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Beyond Doctrinal Transmission through Muslim Converts' Lived Experience for Transformative Spiritual Education

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ABSTRACT

Islamic education for adult converts often emphasizes the accurate transmission of religious doctrine, while giving limited attention to how converts' lived experiences shape their spiritual development. This study explores how Muslim converts in Malang Raya, Indonesia, turn lived post-conversion experiences into religious meaning and embodied piety, and what pedagogical implications follow. It reports an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of interviews with ten converts and one convert mentor, supported by participant observation and documents collected from February to June 2026. Five themes emerged: becoming Muslim as a process that begins before and continues after the shahada; lived encounters with Muslim practice that often, though not always, preceded theological explanation; reflective meaning-making through which Islam became an existential orientation; embodied piety, moral change, and identity negotiation within families; and relational safety within pedagogical accompaniment. The themes are synthesized in an experience-to-piety framework of four recursive movements sustained by accompaniment, from which four pedagogical propositions are derived for further testing. The article argues that Islamic spiritual education becomes more formative when authoritative knowledge is connected to learners' biography, relational safety, reflective practice, and moral action. The findings are limited by a small sample drawn from a single region and institutional network, retrospective accounts, and a single-mentor perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

Muslim converts in contemporary Indonesia can find abundant explanations of creed, worship, law, and moral conduct through mosques, study circles, digital media, and convert-support institutions. The harder educational question is what happens after information becomes available. A person may learn the sequence of prayer and the basic formulas of faith while still struggling to inhabit Islam as a coherent orientation of life. Conversion is not exhausted by the declaration of faith: it unsettles habits, relationships, moral vocabularies, and understandings of the self. Rambo's processual model treats conversion as a sequence of context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences rather than a single event.[1] Moreover, recent studies of Muslim converts show that religious identity after conversion is continuously negotiated rather than mechanically acquired.[2]

Research on converts in Indonesia and elsewhere falls into several strands (Table 1). Psychological studies describe adjustment and well-being. Rahmawati and Desiningrum use interpretative phenomenological analysis to show that becoming a Muslim involves internal conflict, adjustment, and self-development,[3] while Effendi and Taufik and colleagues connect well-being with social support. [4] Studies of spiritual experience examine episodes such as hidayah (divine guidance) or the Umrah journey.[5] Studies of guidance describe contextual mentoring among Dayak and Ngadas converts.[6] The study closest in method is Rahmawati and Desiningrum's, which shares this article's interest in lived experience. The difference lies in the unit of analysis and the contribution: their study describes the psychological experience of becoming Muslim, whereas the present study treats post-conversion experience as an educational process and asks what it implies for spiritual pedagogy. Studies from Poland, the Netherlands, and Switzerland likewise show that identity and belonging after conversion are negotiated through family, community, and social ties, but they do not frame these processes as educational questions.[7]

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[1] Lewis R Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 17–18.

[2] Joanna Krotofil, "Being Muslim, Polish, and at Home: Converts to Islam in Poland," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 37 (2022): 475–493, https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2022.2101714.

[3] Ida Rahmawati and Dinie Ratri Desiningrum, "Pengalaman Menjadi Mualaf: Sebuah Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis," *Jurnal Empati* 7, no. 1 (2018): 92–105.

[4] M Yusuf Effendi, "Subjective Well-Being in Muallaf," *Journal of Advanced Guidance and Counseling* 3, no. 2 (2022): 106–24, https://doi.org/10.21580/jagc.2022.3.2.9178; Taufik et al., "Social Support, Spiritual Well-Being, and Quality of Life Among Muslim Converts in Indonesia," *The Open Psychology Journal* 18 (2025): e18743501397917, https://doi.org/10.2174/0118743501397917250919095103.

[5] Achmad Maimun, "Hidayah in the Process of Conversion to Islam in the Perspective of Muallaf," *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Psychology* 5, no. 1 (2023): 35–55, https://doi.org/10.18326/ijip.v5i1.193; Luthfi Hakim and Khaerul Muhajarah, "Analysis of the Spiritual Experience of Performing Umrah for Converts to Islam (Phenomenological Study in Muallaf Kita Bersama Semarang City)," *JUSPI: Jurnal Sejarah Peradaban Islam* 7, no. 2 (2024): 165–172, https://doi.org/10.30829/juspi.v7i2.19139; Nur Indaturrohmah and Kurnia Muhajarah, "Post-Umrah Meaning-Making among Chinese Indonesian Muslim Converts: An Interpretive Qualitative Study," *Jurnal Sosiologi Agama Indonesia* 7, no. 2 (2026): 345–357, https://doi.org/10.22373/jsai.v7i2.10211.

