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Optimizing Quranic Learning for the Elderly: An Integrative Religious Experience Model to Enhance Spiritual Wellness in Pesantren Communities

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ABSTRACT

Background: The increasing elderly population presents a challenge in meeting their psychosocial and spiritual needs. Learning the Quran in later life is often hindered by methods that are not age-friendly, which can lead to social isolation and reduced spiritual well-being.

Purpose of the Study: This program was designed to implement a Religious Experience Learning (REL) approach to address three core issues: developing an appropriate pedagogical method, enhancing access and participation through effective mentoring, and ultimately strengthening the spiritual well-being of elderly participants.

Methods: The program employed a Service-Learning methodology, structured in three stages: preparation, implementation (participatory REL-based learning, and reflection. The REL framework integrated technical (Bagdadi method), reflective (contextual hermeneutics), and spiritual (contemplative practice) dimensions.

Results: The program achieved holistic transformation. Methodologically, a shift to humanistic approaches created a psychological safety and increased intrinsic motivation. Socially, a multi-generational community and empathetic mentoring reduced isolation. The primary outcome was enhanced spiritual wellness, evidenced by the personalisation of worship, internalisation of Quranic values as a life framework, and the achievement of eudaimonic well-being marked by inner peace (sakinah), self-acceptance, and a profound sense of meaning in life.

Keywords

Quranic Learning, Elderly, Religious Experience, Spiritual Wellness

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Introduction

Kediri Regency, located in East Java, is known as an area with strong religious traditions, one of which is embodied by the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School located in Puncu Village, Kepung District. This boarding school has a specific vision of providing Quranic education to the elderly using an approach that prioritises religious experience. In recent years, the Religious Experience Learning (REL) approach has been intensively implemented. This method focuses not only on the theoretical study of the Quran but also on direct experience and spiritual appreciation, enabling the elderly to grasp the meaning of religious teachings in their daily lives (Putra & Wanda, 2023).

Current data indicate that many elderly individuals in Kediri face difficulties in accessing religious education that suits their needs, particularly in understanding Quranic texts, which require a special approach. Age-related limitations, physical conditions, and the need for more applicable and personalised learning methods are the main factors influencing this situation. Although many Quranic learning programs exist in Islamic boarding schools, the results are often suboptimal because the methods still rely on rigid academic approaches that pay insufficient attention to the physical and psychological conditions of the elderly (Tohiroh et al., 2021).

Preliminary research findings at the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School revealed three main obstacles: limited access to religious learning materials tailored to the elderly's needs, a lack of social support for regular participation in religious activities, and learning methods that inadequately account for the elderly's physical and cognitive conditions. At the macro level, Quranic education in Puncu Village is primarily focused on children and adolescents, and there is no dedicated institution serving the elderly in that area.

These problems indicate an urgent need to develop an inclusive, experience-based learning program. The REL approach, already implemented at the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School, can serve as a relevant model for addressing Quranic literacy among the elderly. This approach not only offers short-term learning but also provides a deep, sustainable spiritual experience, expected to enhance the elderly's access to Quranic teachings and their application in daily life.

Previous research supports the effectiveness of experience-based learning in improving Quranic literacy among the elderly. Rahmawati (2019) stated that such an approach is more effective compared to conventional teaching methods. Haris and Hidayat (2021) added that combining personal reflection with active activities results in a deeper understanding. Furthermore, research by Shirkavand et al. (2018) shows a positive relationship between religious practice and spiritual well-being with mental health, life satisfaction, and overall quality of life in the elderly.

Based on this background, this mentoring program aims to develop Quranic literacy among the elderly through the Religious Experience Learning (REL) approach at the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School in Kediri, with the hope of improving the quality of inclusive, contextual, and sustainable learning for the elderly.

Method

This service methodology uses the Service Learning (SL) approach, chosen for its integration of direct community service activities with in-depth learning and reflection. The SL approach is highly relevant to the context of Quranic learning for the elderly at the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School in Kediri, as it not only provides applicable and adaptive learning services but also facilitates spiritual transformation and enhances the sustainable well-being of the elderly. By combining practical activities and reflection, this method is able to bridge the gap between the needs of the elderly, which have been identified in the problem analysis and objectives, and to implement a comprehensive strategy in terms of human resources, institutions, infrastructure, and

governance.

