

THE SPIRITUAL CONSTRUCTION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES AT THE TAMBAK BENING ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore and describe the spiritual construction of students with disabilities at the Tambak Bening Islamic Boarding School in Surabaya. Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, this study explores the subjective religious experiences of students with special needs in the Islamic boarding school environment. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation of students with disabilities, teachers, and caregivers. Data analysis followed Moustakas' model, which encompasses epoche, horizontalization, grouping of meanings, and the discovery of the essence of the phenomenon. The results indicate that the spirituality of students with disabilities is shaped by a dynamic interaction among personal circumstances (motivation and resilience), the inclusive socio-religious environment of the Islamic boarding school, and the ongoing process of spiritual development (tarbiyah ruhiyah). Religious experiences, such as inner peace through dhikr (remembrance of God) and a sense of acceptance within the community, shape God-consciousness, spiritual resilience, and self-acceptance. This study concludes that Islamic boarding schools play a strategic role as inclusive Islamic educational spaces that transform physical limitations into profound spiritual strength.

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, education in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) focuses not only on the cognitive transfer of religious knowledge but also on the development of character, spirituality, and religious awareness. The lives of students in a pesantren unfold within an educational system that harmoniously integrates academic activities, regular worship practices, and intensive social interaction. In this context, pesantren function as educational institutions that shape religious personalities through worship, the exemplary conduct of teachers, and the ongoing practice of religious culture in daily life (Dhofier, 2000). This controlled environment allows for the in-depth internalization of spiritual values in each individual living within it.

The spiritual experiences of students in Islamic boarding schools are shaped not only by formal classroom learning but also by daily life experiences imbued with religious values. This process involves inner experiences, deep self-reflection, and dynamic interactions with a religious social environment. This aligns with Al-Ghazali's view that human spirituality develops through *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul), namely, purification of the soul through worship, moral education, and ongoing spiritual practice (Anwar et al., 2025). Therefore, the primary goal of Islamic education is to bring humans closer to Allah SWT through the purification of the heart and the development of noble morals.

This phenomenon of spiritual formation becomes even more unique and complex when linked to the presence of students with disabilities in Islamic boarding schools. Students with disabilities have a distinct religious experience because they must contend with physical, sensory, or cognitive limitations that affect how they understand and practice religious teachings. In many cases, these limitations actually give rise to more reflective spiritual experiences, such as an increased awareness of the meaning of life and patience. These spiritual experiences demonstrate that ideal physical conditions do not always shape spirituality; rather, spirituality often develops through challenging life experiences (Lalani, 2020).

Through reflection on life's trials, students with disabilities tend to construct the meaning of spirituality as a form of absolute dependence on God. They view physical limitations as part of God's test that must be faced with an

attitude of trust and submission. This, in turn, fosters "self-acceptance," in which students accept their condition as part of God's plan, thereby strengthening their spirituality. This process demonstrates that physical limitations can catalyze the emergence of strong spiritual resilience in the face of life's various challenges.

Theologically, the principle of inclusivity has long been recognized in Islam through teachings that emphasize the absolute equality of all human beings before God. From an Islamic perspective, every human being has the same right to education and the opportunity to develop their innate potential (Inayati et al., 2025). Islam positions humans as beings with equal dignity and moral responsibility regardless of their physical or social condition (Rahman, 1982). Therefore, Islamic education must provide space for all students, including those with special needs, in both learning and spiritual development (Salamun & Nata, 2022).

Over time, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) have begun to embrace inclusive education as an approach that provides equal opportunities for all. Inclusive education is not merely about providing access to education for people with disabilities, but also about active participation and social acceptance within the learning environment (Ainscow, 2020: 15). This concept emphasizes the importance of creating a welcoming, adaptive learning environment that respects the diversity of students within the *pesantren*. Inclusive *pesantren* are now emerging in Indonesia as a model of Islamic education that is responsive to community needs (Latif & Hafid, 2021).

Although research on inclusive education and spirituality in Islamic education has flourished in recent years, several research gaps remain that require further attention. Conceptually, most previous studies have focused on educational accessibility, learning strategies, and curriculum adaptation for students with disabilities. Meanwhile, spirituality is often understood as part of general religiosity without deeply examining how individuals with disabilities construct spiritual meaning through their lived experiences. However, spirituality is a crucial dimension shaping self-identity, psychological resilience, and an individual's sense of divinity (Reynolds, 2022; Moulin-Stožek & Metcalfe, 2023).