[6] Moch. Riza Fahmi Masri et al., "Religious Challenges and Guidance for Dayak Muslim Converts in the Indonesia–Malaysia Border Region," *Jurnal Theologia* 36, no. 1 (2025): 141–160, https://doi.org/10.21580/teo.2025.36.1.26839; Muh. Zakki Amrulloh et al., "Model of Muallaf Development Based on Local Wisdom in Muslim Minority Villages: A Case Study of Ngadas Village, East Java," *Sosioedukasi* 14, no. 4 (2025): 4642–4650, https://doi.org/10.36526/sosioedukasi.v14i4.6903.

[7] Vanessa Vroon-Najem and Annelies Moors, "'Making Hijra': Mobility, Religion and the Everyday in the Lives of Women Converts to Islam in the Netherlands," *Contemporary Islam* 15 (2021): 35–55,

Table 1. Research strands on Muslim converts and the pedagogical question they leave open

Research strand	What it explains	What remains open pedagogically	Illustrative sources
Conversion trajectories and motives	Why and how people convert; stages and social ties	How learning after the declaration of faith continues to form piety	Rambo; Lofland and Stark; Nollert and Sheikhzadegan
Psychological adjustment and well-being	Emotional and social needs; support and well-being	How religious learning becomes existentially meaningful	Rahmawati and Desiningrum; Effendi; Taufik et al.
Spiritual experience	Transformative episodes such as hidayah or Umrah	How ordinary encounters and worship become learning resources	Maimun, Hakim, and Muhajarah; Indaturrohmah and Muhajarah
Convert guidance	Contextual, community-based guidance models	The learning process through which guidance works	Masri et al.; Amrulloh et al.
Islamic spiritual education	Normative concepts: tarbiyah, ta'dib, tazkiyah	How an adult learner's biography shapes formation	Al-Attas; Al-Ghazali; Mutholingah and Zain; Syafii and Azhari

In Islamic education, spiritual formation is usually theorized through tarbiyah (gradual nurturing), *ta'dib* (formation of right relation and adab), and *tazkiyah al-nafs* (purification of the self),[8] and recent work calls for holistic and humanistic models.[9] These contributions supply a normative horizon, but they are largely conceptual and rarely draw on adult learners' accounts of how religious concepts first became meaningful.

What remains unknown, then, is how converts' own post-conversion experiences turn religious information into meaning and embodied piety, and what this implies for spiritual education. In the literature reviewed here, which is selective rather than systematic, none of the strands in Table 1 treat converts' post-conversion experience as a source for theorizing spiritual pedagogy. The question matters because, in many settings, content-based education is organized around content sequences, and because knowledge that is understood but not inhabited leaves learners without the interpretive resources to sustain practice when

https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-021-00463-5; Michael Nollert and Amir Sheikhzadegan, "Embracing Islam in Switzerland: (Re-)Conversion between Searching for the Meaning of Life and Social Ties," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 2023, 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2023.2202044.

[8] Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1991), 194; Siti Mutholingah and Burhan Zain, "Metode Penyucian Jiwa (Tazkiyah Al-Nafs) Dan Implikasinya Bagi Pendidikan Agama Islam," *Ta'limuna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 10, no. 1 (2021): 69–83, https://doi.org/10.32478/talimuna.v10i1.662.

[9] Muhammad Hisyam Syafii and Husain Azhari, "Interaction between Spiritual Development and Psychological Growth: Implications for Islamic Educational Psychology in Islamic Students," *Journal of Islamic Education and Ethics* 3, no. 1 (2025): 29–48, https://doi.org/10.18196/jiee.v3i1.69; Minhah Makhzuniyah et al., "Reconstructing the Curriculum of Love: Perspective of Modern Islamic Education Philosophy," *Cendekia: Jurnal Kependidikan Dan Kemasyarakatan* 24, no. 1 (2026): 21–42, https://doi.org/10.21154/cendekia.v24i1.13198.

circumstances change.