First, the Preparation Stage. The first stage in Service Learning is preparation. At this stage, an in-depth identification of the needs and characteristics of the elderly program participants is carried out, as outlined in the problem analysis. Furthermore, the development of a Quranic learning module based on Religious Experience Learning (REL) is tailored to the physical and psychological capabilities of the elderly, aiming to improve literacy and spiritual well-being. Training activities for instructors and assistants are also conducted to equip them with the skills and knowledge aligned with the designed program strategy. This preparation includes coordination with boarding school administrators and relevant stakeholders to ensure adequate institutional and policy support. The development of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), the provision of elderly-friendly learning facilities and infrastructure, and the planning of monitoring and evaluation are also carried out at this stage as part of systematic governance.

Second, the Service Stage. The service stage is the direct implementation of REL-based Quranic learning for the elderly at the boarding school. Here, the elderly participants are allowed to engage in interactive learning that combines technical instruction in reading the Quran with reflective, practical religious experiences. Social assistance and community support are also activated so that the elderly feel comfortable and motivated to continue learning and participating. This directly addresses the gaps in infrastructure and social institutions identified earlier. This process aims not only to improve the ability to read and understand the Quran but also to support the spiritual transformation that is the program's ultimate goal.

Third, the Reflection Stage. The reflection stage is a crucial part of the Service Learning approach, where service participants, including the elderly, instructors, and assistants, collectively evaluate and introspect on the learning process and outcomes. This reflection focuses on how learning and service experiences have changed the elderly's understanding, attitudes, and religious practices, as emphasised in the theories of learning transformation and experiential learning. Additionally, the reflection assesses the program's strategy and identifies remaining obstacles, and formulates improvements to ensure the program's future sustainability. This activity strengthens governance and ensures that learning does not stop at the technical aspect but also has a real impact on the spiritual wellness of the elderly.

To clarify this process, here is the flowchart of the Service Learning stages used in this community service program:



Figure 1. Service Learning Method Flowchart

Result

Preparation for the Mentoring Program

The preparation stage is the foundation for implementing the community service program based on Service Learning. This stage is designed to ensure the readiness of all aspects before implementation, using a participatory, context-based approach that prioritises the needs and real-life conditions of the elderly at the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School.

1. Identification of the Needs and Characteristics of the Elderly

The identification of needs and characteristics was carried out to obtain a comprehensive overview. Through in-depth interviews with elderly participants and boarding school caregivers, it was revealed that the fundamental need is not only the ability to read and write the Quran but also spiritual appreciation that can serve as a source of peace and meaning in life in old age. Based on the observation results, it was confirmed that the elderly participants have the following specific characteristics:

- a. Physio-psychological: decreased eyesight and hearing, easy fatigability, and a need for recognition and space to share stories, as most participants are aged 70 years and over.
- b. Socio-spiritual: a desire to remain spiritually productive, stay connected with the community, and prepare themselves to face the afterlife with serenity. This data served as the primary basis for developing modules and mentoring strategies.

2. Training of Teaching Staff

To ensure the quality of facilitation, we collaborated with two teaching staff members from the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School who have complementary profiles:

a. Ustadz Azis (43 years old)

Profile: Caregiver and senior teacher at the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School, understands the socio-cultural characteristics of the Puncu Village community, and has extensive experience teaching children and adolescents.

Role in Training & Program: As the main resource person for the Bagdadi method and a key facilitator in building a warm and familiar learning atmosphere. His training focused on adapting teaching materials for an elderly audience, techniques for moderating reflective discussions, and multi-generational classroom management. In the program, he serves as the academic coordinator and a central figure who provides trust and comfort to the elderly participants.

b. Ibu Mahmudah (70 years old)

A practitioner in elderly mentoring. Role in Training & Program: As a consultant on the psychology of the elderly and a designer of humanist approaches, having lived among the elderly learners. During the program, she acts as a supervisor of the psychological climate and provides informal counselling if needed.

Intensive training was conducted for the teaching staff, covering: (a) the philosophy and techniques of REL, (b) the Psychological Dynamics of the Elderly, (c) Participatory Facilitation Techniques, (d) Inclusive Classroom Management, and (e) Teaching Simulations.



Figure 2. Training with At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School Teachers

3. Coordination and Preparation of Supporting Infrastructure

Intensive coordination was carried out to build strong partnerships and ensure the physical environment was ready to support the learning process. A series of meetings with the boarding school administrators resulted in a mutual agreement to use the comfortable prayer room as the main learning venue, to provide logistical support for refreshments, and to integrate the program with existing boarding school activities seamlessly. Simultaneously, coordination with the Puncu Village Government proved equally fruitful, as they warmly welcomed the elderly Quranic education program at the At-Taubah boarding school, recognising it as a valuable contribution to the development of family resilience and social piety within the community.