Contextually, research on inclusive education is still dominated by studies conducted in public schools, madrasas, and other formal educational institutions. Studies specifically focusing on Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) as spaces for the spiritual development of students with disabilities are still relatively limited. This is even though Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) have distinct characteristics compared to other educational institutions, integrating religious instruction, boarding school life, worship practices, and 24-hour religious social interaction. These characteristics have the potential to create unique and distinctive spiritual experiences for students with disabilities.

Methodologically, most previous research has used survey approaches, policy studies, program evaluations, or institutional analyses that focus on the structural aspects of inclusive education. These approaches have not been able to deeply reveal the subjective experiences of people with disabilities in interpreting their relationships with God, fellow human beings, and their socio-religious environment. Research using a phenomenological approach to explore the religious experiences of students with disabilities in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) is still very rare. Therefore, research that can directly explore the lived experiences of students with disabilities is needed to uncover the essence of the spirituality they construct in their daily lives (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2023).

Given this gap, this research is important because it seeks to understand the process of spiritual formation, which occurs not only through cognitive learning but also through life experiences, worship practices, and religious social interactions within Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). Understanding the spiritual construction of students with disabilities is strategically valuable for developing inclusive Islamic education that is more humanistic, equitable, and oriented towards students' needs. Furthermore, this study can help strengthen models of spiritual development for people with disabilities in Islamic educational institutions, a relatively underexplored area in the academic literature.

The novelty of this research lies in integrating three perspectives that have often been studied separately: Islamic spirituality, inclusive education, and the lived experiences of students with disabilities in Islamic boarding schools.

Unlike previous research that focused more on pedagogical aspects and educational accessibility, this study examines how spirituality is constructed through the religious experiences of students with disabilities living within the Islamic boarding school ecosystem. This study also offers a conceptual model showing that dynamic interactions among personal circumstances, the spirituality of students with disabilities, the socio-religious environment of the Islamic boarding school, and the ongoing process of spiritual education shape one another. Thus, this research expands the study of inclusive Islamic education by placing spiritual experience at the heart of the identity formation and self-resilience of students with disabilities.

Tambak Bening Islamic Boarding School in Surabaya was chosen as a relevant research site because it offers a wide range of educational activities. It provides formal and non-formal education, as well as equivalency programs (Ula, Wustha, and Ulya) that openly involve students with special needs. The pesantren's strong tradition of religious learning makes it an ideal laboratory for examining the construction of spirituality through real-life experiences. This phenomenological study hopes to reveal how the pesantren ecosystem can transform physical limitations into profound spiritual strength for students with disabilities.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative, phenomenological approach to deeply understand the lived experiences of students with disabilities in they develop spirituality in an Islamic boarding school environment. The choice of qualitative methods was based on the research objective of exploring individual meanings regarding a human phenomenon in a natural context (Creswell, J., 2010). The phenomenological approach was applied to uncover the essence of human experience through reflection and in-depth analysis of participants' experiences as they occurred (Moustakas, 1994). The research was conducted at the Tambak Bening Islamic Boarding School in Surabaya, an institution that inclusively integrates students with disabilities at various levels of education. The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling, namely by selecting informants based on specific criteria to obtain rich, multidimensional information (Sugiyono, 2020).

Data collection techniques were conducted through triangulation, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were used to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' inner narratives regarding their worship experiences and spiritual transformation (Schlunegger et al., 2024).

Participatory observation allowed researchers to directly observe social interactions and collective worship activities within the Islamic boarding school environment (Bilal, 2020). Data analysis followed Moustakas' phenomenological model, which includes the stages of epoche (suspension of assumptions), horizontalization of important statements, clustering of meanings, and discovery of the essence of experience (Moustakas, 1994). To ensure data validity (trustworthiness), researchers employed member checking techniques by confirming interview results with informants and conducting prolonged field engagement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESEARCH RESULTS

Personal Conditions and Initial Motivation

The research findings indicate that the spiritual development of students with disabilities at the Tambak Bening Islamic Boarding School in Surabaya begins with personal circumstances, including family background, life experiences, and motivation to study religion. The majority of students with disabilities entered the Islamic boarding school environment with strong encouragement from their families, who learned about the institution's inclusiveness from relatives or alums. This family's involvement in decision-making is driven by a desire for their children to continue receiving adequate religious education and to achieve independence despite their physical limitations. This aligns with the concept of Islamic education, which aims to shape human beings who understand their relationship with God and live lives grounded in spiritual values.

