become accustomed to following rules with the intention of worship. The order and structure in DI are not merely seen as pedagogical techniques but as manifestations of Islamic values such as *nidham* (order), *intidham* (discipline), and *istiqamah* (consistency). Thus, the systematic instructional process can serve as a medium for internalizing spiritual values [49], [50]. The most memorable moment for the teacher is when students are able to explain the meaning of Qur'anic verses in their own words after going through the systematic DI learning stages. The teacher feels that DI helps students think more structurally and organize their understanding of Islamic teachings.

However, the teacher also realizes the need to incorporate moments of value reflection and *tadabbur* (contemplation) at the end of the learning steps so that DI is not only technical but also touches the hearts of the students [51], [52]. These findings align with van Manen's four existential concepts. In the dimension of lived space, the teacher experiences a more orderly classroom, though potentially rigid. In lived body, the teacher's gestures and expressions become more measured and directed, though sometimes losing spontaneity. In lived time, the DI structure creates a clear and predictable rhythm of learning, providing a sense of security but reducing space for temporal exploration. In lived relation, the teacher-student relationship becomes more formal within the instructional context, but the teacher strives to build a spiritual relationship through moments of reflection [53], [54].

Students' Experience in Participating in PAI Learning with Direct Instruction

The students' experiences reveal a different yet complementary perspective to the teachers' experiences. The students who participated in the study described their experience of learning PAI with the DI model as organized and easy to follow. The clarity of each learning step made students aware of what they needed to do and what was expected of them. This clear structure reduced confusion and increased the students' confidence in following the learning process. In terms of emotions, students expressed that learning with DI sometimes felt serious and formal, but they appreciated this approach because it helped them truly understand what the teacher meant. The seriousness was not viewed negatively, but rather as a sign that learning PAI is something important and should be approached with sincerity.

Students began to internalize that studying religion requires earnestness and awareness, not just a routine activity carried out without meaning. In the relational dimension, students felt that learning with DI helped them focus and concentrate more. Although they sometimes felt they lacked time for free discussions with their peers, they still felt a sense of closeness to the teacher. The teacher remained open and responsive when students asked questions, even within the framework of a strict learning structure. This shows that structure does not have to eliminate the warmth of relationships, as long as the teacher can balance procedural demands with emotional and spiritual sensitivity. Interestingly, students acknowledged that learning with the DI model helped them understand Islamic values more deeply. They stated that they became more disciplined and felt that studying religion required sincerity.

Teachers often reminded them that learning is an act of worship, so each learning step was not only seen as an academic procedure but also as part of their devotion to Allah. This suggests that the DI structure, when interpreted spiritually, can serve as a means to cultivate religious consciousness. When asked to describe their learning experience in one phrase, students referred to it as "directed but meaningful." This phrase is highly significant as it captures the essence of the students' experience: they felt the order and clarity of the learning direction (directed), but beneath that structure, they also found meaning that touched their spiritual dimension (meaningful). This indicates that students were not merely passive recipients of instructions, but active subjects who interpreted their learning experiences within the framework of Islamic spirituality.

This student experience can be analyzed through van Manen's four existential dimensions. In lived space, students perceive the classroom as an organized and conducive environment for serious learning. In lived body, students experience their bodies as instruments for following the structured rhythm of learning—sitting attentively, responding appropriately, and practicing with focus. In lived time, students perceive the learning time as efficient yet dense, where every moment has a clear purpose. In lived relation, students experience their relationship with the teacher as guiding yet warm, and their relationship with peers is more focused on learning together rather than on free social interaction [55], [56].

Discussion

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning through the Direct Instruction (DI) model cannot be understood merely as a technical and procedural instructional strategy. The findings of this study indicate that the clear, systematic, and purposeful structure of DI can instead serve as a pedagogical space for bringing spiritual meaning into the learning process. The orderly sequence of steps, clarity of objectives, and consistency of instruction reflect Islamic values such as *nidham* or orderliness, *intidham* or discipline, *istiqamah* or consistency, and *amanah* or responsibility [57], [58]. Thus, in the context of PAI, DI is no longer positioned as a rigid model, but rather as an approach that can help teachers instill religious values through an orderly and meaningful learning process.

The concept of Spiritualized Direct Instruction represents an important contribution to understanding the integration between the effectiveness of the DI model and the values of Islamic education. Each component of DI can be spiritually reinterpreted, ranging from clear learning objectives as a manifestation of honesty and transparency, the logical sequencing of material as a form of *tadarruj*, to teacher demonstration as the practice of *uswatun hasanah* [59]. Guided practice does not merely function as academic exercise, but also as a process of *ta'lim* and *tarbiyah*, in which the teacher guides students both intellectually and morally. Feedback and reinforcement may be understood as *tazkiyah* and *tazkir*, while mastery criteria reflect the principle of *itqan*, namely a sincere commitment to achieving the highest quality in every task [60].

The tension experienced by teachers between the procedural demands of DI and the search for spiritual meaning actually reveals a reflective dynamic within instructional practice. Such tension should not be viewed as a weakness of the model, but rather as a dialectical space that enables teachers to discover new ways of connecting pedagogical effectiveness with the depth of religious values. From a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, paradoxical

experiences can generate new understanding because teachers do not merely implement procedures; they also interpret the meaning behind each act of teaching. This process may be understood as a form of pedagogical jihad, namely a sincere effort to construct learning that not only develops the intellect but also touches and enlightens students' hearts [61].