The preparation of facilities was undertaken with careful attention to the specific needs of the elderly participants. The learning space was arranged in a natural, floor-sitting style, in accordance with the boarding school's cultural traditions, to create a familiar and welcoming atmosphere. However, this was thoughtfully complemented by ergonomic chairs for those who needed them, ensuring physical comfort throughout the sessions. Additional lighting was installed to assist those with visual difficulties, and visual aids, such as a large whiteboard, were prepared to support the learning process. Through these coordinated efforts, the Preparation Stage successfully produced a deep understanding of the participants' needs, a set of contextual learning modules, a competent and cohesive teaching team, and a robust support network, thereby establishing a solid foundation for the program's implementation.

Service: Implementing Quranic learning with community support

After going through thorough preparation, the community service program entered the direct implementation phase, or the Service Stage. This stage was carried out over three months, involving ten elderly individuals as core participants, with an activity design that prioritised personal interaction, meaningful learning, and collective spiritual experience.

The elderly participants were students, or santri, in the elderly Quranic education program at the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School, ranging in age from fifty-one to seventy-nine years. All participants were women with diverse backgrounds, including farmers, retired community health centre employees, and retired teachers. The participants' physical conditions varied considerably, from those who were still active to those who required a walking stick, and two participants had significant hearing loss. Their initial motivation was generally a desire to read the Quran fluently before passing away, as well as to find peace and a sense of community in their old age.

Learning activities were held in the Musholla of the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School, following a structured yet flexible format. Each session began with a fifteen-minute opening that included greetings and a collective prayer to centre the participants and foster a sense of togetherness. This was followed by a 30-minute technical reading session using the guided Bagdadi (turutan) method. During this time, activities were carried out both collectively and alternately, beginning with the collective reading of letters, vowel marks, and basic words. The elderly participants then took turns reading short passages at a pace adjusted to their individual abilities. Throughout the session, assistants provided personal support, helping participants who had difficulty seeing or remembering letters. Importantly, there was no system of punishment or strict evaluation; mistakes were corrected gently, and every small effort was sincerely appreciated.

The next segment, a thirty-minute reflective-spiritual session, formed the heart of the Religious Experience Learning approach. In this part of the program, one verse or short chapter, such as Al-Falaq, An-Nas, or Al-Kautsar, was chosen as material for reflection. The facilitator would read the translation and explain the simple context through relatable stories. Discussions were then opened with thought-provoking questions designed to connect the sacred text with lived experience, such as, "What does 'the favours of your Lord' that we should not deny mean, based on Ibu's or Bapak's life experiences?" Participants were warmly invited to share their stories, feelings, and life experiences related to the verse's message, while the facilitators carefully observed the psychological dynamics and offered emotional validation. Each session concluded with a fifteen-minute closing and brief practice, which included a reflective summary of the day's learning and ended with a collective prayer, sending the participants home with a sense of peace and accomplishment.



Figure 3. The Elderly Quranic Education Program Mentoring Process

1. Implementation of the Mutual Recitation System and Personal Mentoring

Beyond the structured meetings, a more personal mutual recitation system was implemented. These recitation sessions took place after the formal learning activities, when participants gathered to listen to each other's readings more closely, share the difficulties they were facing, and offer mutual encouragement and support.

Mentoring support was also provided by the young female students at the boarding school, aged 16 to 18. These young santri assisted the elderly mothers by accompanying them on walks from home to the boarding school and served as informal conversation partners. This intergenerational interaction created natural and meaningful bonds that enriched the entire learning community.

2. Integration with the Boarding School's Spiritual Activities

To further enrich the religious experience, the elderly participants were gradually integrated into the boarding school's existing spiritual rituals. They were invited and accompanied to perform the Maghrib and Isha prayers in congregation at the boarding school's

prayer hall, fostering a sense of collective worship and belonging. A monthly collective Quran recitation completion ceremony was also held, during which the elderly women took turns reading several verses, with all the boarding school students in attendance. This moment became a profoundly moving and meaningful spiritual peak experience for all involved.

3. Achievements of the Service Stage

Several important outcomes emerged from this stage of the program. In terms of basic literacy, four out of the ten participants showed significant progress in their ability to read the Quran. Regarding comprehension of meaning, all participants were able to express in their own words the moral messages of the chapters they had studied. A notable shift in attitude was also observed, characterised by the emergence of self-confidence, a reduction in feelings of shame, and a strengthened sense of togetherness among the participants. They began greeting each other warmly, visiting one another when someone fell ill, and offering mutual motivation. Finally, in terms of spiritual engagement, the participants grew increasingly enthusiastic about participating in the communal rituals. They began incorporating the daily recitations and remembrances of God into their regular practice.