The religious motivation instilled by families provides the initial foundation for students to face the challenges of their new environment. Families view Islamic boarding schools as the best ecosystem for developing morals and providing spiritual protection for children with special needs. This

hope for independence drives students to persevere and adapt to the disciplined Islamic boarding school education system. Thus, family factors are a primary driver in the initial stages of students' development of divine awareness.

In the initial phase of their stay at an Islamic boarding school, students with disabilities generally experience psychological dynamics such as deep fear and anxiety. They feel anxious about their physical and mental inability to keep up with the school's rigorous and physically demanding schedule of activities. However, these feelings gradually transform into a sense of comfort as they experience warm social acceptance from their surroundings. This adaptation process demonstrates that an inclusive environment can mitigate the initial psychological barriers experienced by students with special needs.

The unique findings of this study indicate that the physical limitations experienced by the students actually catalyze more reflective thinking in understanding the meaning of life's existence. The existential experience of facing physical challenges encourages them to engage in deep inner reflection on the relationship between humans and the Creator. This personal condition is not viewed as a static obstacle but rather as a means of increasing patience and absolute dependence on God Almighty. This reinforces the theory that spirituality often thrives through life experiences full of challenges and trials.

Worship Experience and Spiritual Life

In terms of religious practice, students with disabilities report significant changes in their religious discipline since settling in at the Islamic boarding school. The collective and regular worship activities at the mosque create a new spirit not found in their previous environment. Congregational prayer, in particular, becomes a particularly memorable spiritual moment, providing a sense of order and sustained inner peace. Through this routine, students learn spiritual discipline and togetherness in carrying out religious commands.

The spiritual experience at the mosque also has a powerful emotional impact, as students feel they belong to a new "family" of equals before God. The social interactions that occur in the prayer space diminish feelings of isolation and foster a collective religious identity. The shared experience of prostration and prayer provides psychological reinforcement that physical limitations are no barrier to being an integral part of the devout Muslim community. This sense

of social acceptance in the place of worship accelerates the development of positive spirituality within the students.

In addition to obligatory worship, collective dhikr (remembrance of God) and recitation of the yellow book (Kitab Kuning) are recognized as providing profound inner peace for students with disabilities. Collective dhikr practices help them feel closer to God and provide strength in facing life's difficulties. The material in the yellow book also serves to internalize moderate Islamic values, helping them understand religion more substantively. These spiritual activities serve as an effective method of spiritual development (*tarbiyah ruhiyah*) to foster mental resilience.

For students with disabilities, worship is understood transcendentally as a primary source of strength for overcoming their physical limitations. They view every act of worship and prayer as a bridge to God's help in navigating life's challenges. Spirituality in this context manifests as "self-acceptance," in which they believe that their disability is part of God's destiny and contains certain wisdom. This belief provides inner fortitude to persist in pursuing knowledge and serving God.

Environmental Support and the Role of Educators

The support of educators (teachers and *ustadz*) at the Tambak Bening Islamic Boarding School plays a central role in the success of this inclusive education. The teachers view the presence of students with disabilities as an educational "trust" that must be implemented according to the principles of justice and humanity. They provide more personal and empathetic attention, acting not only as religious instructors but also as spiritual guides (*murabbi*). This non-discriminatory attitude of the teachers serves as a source of inspiration and motivation for the students to continue developing.

The development strategy is implemented through adapting flexible teaching methods, such as simplifying difficult material and providing intensive personal guidance. In addition to support from educators, peers (senior students and fellow students) also demonstrate an accepting attitude that strengthens the self-confidence of students with disabilities. The open environment of the Islamic boarding school fosters religious morals and social

solidarity. Thus, the humanistic ecosystem of the Islamic boarding school successfully transforms physical limitations into collective spiritual strength.

DISCUSSION

Spirituality of People with Disabilities as a Form of Spiritual Resilience

Research findings indicate that the spirituality of students with disabilities at the Tambak Bening Islamic Boarding School develops through life experiences full of physical limitations, yet it actually produces strong spiritual resilience. This condition demonstrates that the experience of disability does not always result in psychological weakness, but rather can become a space for existential reflection that strengthens an individual's relationship with God. These findings align with research by Reynolds (2022), which states that individuals with disabilities often develop a deeper meaning in life through experiences of suffering and physical limitations. Spirituality then becomes a primary mechanism for building hope, self-acceptance, and resilience in the face of social stigma.

In the context of Islamic boarding schools, the religious experiences of students with disabilities are formed not only through formal rituals but also through the intensive, twenty-four-hour process of collective life. This situation reinforces Sahin's (2023) view that modern Islamic education should be understood as a process of developing spiritual consciousness that fosters emotional and moral balance in students. Thus, Islamic boarding schools function not only as religious educational institutions but also as spaces of spiritual and social therapy for vulnerable groups.