Three existing frameworks are close to what is developed here. Kolb's experiential learning cycle, Mezirow's transformative learning, and Rambo's conversion model all describe change through experience and interpretation.[10] This article does not claim a new learning theory. Its aim is narrower: to specify how such processes take shape when the learner is a convert, the object of learning is a revealed tradition with authoritative content, and formation depends on accompaniment by mentors and community. The comparison is made explicit in Table 4.

The argument is not that doctrine should be displaced. Doctrinal knowledge is indispensable; the question is how it becomes meaningful, embodied, and morally consequential. Nor does the study claim that conversion education in Malang Raya is transmission-based: the mentor interviewed here describes an approach that prioritizes akhlak (character). The study asks what experiences make such an approach work and what framework can explain it to institutions that rely more on content sequences.

Conceptual Framework

Four sets of ideas guide the analysis. First, lived experience is understood phenomenologically as experience as it is encountered and interpreted within the lifeworld,[11] an experience that is embodied.[12] Moreover, has pedagogical significance in van Manen's sense. [13]Second, religion is approached as lived religion,[14] and piety as an ethical self-formation cultivated through embodied discipline within a tradition.[15] Third, learning is understood through adult and transformative learning, in which experience and reflection reorganize perspectives on meaning.[16] Fourth, tarbiyah, ta'dib, and tazkiyah provide the Islamic educational horizon.

Three working concepts are defined operationally. *Spiritual experience* is a felt, often affectively charged encounter that a participant describes as religiously significant, such as calm after prayer, longing on seeing others pray, or a dream. *Religious meaning-making* is the interpretive work through which a participant places such experiences within an account of God, self, others, life, and death. It differs from Park's meaning-making model, which describes how people reduce discrepancies between global meaning and situational appraisals of stressful events.[17]Here, the interpretive work is understood as a learning process that

[10] D A Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 20–38; J Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), 99.

[11] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 273; Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, ed. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 84.

[12] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2012), 258.

[13] Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (London: Routledge, 2016), 35.

[14] Meredith B McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 371.

[15] T Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1986), 172; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 286.

[16] Malcolm S Knowles, Elwood F Holton III, and Richard A Swanson, *The Adult Learner*, 8th ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), 18–50.

[17] C L Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature: An Integrative Review of Meaning Making and

unfolds in relationships and is oriented toward a normative tradition rather than toward restoring coherence after stress. *Lived piety* is a religious meaning that has become practice, disposition, and social conduct, including worship, but also speech, family relations, and moral restraint.

This is an empirical qualitative study with an analytic step that builds a conceptual framework from the findings. The framework is offered as a set of propositions, not as a tested model. Two questions guide the study. RQ1: How do Muslim converts in Malang Raya turn lived post-conversion experiences into religious meaning and embodied piety? RQ2: What pedagogical implications for spiritual education follow from these accounts and from the account of one convert mentor?

RESEARCH METHOD

Design and Setting

The study used a qualitative phenomenological design because the problem concerns how converts experience, interpret, and embody Islam after conversion. [18]Data were analyzed with interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), an idiographic approach that examines how participants make sense of significant experiences and is designed for small, purposively selected samples.[19] Bracketing was understood in the reflexive sense used in IPA: a continuing effort to notice and set aside the researcher's own assumptions about piety, not a complete suspension of presuppositions.

Fieldwork took place in Malang Raya, East Java, a region comprising Malang City, Malang Regency, and Batu City, with universities, pesantren, and religious communities from diverse backgrounds. The main research site was Paseban Darmanawa, a convert-mentoring institution led by Ustadz Umar Al-Faruq, where converts learn about Islam and many declare the shahada. Data collection also took place at participants' homes. The researcher had no prior professional affiliation with Paseban Darmanawa and had never worked there as a mentor, teacher, or staff member. The relationship between the researcher and the institution was established solely through the research process, motivated by the researcher's initial interest in examining Muslim converts' experiences and religious learning at the institution. Administrative records at Paseban Darmanawa list thirty-four converts who declared the shahada between 2013 and 2026.

Participants

Participants were selected purposively, with snowball referrals from earlier participants. Inclusion criteria were being an adult, voluntary conversion, active participation in mentoring or learning activities, willingness to narrate spiritual experiences in depth, and at least 1 year as a Muslim at the time of the interview. One deliberate exception was made: P10 had declared the shahada about four months before the interview and was retained because the recency of the account offers a partial check on the reconstruction of memory.