The Service Stage successfully created a safe, warm, and meaningful learning space for the ten elderly women. The process of transformation occurred not only in their cognitive and technical abilities but, more importantly, in their psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions, laying a strong foundation for entering the next phase of deep reflection.

Reflection Stage

The final stage of this Service Learning cycle consisted of a process of critical reflection and systematic evaluation of the entire program. This stage functioned not merely as a summative assessment but also as a space for deep, transformative learning for all stakeholders, particularly the community service team.

1. Effectiveness of the Religious Experience Learning (REL) Approach

Program evaluation revealed that the Religious Experience Learning approach successfully fostered holistic, transformative learning among the elderly. The strength of this approach lies in its ability to integrate three dimensions of learning synergistically: the technical aspect of reading the Quran, the reflective process of finding meaning, and the internalisation of spiritual values in daily life. As a result, learning shifted from being merely an activity of textual literacy to existential literacy, where participants not only learned to read the sacred text but also came to find meaning in life through it deeply.

In its implementation, the Bagdadi or turutan method was chosen as the primary technical approach and proved more suitable for the psycho-cognitive condition of the elderly than more structured, speed-oriented methods such as Yanbu'a. Findings from Focus Group Discussions with participants indicated that the characteristics of the Bagdadi method, which does not emphasise strict evaluation, is free from "achievement cards," and does not demand perfection in pronunciation, actually created a safe and non-threatening learning environment. This condition significantly increased psychological safety, reduced learning anxiety, and, in turn, strengthened the participants' intrinsic motivation to continue learning without the burden of shame or fear of failure.

Thus, the integration of the REL approach, a humane method, and contextual material not only achieved instructional goals but also realised spiritual wellness through learning that humanised and empowered.

2. Teacher Synergy and the Humanist Approach as the Foundation of Success

Evaluation results consistently affirmed that the performance and dynamics of the teaching team were one of the main determining factors in the program's success. The greatest strength lay in their complementary collaboration, where teachers with different disciplinary expertise synergised their competencies to create a truly holistic approach. Ustadz Azis, with his religious authority and deep understanding of local culture, served as a key figure providing comfort and religious legitimacy. His presence created a sense of safety and familiarity that underpinned the learning process. Ibu Mahmudah, with her expertise in community psychology, actively monitored and maintained the psychological well-being of the elderly participants.

Built upon this collaborative structure, a humanist approach embodied in the *ngemong* philosophy, emphasising gentleness, patience, and unconditional acceptance, was consistently applied by the entire team. This approach successfully fostered a high degree of psychological safety within the learning space. This atmosphere allowed the elderly participants, who were often burdened by social expectations and shame over their lack of knowledge, to express their vulnerability openly. Phenomena such as tears of emotion upon completing the Quran recitation, admissions of learning difficulties, or sharing life's sorrows were no longer seen as weaknesses. However, they were honoured as authentic parts of the spiritual and learning process. Thus, the teaching team not only succeeded in transmitting knowledge but, more importantly, created an inclusive, empathetic, and humanising learning community where each elderly individual felt truly seen, heard, and valued.



Figure 4. Humanist Approach through Dialogue with Elderly Quranic Education Students at the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School

Impact on Elderly Participants

The evaluation of the program's impact revealed a multidimensional transformation in the elderly participants that extended far beyond mere academic achievement, touching the deepest aspects of human experience.

In the cognitive-spiritual domain, concrete progress was observed in the participants' ability to read verses and arrange basic recitations, an achievement of profound significance in their old age. However, the more significant impact was the increase in spiritual literacy. Participants not only read the text but also developed the capacity to connect the Quran's universal messages to the context of their personal lives, drawing wisdom and life lessons from each verse. This process transformed the Quran from a mere object of recitation into an active dialogical partner in understanding and navigating life.

On the affective-psychological level, the program proved to be an effective intervention. A significant decrease was observed in feelings of loneliness and existential anxiety that often afflict

the elderly. Conversely, there was a notable increase in self-esteem and a sense of purpose in life. Many participants expressed, often with tears in their eyes, that they now felt "still useful" and "still capable of learning." These statements represented a restoration of identity and agency, which are frequently eroded by social stigma surrounding the helplessness of old age.

In the social-communal realm, a strong social support network was formed among the elderly participants and with the younger generation at the boarding school. The mutual recitation system, which initially functioned as a learning technique, evolved into a care group. Within these groups, participants not only corrected each other's readings but also visited one another during illness, strengthened each other in times of grief, and celebrated together in moments of spiritual joy.