From the students' perspective, the clear structure of DI can function as scaffolding that helps them move from technical understanding toward spiritual awareness. When students feel secure within a well-organized learning sequence, they have greater mental and emotional space to understand the religious messages embedded in the material being studied. In other words, instructional order is not a barrier to reflection; rather, it can become an initial foundation for exploring deeper meaning. In the context of PAI, the DI structure helps students understand religious concepts gradually before eventually connecting those concepts with personal experiences, life values, and religious consciousness [62].

The moment when students are able to explain the meaning of a verse or religious material in their own words indicates a transformation from merely understanding information toward the internalization of values. At this stage, learning does not only produce cognitive achievement, but also a process of appropriation, in which external knowledge becomes part of students' self-understanding. In the terminology of Islamic education, this process can be understood as a transition from *'ilm* to *hikmah*, namely knowledge that has been deeply internalized and provides direction for behavior. The DI structure provides a strong foundation of understanding, while reflection and *tadabbur* facilitated by the teacher help students connect the material with spiritual experiences and everyday life [63].

This finding also extends the theoretical understanding of Direct Instruction (DI). DI has often been criticized for being overly oriented toward cognitive-behavioral aspects, mechanistic in nature, and insufficiently attentive to humanistic dimensions. However, in the context of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), this study demonstrates that DI can become a humanistic and meaningful instructional model when implemented with value consciousness. The effectiveness of DI does not lie solely in its capacity to build systematic conceptual mastery, but also in its potential to develop students' affective and spiritual dimensions. Thus, critiques of DI need to be positioned more proportionally, as the meaningfulness of an instructional model depends largely on how teachers interpret and implement each step of the learning process [64].

From the perspective of Islamic education, the integration of DI with spiritual values indicates that modern instructional models should not necessarily be positioned as a threat to Islamic values. On the contrary, modern models can serve as a means of actualizing Islamic values in a more structured and applicable manner. This is consistent with the principle of *wasathiyah*, namely a moderate stance that enables Islamic education to adopt valuable elements from various approaches and integrate them into an Islamic value framework [65]. Therefore, Islamic education does not need to reject pedagogical modernity; rather, it needs to critically process and adapt it so that it remains aligned with the goals of forming students' moral character, spiritual awareness, and intellectual maturity.

When interpreted through van Manen's four existential dimensions, the experience of learning PAI through DI shows that learning is not merely a cognitive event, but also an experience involving space, body, time, and relation. The classroom becomes a space where orderliness and spiritual attentiveness are formed; the body is present through practice,

attention, and discipline; time is reflected in the gradual process toward understanding; and relation is built through guiding interactions between teachers and students. Therefore, DI-based PAI learning can be understood as a “directed yet meaningful” learning experience, namely an instructional experience with a strong structure while still opening space for reflection, value internalization, and spiritual growth [66]. The implication is that PAI teachers need to develop reflective awareness, incorporate moments of *tadabbur*, and combine DI with exploratory approaches so that learning does not stop at content mastery, but moves toward students’ self-transformation.

CONCLUSION

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of teachers and students in implementing the Direct Instruction (DI) model in Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) at SMA Negeri 2 Bandung. The primary findings reveal that DI in PAI learning goes beyond its role as a technical instructional model, evolving into a medium for the spiritualization of the learning process. The order, clarity, and systematic structure of DI are interpreted as reflections of key Islamic values such as *nidham* (order), *intidham* (discipline), *istiqamah* (consistency), and *amanah* (responsibility). Teachers' experiences uncover a productive tension between procedural demands and the search for spiritual meaning, prompting reflection on their dual role as both *mu'allim* (teacher) and *murabbi* (spiritual guide). Students' experiences indicate a shift from merely receiving instructions to uncovering religious significance through structure and clarity. Students describe their experience as "directed but meaningful," suggesting that the DI framework facilitates the discovery of spiritual meaning when implemented with a conscious awareness of values.

This study introduces the concept of "Spiritualized Direct Instruction" as a theoretical contribution integrating the effectiveness of the DI model with spiritual values and the ethics of Islamic education. This concept addresses the criticism of DI as being too technical by demonstrating that DI can be humanistic and meaningful when implemented with reflective and spiritual awareness. Practical implications include: the development of reflective awareness in PAI teachers to interpret every pedagogical practice in a spiritual dimension; the systematic incorporation of reflection and *tadabbur* (contemplation) moments; the development of PAI curriculum integrating DI with exploratory and reflective approaches; and teacher training that includes the development of spiritual awareness and reflective abilities.

LIMITATIONS

This study has limitations in terms of its single-location focus, limited number of participants, relatively short observation period, and the influence of the researcher's perspective. Further research is recommended to: expand to different institutional contexts; quantitatively or through mixed methods measure the effectiveness of Spiritualized Direct Instruction; explore the spiritual practices of teachers through a contemplative approach; develop self-reflection instruments for PAI teachers; and integrate phenomenological approaches with ethnography or narrative inquiry. The proposed Spiritualized Direct Instruction model in this study paves the way for the development of PAI learning practices

that are both pedagogically effective and spiritually profound, bridging the demands of academic competence achievement with the need for character formation and Muslim spirituality.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

PG and AW contributed to the conceptualization and development of the research methodology, as well as being directly involved in data collection and analysis. NT and RA played a key role in writing the initial sections of the manuscript, revising the draft, and providing critical feedback on the analysis and discussion. All authors jointly approved and finalized the manuscript submitted for publication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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