Its Effects on Adjustment to Stressful Life Events," *Psychological Bulletin* 136, no. 2 (2010): 257–301, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018301.

[18] John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018), 75–80.

[19] Jonathan A Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2022), 35–52.

Table 2 summarises the ten participants, who ranged in age from 23 to 45 and came from Protestant Christian (n = 4), Catholic (n = 3), and Hindu (n = 3) backgrounds. Recruitment through a single institutional network and the requirement of active participation mean that converts who withdrew from mentoring or returned to their former religion are absent from the sample. This limits the range of experience and is discussed under the Limitations section. Consistent with IPA, the sample size was justified by the depth of idiographic analysis rather than by thematic saturation, which was not formally assessed.

Table 2. Participants (Pseudonymized)

Code	Age	Former religion	Year of shahada	Time as a Muslim at the interview	Gender	Education	Occupation	Interview dates (2026)
P1	31	Protestant Christian	2014	12 years	Male	Master's degree (S2)	Teacher	4 and 8 May
P2	27	Protestant Christian	2015	11 years	Female	Bachelor's degree (S1)	Housewife	13 May
P3	36	Hindu	2017	9 years	Male	Bachelor's degree (S1)	Entrepreneur	5 May
P4	44	Catholic	2018	8 years	Female	Senior High School (SMA)	Entrepreneur	6 and 8 May
P5	23	Hindu	2021	5 years	Female	Bachelor's degree (S1)	Student	10 May
P6	45	Protestant Christian	2024	about 1.4 years	Female	Senior High School (SMA)	Housewife	5 May
P7	26	Catholic	2025	about 1.3 years	Male	Bachelor's degree (S1)	Teacher	15 May
P8	23	Hindu	2025	about 1.3 years	Male	Senior High School (SMA)	Entrepreneur	7 and 15 May
P9	36	Catholic	2025	about 1 year	Female	Bachelor's degree (S1)	Entrepreneur	2 and 7 May
P10	28	Protestant Christian	2026	about 4 months	Male	Senior High School (SMA)	Entrepreneur	3, 5, and 15 May

*M refers to the mentor, interviewed on 1 May 2026.

Data Collection

Fieldwork ran from February to June 2026, with interviews concentrated in May. Participant interviews were conducted in Indonesian, face-to-face or online when necessary, and lasted 60–90 minutes; participants were interviewed between one and three times. A semi-structured guide covered life before conversion, motives, post-conversion worship, social responses, learning processes, struggles, understandings of piety, and perceived moral change. Interviews were recorded with permission and accompanied by field notes. One interview with the institution's mentor (1 May 2026) and participant observation of mentoring and religious activities at Paseban Darmanawa (1 May–1 June 2026), conducted as a form of moderate participation, provided institutional context. Documents (administrative records of the shahada, activity notes, and photographs) were used to situate accounts, not to verify them. Interviews are therefore the primary data. Observations and

documents are included in the findings only where they clarify context. The wider fieldwork also included interviews with other converts, who are not quoted here.

Analysis and Trustworthiness

Analysis followed the IPA sequence: repeated reading and noting of each transcript, initial coding, development of emergent themes, identification of connections within each case and across cases, and a narrative description. The analytic question was what made an experience educational: what opened the participant to learning, what enabled a religious practice to acquire meaning, and what supported the movement from understanding to embodied conduct. Table 3 shows how codes were grouped into themes and framework components. Quotations were translated from Indonesian by the author; the original wording is given in the notes.

Trustworthiness was addressed through Lincoln and Guba's four criteria.[20] To establish credibility, the study relied on sustained engagement throughout the fieldwork period, triangulation of interviews with observations and documents to enrich contextual understanding, and member checking involving 11 participants. Member checking was conducted through follow-up interviews and direct confirmation of the researchers' interpretations with participants. No changes to the researchers' interpretations were required following this verification process. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research setting and participant characteristics (Table 2). Dependability was addressed by maintaining an audit trail documenting the research procedures and analytical decisions. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive notes documenting the analytical process, critical discussions with academic colleagues, and academic supervision from the dissertation promoter and co-promoter, who provided guidance on the research process and interpretation of the findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Becoming Muslim: Disruption before and after the Shahada