In the existential-spiritual dimension, the program facilitated peak spiritual experiences, such as the profoundly moving collective Quran recitation completion ceremony. Such experiences contributed directly to the realisation of spiritual wellness, manifested in three fundamental ways: a deep sense of gratitude for life's blessings and journey; inner peace in accepting one's circumstances, including physical limitations due to age; and a more complete self-acceptance, resolving inner conflicts and achieving life integrity in accordance with Erikson's stage of integrity versus despair.

Taken together, the program's impact was holistic and mutually reinforcing. The increase in spiritual literacy strengthened psychological resilience; the community's social support provided a foundation for spiritual growth; and the achievement of spiritual wellness ultimately radiated positive energy into participants' cognitive, affective, and social lives. This transformation demonstrates that an appropriate educational approach can activate growth potential at any stage of life, including in old age.



Figure 5. Mentoring Documentation

Discussion

Pedagogical Deconstruction: The Implementation of Religious Experience Learning (REL) in Quranic Education for the Elderly

The implementation of Religious Experience Learning in Quranic education for the elderly at the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School represents a radical pedagogical paradigm shift, moving from a mechanistic, product-oriented approach toward a humanistic, reflective, and experience-centred learning ecology. Research findings indicate that the elderly intuitively rejected standardised methods such as Yanbu'a, which, although technically efficient, actually became a source of learning anxiety and feelings of incompetence. This rejection was not merely a matter of dislike but rather a form of epistemological resistance to an educational logic that ignored their psychological and temporal context. As the study by Yunus et al. (2024) reminds us that digital innovation and accelerated methods must still consider marginalised groups such as the elderly, the findings at At-Taubah reinforce that learning success is determined more by alignment with

the psycho-social context of learners than merely by speed of achievement. Therefore, the choice to return to the Bagdadi method, which is more relationship-based and process-focused, represents a form of "pedagogical deconstruction." This deconstruction dismantled the rigid teacher-student hierarchy and created a space where Quranic learning was understood as a shared spiritual journey rather than a race for individual achievement.

This fundamental transformation was most evident in the evolution of the mutual recitation system. What initially functioned as a mechanism for technical correction and quality control of memorisation at the At-Taubah boarding school developed into a reflective interpretive community. In this community, the elderly not only corrected each other's pronunciation but also, more importantly, interpreted their learning experiences together, shared difficulties, and offered emotional support. This practice created what might be called a collective zone of proximal development, where individual abilities were developed through social scaffolding from fellow participants and facilitators. This phenomenon aligns with the principles of inclusive lifelong learning that respect the unique needs of the elderly, as formulated by [Nik Abdullah et al. \(2024\)](#). By reducing shame and increasing feelings of acceptance, this reflective mutual recitation system transformed the learning environment into a laboratory of religious experience, where every interaction became an opportunity to directly experience the values of brotherhood, patience, and trust in God embedded in the verses being studied.

The culmination of this REL implementation was manifested in the transformed meaning of the *khataman*, or collective Quran recitation completion ceremony. If in the conventional paradigm *khataman* represented the technical completion of a material target, at the At-Taubah boarding school, it underwent a sacralization, becoming a peak spiritual experience and rite of passage. The *khataman* was experienced not as an end to learning but as existential confirmation, tangible proof that in their old age, they were still capable of achieving something spiritually meaningful. This feeling closely paralleled the findings of [Hamiz et al. \(2014\)](#), who noted that success in re-memorising prayer verses could reduce frustration and increase spirituality among the elderly. However, at At-Taubah, the impact was even deeper: the khataman prompted elderly participants with limited economic means to make sacrificial offerings. This action represented a concrete form of value internalisation, where gratitude for spiritual achievement was directly translated into social charity. Thus, the khataman functioned as a powerful identity-validation mechanism, transforming the elderly from "retirees" or "senile individuals" into "Quran learners" and "grateful servants of God."

Theoretically, the implementation of REL at At-Taubah both addresses and transcends previous literature findings. Adaptive gamification frameworks, such as GLAM-Q, emphasise personalisation and motivation through technology. REL at At-Taubah achieved similar goals, namely high motivation and engagement, but through relational and emotional personalisation rather than algorithmic personalisation. This approach proved more appropriate for the characteristics of the elderly who, as revealed by [Okun and Nimrod \(2021\)](#), may face cultural and technological barriers in digital learning but are highly responsive to social bonds and meaningful experiences. Therefore, the success of REL implementation here lies in its ability to revitalise the essence of traditional learning, such as the Bagdadi method and the mutual recitation system, by infusing new awareness of the importance of experience, reflection, and community. The result was a transformative pedagogical model that not only taught the elderly to read the Quran but made the learning process itself a source of spiritual wellness that could be directly felt and celebrated.