Inclusive Islamic Boarding Schools as Spaces for Spiritual Transformation

The uniqueness of this research lies in the finding that inclusive Islamic boarding schools can transform physical limitations into moral and spiritual strengths. The egalitarian social environment of Islamic boarding schools creates a sense of belonging for students with disabilities, enabling them to develop a positive religious identity. This phenomenon demonstrates that inclusivity in Islamic education is not merely about educational access but also encompasses social acceptance and respect for human dignity.

These findings support Darwanto et al.'s (2024) study, which explains that inclusive Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia have unique characteristics compared to formal educational institutions, as relationships among students are built through a culture of brotherhood, collective spirituality, and shared living practices. This model of social relations allows students with disabilities to experience a natural process of social integration without strong discriminatory pressures.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that collective worship practices such as congregational prayer, dhikr, and recitation of yellow books have a significant impact on fostering a sense of psychological security and inner peace among students with disabilities. This confirms Moulin-Stožek and Metcalfe's (2023) view that collective spiritual practices can foster meaning in life and strengthen the emotional well-being of people with disabilities.

Religious Experience as a Construction of the Meaning of Life

Phenomenologically, the religious experiences of the disabled students in this study demonstrate a profound process of constructing meaning in life. The students do not view their disability as punishment or a form of injustice from God, but rather as a spiritual test filled with wisdom. This perspective fosters a strong sense of trust, gratitude, and self-acceptance.

These findings are relevant to research by Marinić & Nimac (2021), who found that the religious experiences of Muslims with disabilities contribute significantly to the formation of positive self-identity and strengthening mental health. Spirituality, in this context, is not merely a ritual activity but a primary source of optimism and social empowerment.

Furthermore, the results of this study demonstrate that the spiritual experiences of students with disabilities possess a uniquely transformative dimension, born from a combination of physical suffering and the support of a religious community. This phenomenon reinforces the perspective of the phenomenology of religion, which places individual subjective experience at the heart of the development of spiritual awareness. Thus, the spirituality of students with disabilities in Islamic boarding schools can be understood as the result of a dialectic between personal experience, the social-religious environment, and a transcendental relationship with Allah God.

Theoretical Contribution to Contemporary Islamic Education

This research makes a significant contribution to the development of a spirituality-based, inclusive Islamic education paradigm. To date, studies of inclusive education have tended to focus more on pedagogical aspects and learning accessibility. However, the spiritual aspects and religious experiences of students with disabilities significantly influence their character development, mental health, and quality of life.

In a global context, Aisyi et al. (2025) emphasized that future education must integrate emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions in a balanced manner. Therefore, an inclusive Islamic boarding school education model, such as that at the Tambak Bening Islamic Boarding School, can be an alternative for developing humanistic Islamic education that places spirituality as the primary foundation for the development of a complete human being.

Another unique feature of this research is the use of a phenomenological approach to understand the inner experiences of students with disabilities directly from their own perspectives. This approach allows researchers to uncover the deepest dimensions of religious experience that are often obscured by administrative and structural approaches to formal education. Thus, this research expands the academic discourse on the relationship among disability, spirituality, and Islamic education in contemporary Muslim society.

CONCLUSION

1. The construction of spirituality of students with disabilities at the Tambak Bening Islamic Boarding School is a dynamic process that begins with subjective personal conditions, including family background, religious motivation, and life experiences facing physical limitations.
2. These personal factors are transformed through interactions within the inclusive religious-social environment of Islamic boarding schools, where students feel socially accepted by teachers and peers. The core of this formation lies in the spiritual education process, which includes the habituation of collective worship, the study of yellow books, and empathetic personal guidance from ustadz and caregivers. Through a 24-hour total education system, students' physical limitations become a catalyst for deep inner reflection on the relationship between humans and the Creator.

3. The result of this process is the formation of a spiritual identity that encompasses the dimensions of God consciousness, spiritual resilience, and strong self-acceptance. Religious experiences, such as inner peace through remembrance and gratitude, demonstrate that spirituality does not always arise from ideal physical conditions, but rather from life's challenges faced with faith.
4. Tambak Bening Islamic Boarding School has succeeded in becoming a space of transformation that respects human dignity and proves that an inclusive Islamic educational ecosystem can transform physical limitations into moral and spiritual strength. Thus, the spirituality of students with disabilities is a combination of individual inner strength and the support of an adaptive and humanistic religious environment.

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