Several participants described unease before conversion and a shahada that opened rather than completed a process. P9 recalled: "At that time, I felt my life was empty. I went through life as usual, but something inside me was not at peace. I began to question the purpose of life and my relationship with God."[21] P10 located the disruption in the rhythm of a former religious life: "In my religion, it is different; I can only meet God once a week, and my place of worship is locked, so I cannot go whenever I want. … I feel now as if I am already very far from God."[22] Two participants from Christian backgrounds described months of withdrawal from church attendance while praying privately. P4 said: "In the end, I made up my mind not to go to church from June to November. Until November, I did not go to church; I only prayed." [23] P2 added: "I was not immediately sure. I learned slowly. For several months, I did not go to church, but I still prayed by myself, asking for guidance."[24]

After the shahada, the process continued. The mentor described converts who

[20] Y S Lincoln and E G Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1985), 301–327.
[21] P9, "Interview with P9, 7 May 2026," 2026.
[22] P10, "Interview with P10, 15 May 2026," 2026.
[23] P4, "Interview with P4, 6 May 2026," 2026.
[24] P2, "Interview with P2, 13 May 2026," 2026.

"sometimes come asking to be guided in ablution, asking to be guided in joining the recitation,"[25] which suggests that learning to pray and to take part in communal worship begins after, not before, the declaration of faith. Not every route began with existential unease. The wider data also include marriage and family ties, mentioned by P10 and by the mentor, and a prior study of Islam (P1, below). These routes are noted here because they qualify any single narrative of conversion.

These accounts accord with Rambo's view that crisis and quest precede conversion and that consequences follow it, and with Lofland and Stark's emphasis on tension and social ties.[26] The educational contribution is to treat the consequences stage as itself a learning process. Participants were not applying a finished decision; they were continuing to construct commitment through prayer, reflection, and negotiation with relatives. The pedagogical implication is that education becomes more relevant when mentors know which question the learner is actually trying to answer. The claim that piety appears first as a verb, a practice of repeated trying, before it appears as a status, is an interpretation of these accounts and of the mentor's description, not a directly observed sequence.

Lived Encounter: Experience Often before Explanation

Participants described encounters with Muslim practice that became compelling before they could explain it theologically. P10 recounted waiting for Muslim friends in a motorbike community: "When it was time to pray, I would be left behind. 'Wait a moment, mas, I just want to pray first.' So I waited for them … Then envy began to rise. 'How nice for them. However busy they are, however far they travel, they still have time for their God.'"[27] P6 contrasted with verbal teaching explicit: "I feel I learn more from their attitude than from sermons."[28] P3, whose friends were "mostly Madurese and Malang people, all of them Muslim," noted that he or she "never hang[s] out with people of the same religion"; [29]Everyday sociability, not formal teaching, was the setting in which Islam first became familiar. P9 and other participants also described calm on hearing Qur'anic recitation before understanding its meaning.[30]

The pattern is a tendency, not a rule. P1 reported the opposite order: "Before I became Muslim, I already knew the Al-Fatiha… I had already memorized it," and "I also learned a lot by listening to Ustaz Omar, and learned a lot about Muslims too."[31] The mentor likewise noted converts who entered Islam through study. Experience before explanation, therefore, describes a frequent route in this sample, alongside routes through knowledge, family, and marriage. All accounts are retrospective and may reconstruct earlier experience in light of later commitment. P10's account, given about four months after the shahada, is closer to the events, but recall bias cannot be excluded for the other participants.

James foregrounded the felt quality and transformative consequences of religion, and later studies continue to associate life-changing spiritual experiences with subsequent

[25] M, "Interview with M, 1 May 2026," 2026.

[26] John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (1965): 862–75.

[27] P10, "Interview with P10, 5 May 2026," 2026.

[28] P6, "Interview with P6, 5 May 2026," 2026.

[29] P3, "Interview with P3, 5 May 2026," 2026.

[30] P9, "Interview with P9, 2 May 2026," 2026.