Expanding Access and Participation: Humanistic Mentoring and the Construction of a Spiritual Safe Space

The effort to increase access and participation for the elderly at the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School was achieved not through a merely technical-administrative approach, but through careful and empathetic social engineering that, at its core, involved building an inclusive, multi-generational community and a spiritual safe space. Research findings indicate that the active participation of the elderly did not stem from complete physical facilities, but from a sense of acceptance, belonging, and being treated humanely. The formation of a learning community involving the elderly, adolescents, and children was a brilliant strategy that created an ecosystem of mutual support. The adolescents served as a practical support system, while the elderly became spiritual role models and sources of wisdom. This dynamic directly addressed one of the root causes of low elderly participation: social isolation and feelings of uselessness. As emphasised in the literature on spiritual support for the elderly, the social dimension of interaction and a sense of belonging are critical components for their well-being (Fan et al., 2025). By becoming part of this multi-generational community, the elderly at At-Taubah regained a meaningful social role that extended far beyond being mere passive learners.

The mentoring strategy adopted also underwent a fundamental transformation, shifting from a hierarchical instructional model toward a humanistic approach based on relationship and empathy. The mentors no longer acted as all-knowing "teachers" but as spiritual facilitators and life companions who adopted the local philosophy of "ngemong", a practice of caregiving characterised by deep gentleness and patience. This approach aligns with the principles of humanistic education and unconditional positive regard, which emphasise creating a non-threatening environment and appreciating individual autonomy and potential (Hall et al., 2010; Holstun & Bohecker, 2024). In the context of religious learning, the application of these principles carries deep spiritual meaning; it reflects an attitude of *rahmah* (compassion) and respect for human dignity at any age. By becoming patient listeners and providing space for the elderly to ask questions without fear of judgment, the mentors created the psychological safety that is a prerequisite for deep learning and spiritual growth.

The logical consequence of this humanistic mentoring was the creation of a safe space for vulnerability. The At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School succeeded in deconstructing the traditional teacher-student hierarchy and replacing it with an egalitarian relationship in the search for meaning. In this space, ignorance, difficulty remembering, or emotions such as tears during the khataman were not seen as weaknesses but were normalised as part of spiritual language and human honesty. This was especially important for the elderly, who often feel ashamed of their declining cognitive abilities. By destigmatising vulnerability, the boarding school became a sanctuary or spiritual refuge, similar to the ideal role of a faith community, as reviewed by Garrison (2021), as a vessel for transforming the narrative of ageing and dementia from stigma to inclusion. This safe space allowed the elderly to be fully present in the learning process, not as flawed "learning objects" but as whole spiritual subjects on a journey.

This inclusive approach was reinforced by the transformation of material support into communal spiritual expression. Donations, refreshments, and even the initiative for sacrificial offerings from elderly participants with limited economic means were not reduced to economic transactions but underwent a sacralization of the mundane. The practice of cooperation for the boarding school's sustainability became a communal ritual in its own right, strengthening bonds and a sense of mutual need. This echoes Stover's (2005) findings that one of the spiritual needs of the elderly is the opportunity to serve and feel themselves as "masters," not merely as "senior citizens." By contributing according to their abilities, the elderly at At-Taubah regained their agency and self-worth. They were no longer recipients of aid but became givers and pillars of the community. Thus, the expansion of access and participation here was achieved not by simplifying technical requirements but by redesigning the entire socio-ecological system of the boarding school

into a mutually reinforcing, humanistic, and spiritually meaningful support network, where every person, old, young, wealthy, or less fortunate, has a valued role and contribution.

Achieving Spiritual Wellness: Internalisation of Values and Existential Transformation of the Elderly

The implementation of Religious Experience Learning (REL) at the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School was not merely a pedagogical success but, more importantly, led in deep, multidimensional spiritual wellness among the elderly. Research findings demonstrate how integrated and experiential Quranic learning successfully facilitated the internalisation of the sacred text's values, transforming the perspectives, life attitudes, and existential quality of the elderly participants.

The first and most fundamental transformation was the shift in motivation for worship from extrinsic to intrinsic. Acts of worship such as prayer and Quran reading, which may previously have been performed as routine obligations, became personally longed-for spiritual needs. This process was very clear when the elderly reported that prayer served as a source of spiritual energy and inner peace, rather than merely a ritual. The adaptation of practices such as performing eight rakats of Tarawih prayer and maintaining flexible learning times demonstrated that spiritual substance was prioritised over formality. This aligns with research showing that authentic spirituality, not merely ritualistic practice, is an important predictor of mental health and life well-being among the elderly (Rivera-Ledesma & Montero, 2005; Briggs & Shoffner, 2006). At At-Taubah, REL catalysed in shift from "religiosity" toward a more personal and enlivening "spirituality."