[31] P1, "Interview with P1, 4 May 2026," 2026.

religious attitudes and practices.[32] The present data modify James's picture in two ways. The experiences described were ordinary and social, such as watching friends pray, rather than the dramatic episodes of his case studies, which were drawn largely from Protestant Christian settings. Moreover, experience became religiously significant through interpretation and accompaniment, not by itself. Islamic spirituality has its own vocabulary for experiential knowing: dhawq (tasting) and hal (state), distinguished from ma'rifa (gnosis) and tested against the Shari'a and the guidance of a teacher.[33] The participants' calm and longing are not claimed to be mystical states. However, the tradition's insistence that experiential states require discernment is consistent with the finding that experience is an opening rather than a validation. Pedagogically, doctrine is not reduced; it is anchored in something the learner has already encountered.

Reflective Meaning-Making: Islam as an Existential Orientation

Participants moved from isolated experiences to a broader orientation. P8 reflected: "Maybe in this way I become closer and more obedient to my religion. More diligent in prayer, maybe."[34] P10 reinterpreted life and death: "I feel life is only a trust (*titipan*)," and "in Islam, when someone dies, they take nothing with them … after all, when we are born, we bring nothing. I want to return to God, as I was born." [35]In both accounts, the convert does not merely add Islamic concepts to an unchanged biography; earlier events and expectations, such as funeral customs, acquire new significance. This is the sense in which post-conversion learning involves the reconstruction of a worldview. Meaning-making is the thinnest theme in the data: interviews captured the outcomes of interpretation more often than the interpretive process itself.

Rambo and Bauman treat transformation as a reconfiguration of meaning rather than only a change of affiliation.[36] Park's model locates meaning-making in the reduction of discrepancy after stressful events. The accounts here suggest a broader educational process: the meanings converted reached were shaped by what mentors and friends modeled and by an authoritative tradition, not only by individual coherence-seeking. Lyngsøe and Stjernholm show that nearness to God is cultivated through practices that shape attention and moral sensibility,[37] which parallels P8's linking of closeness to God with diligence in prayer. The pedagogical consequence is that learning outcomes should include interpretive depth, assessed through reflective journals, guided dialogue, or narrative interviews, as well as procedural correctness.

Embodied Piety, Moral Change, and Identity Negotiation

Piety became visible in conduct toward others. The mentor described telling a new

[32] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902), 189–216; Orsolya Cseh, István Karsai, and Attila Szabo, "The Relationship of Life-Changing Spiritual Experiences to Current Religious/Spiritual Attitudes and Practices: A Pilot Study," *Pastoral Psychology* 73, no. 2 (2024): 227–238, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-023-01120-9.

[33] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 98–186.

[34] P8, "Interview with P8, 7 May 2026," 2026.

[35] P10, "Interview with P10, 15 May 2026."

[36] Lewis R Rambo and Steven Bauman, "Psychology of Conversion and Spiritual Transformation," *Pastoral Psychology* 61, no. 5–6 (2012): 879–894.

[37] Maria L Lyngsøe, "Nearness to God: Danish Muslims and Taqwa-Infused Faith Frames," *Contemporary Islam* 16 (2022): 173–191.

convert: "From tomorrow, before you leave for work, kiss your father's and mother's hands, all right?" [38] P8 reported following this guidance: "I usually kiss my father's hand … since the shahada … kiss his hand, make him coffee or tea. There are many more values the Ustadz taught that I practice." [39]The mentor reported a consequence: "Subhanallah, two weeks later the father embraced Islam … he was touched by his child's behavior."[40] Whether or not every moral change has such an effect, the episode shows embodied conduct acting as feedback: a practice is tried, others respond, and those responses reshape the practice's meaning. The sequence experience, meaning, practice, social feedback, and deepened meaning is offered as an interpretation of these accounts, not as a demonstrated causal chain.

Conversion also produced friction within families. P1 recalled: "Back then I … was afraid of shaming my parents. People would say, your mother teaches so many people, yet her child is like that," and "the hardest thing was talking to my family." [41] P7 said simply: "I was afraid my mother would be disappointed." [42] Studies of converts in Europe show that conversion disturbs taken-for-granted relations among religion, ethnicity, and belonging, and that converts seeking supportive environments may meet tensions between idealized and lived Islam.[43] In Malang Raya, the pressure reported by P1 and P7 came mainly from families rather than from public stigma, and majority status did not remove vulnerability: a person may be surrounded by Islam yet marginal within a non-Muslim family. Administrative matters such as identity documents and marriage, and the stigma attached to the label *"muallaf," did not emerge in the interviews analyzed here and warrant* a separate study.