This internalisation of values then expanded into a life framework and a positive religious coping mechanism. Quranic values such as patience, gratitude, and trust in God were no longer merely theological concepts but became concrete strategies for facing the challenges of ageing. The elderly reported an ability to interpret illness, physical limitations, or loss as meaningful tests from God, rather than mere meaningless suffering. This capacity for religious reframing lies at the heart of adaptive religious coping, which has long been recognised in the literature as a powerful source of resilience for the elderly (Martins et al., 2022; Mohammadi et al., 2024). More intriguingly, the internalisation of the value of generosity prompted elderly participants with limited economic means to make sacrificial offerings. This action was tangible proof that the value had become part of their identity and inner drive, leading to an existential transformation in which giving became a source of happiness and self-affirmation.

The accumulation of this internalisation process culminated in the achievement of existential well-being and peace of mind. The elderly reported increased life satisfaction, greater acceptance of the ageing process, and, most significantly, reduced death anxiety. These findings confirm the central proposition of many studies that meaning and purpose in life are core components of spiritual wellness and mental health (Briggs & Shoffner, 2006; Casanova et al., 2024). By finding new meaning through learning and community, the elderly at At-Taubah appeared to successfully resolve Erikson's final stage crisis, integrity versus despair. They viewed their lives as a meaningful whole, capable of integrating past failures and successes, and faced the end of life with acceptance full of meaning, rather than with regret or despair. This represents the pinnacle of spiritual wellness.

This individual spiritual transformation did not stop at the personal level but resonated socially, strengthening a spiritualized social network. Newly formed spiritual bonds strengthened the boarding school community. The elderly not only received support but also actively contributed as living libraries of wisdom, life experience, and spiritual role models for the younger generation. This role empowered and validated their self-worth, a critical component of spiritual

support, according to the framework of [Fan et al. \(2025\)](#). Thus, the spiritual wellness achieved was synergistic: individual well-being strengthened the community, and the strong community in turn became a vessel that sustained and nurtured individual well-being. This pattern demonstrates that the REL approach at the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School created a sustainable spiritual ecosystem in which Quranic learning catalysed a virtuous cycle of enhanced spiritual well-being and strengthened social capital, ultimately realising the essence of dignified and meaningful ageing.

Synthesis of an Integrative Model: Religious Experience Learning as a Catalyst for Spiritual Wellness among the Elderly in Islamic Boarding Schools

Based on the in-depth discussion in the three previous subsections, an integrative model can be synthesised to explain the working mechanism and the success of the Religious Experience Learning approach at the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School. This model positions REL not as a single method, but as a transformative catalyst that enlivens and synergises three pillars of the learning ecosystem: reflective pedagogy, humanistic mentoring, and spiritual community. These three pillars work symbiotically to create a tiered transformation pathway: from a meaningful learning experience, giving birth to a deep religious experience, which ultimately crystallises into enhanced spiritual wellness.

The first pillar, Reflective Pedagogy, begins with the deconstruction of rigid methods toward a contextual and relationship-based approach. This creates an initial foundation that is psychologically safe. However, REL transforms this foundation into something more than just "comfortable." Through practices such as reflective mutual recitation and the khataman as a rite of passage, every learning moment is designed to trigger an experiential learning cycle involving concrete experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation. This is what distinguishes REL from ordinary learning; it deliberately weaves threads of spiritual reflection into the fabric of cognitive activity. The result is not merely knowledge, but internalised understanding.

The second pillar, Humanistic Mentoring, functions as a social and emotional catalyst that accelerates this internalisation. With the philosophy of "*ngemong*" and unconditional positive regard, mentors foster a sense of psychological safety that allows vulnerability to be expressed. In the context of REL, mentors do not merely facilitate cognitive processes but also act as spiritual guides, helping the elderly reflect on their learning experiences in light of life values and faith. This role is similar to that of a mentor in heutagogy or mentor-assisted learning, which encourages independent learning and the search for meaning ([Snowden & Ali, 2017](#)). The sacralization of material support further strengthens this dimension, transforming the community into a network of mutual care imbued with worshipful value.

The third pillar, Spiritual Community, serves as a container that holds and strengthens the entire process. The multi-generational community at the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School is not merely a collection of individuals but an interpretive community that collectively constructs meaning. Here, personal experiences are reflected upon and socially validated. The elderly not only learn for themselves but also learn to live together and to practice values such as patience and mutual support in real interactions. This community functions as a critical source of social support, which, according to research, plays a powerful mediating role between spiritual activity and well-being ([Li & Shih, 2022](#); [Luo et al., 2025](#)). This support, especially esteem support that respects dignity, directly fosters the elderly's self-worth and sense of belonging.

These three pillars support the transformation pathway at the heart of this model. First, integrating reflective pedagogy and humanistic mentoring produces meaningful learning experiences, moments when an elderly participant successfully reads a verse and feels the warm support of friends and mentors. Second, these meaningful learning experiences, when reflected upon within the spiritual community, are elevated to the level of deep religious experience.

Participants not only feel "capable" but also experience closeness to God, profound happiness, or inner peace. Third, it is the accumulation of these deep religious experiences that gradually builds and strengthens the various dimensions of spiritual wellness: providing meaning and purpose in life, enhancing peace and self-acceptance, strengthening positive social relationships, and ultimately overcoming existential anxiety. This model explains why the intervention at At-Taubah succeeded while some other religious programs may not, because REL here holistically activated and connected all three levels of the learning ecosystem.

Therefore, the uniqueness of the At-Taubah Islamic Boarding School model lies in its ability to serve as both a spiritual incubator and a haven. As an incubator, it actively cultivates spiritual wellness through a series of structured experiences. As a haven, it provides a safe space where the elderly can confront the vulnerabilities of old age without stigma. The theoretical implication of this model is the reinforcement of the paradigm that lifelong learning, particularly in old age, must shift from knowledge transfer toward the co-construction of meaning. The practical implication is that this model can be adopted and adapted by other Islamic boarding schools, study groups, or religious educational institutions serving the elderly, by emphasising the redesign of learning environments that integrate all three pillars: reflective methods, empathetic mentoring, and inclusive community building.

Conclusion

Based on the implementation of the community service program that has been carried out, it can be concluded that:

First, regarding the development of a Quranic learning method based on Religious Experience Learning (REL), this program succeeded in designing and implementing a pedagogical approach that was truly responsive to the physical and psychological needs of the elderly. This success was realised through a process of deconstructing rigid, standardised learning methods, which were then replaced by the more flexible and process-oriented Bagdadi or turutan approach. This method was further developed through the mutual recitation system, which no longer served merely as a mechanism for correcting readings but became a reflective, interpretive community. The culmination of this methodological implementation was seen in the transformed meaning of the khataman, which shifted from merely a ritual of technical completion to a meaningful peak spiritual experience that shaped a new identity for the elderly as lifelong learners. All the contextual adjustments in materials, duration, and learning intensity demonstrated the method's successful adaptation to the participants' physiological and psychological realities.

Second, regarding the increase in access and participation among the elderly, this program demonstrated that active involvement in religious education can be achieved through the creation of a holistic support ecosystem. The core of this success lay in the formation of a multi-generational community that organically created a socio-spiritual support network. In this community, the elderly were no longer passive participants but an integral part of a mutual support system involving young boarding school students, caregivers, and fellow elderly individuals. The foundation of this ecosystem was humanistic mentoring inspired by the philosophy of ngemong, an approach emphasising gentleness, patience, and unconditional acceptance. This approach successfully created psychological safety that enabled the elderly to overcome the shame and fear that often hindered their participation. Furthermore, this program transformed the learning space into a safe place to express vulnerability, while simultaneously converting material support from mere economic transactions into communal spiritual practices that strengthened a sense of belonging and self-worth.

Third, in strengthening spiritual wellness and quality of life for the elderly, this program

achieved a profound, multidimensional impact. Transformation began at the level of worship practices, shifting from ritual formality toward authentic personal spiritual experience. The values of the Quran were no longer abstract concepts but became internalised as a life framework providing resilience in facing the challenges of ageing. The peak achievement was seen in the emergence of existential well-being, a psychospiritual state characterised by inner peace, self-acceptance, and deep life meaning. Equally important, this spiritual transformation did not stop at the individual level but also resonated in social relationships, strengthening community cohesion and restoring the elderly as sources of spiritual wisdom for the next generation.

Integratively, these three achievements mutually reinforced each other in a sustainable, transformative cycle. The implementation of contextual REL methods created an inclusive learning environment, which then became the foundation for realising holistic spiritual wellness. This program not only succeeded in improving religious literacy but, more fundamentally, actualised the essence of lifelong learning that humanises, empowers, and transforms. These findings provide a valuable contribution to the development of geragogy in an Islamic context, while simultaneously offering a new paradigm in viewing old age not as a period of decline, but as a phase of spiritual growth and search for meaning that actually reaches its peak of depth.

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