The mentor's instruction shows how identity negotiation can be treated as a legitimate curriculum theme: a concrete act of respect toward parents turned a potential site of conflict into a site of moral practice. Social learning theory explains part of this process through modeling, attention, reproduction, and reinforcement.[44] The Islamic tradition frames exemplarity as uswah hasanah (Q 33:21), and Al-Ghazali's discussion of the teacher's duties requires that conduct accord with teaching. [45]P6's remark that attitude taught more than sermons is consistent with both. Exemplarity is therefore part of the content of spiritual education, not a supplement to it, and a mentor's conduct that contradicts the verbal message undermines it.

Relational Safety within Pedagogical Accompaniment

Participants valued environments in which they were not pressured. P8 said, "I feel comfortable learning Islam because my friends do not force me and do not judge me," and "they teach me slowly."[46] The mentor described the sequencing logic: "Usually, [Ustadz], what we instill is, indeed, not sharia … the rest is akhlak."[47] Relational safety here does not

[38] M, "Interview with M, 1 May 2026," 2026.
[39] P8, "Interview with P8, 7 May 2026," 2026.
[40] M, "Interview with M, 1 May 2026," 2026.
[41] P1, "Interview with P1, 4 May 2026."
[42] P7, "Interview with P7, 15 May 2026," 2026.
[43] See notes 2 and 7 above.
[44] Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977), 22–23.
[45] Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum Al-Din*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 2005), 144–145.
[46] P8, interview by the author, 7 May 2026. Original: "Saya merasa nyaman belajar Islam karena teman-teman tidak memaksa dan tidak menghakimi saya. / Mereka ngajarin pelan-pelan."
[47] M, interview by the author, 1 May 2026. Original: "Biasanya Ustadz, yang kita doktrinkan itu bukan syariat memang… selebihnya akhlak."

mean suspending norms. It means that norms are met within a relationship that preserves dignity and recognizes pace, and that correction distinguishes between what is essential and what can be learned later. A mentor who listens to a convert's difficulty with fasting or family pressure also gains the information needed to sequence learning, so empathy changes the instructional process, not only its tone.

These accounts should be read with caution. No participant described being pressured or shamed by the Muslim community. However, the sample was recruited through a mentoring network, and converts with negative experiences may have left it. The pressure that participants reported came from their families (P1, P7). The theme, therefore, describes conditions that participants valued, not proof that relational safety is a universal prerequisite for learning.

Amrulloh and colleagues report the value of a non-directive, community-based approach in Ngadas, a Muslim-minority village, where the community was the primary agent of guidance; at Paseban Darmanawa, the mentor is more central, suggesting that the locus of accompaniment varies by setting. Masri and colleagues show that guidance for Dayak converts must respond to cultural context, a pattern that parallels the family-sensitive guidance observed here. Taufik and colleagues associate social support with well-being; the present accounts add a qualitative description of what support looked like in practice: not forcing, slow pacing, and character before law. Makhzuniyah and colleagues propose a humanistic-spiritual paradigm for Islamic education; this study provides an empirical basis for it in a convert-mentoring setting.

The Experience-to-Piety Framework

Table 3 traces how codes were grouped into themes and framework components. The framework has four recursive movements: existential-spiritual disruption, lived encounter, reflective meaning-making, and embodied piety with moral-identity reorientation. These are sustained by pedagogical accompaniment, which is not a fifth movement but the relational condition under which the movements become educational (Figure 1). The movements form a cycle rather than a staircase. Converts returned to earlier questions when family tension arose, as in the accounts of P1 and P7, and the mentor described post-shahada requests for guidance. The framework is the author's analytic construct developed from the themes. It has not been validated by participants, mentors, or external experts, and it is presented as an interpretive proposal.

Table 3. From codes to themes to framework components

Theme	Representative codes	Framework component	Participants
1. Becoming Muslim: disruption before and after the shahada	emptiness; distance from God; months away from church; gradual learning; requests for guidance after the shahada	Existential-spiritual disruption	P2, P4, P9, P10, M
2. Lived encounter	friends praying; envy and longing; calm from recitation; learning from attitude; Muslim social ties; prior knowledge (contrary case)	Lived encounter	P1, P3, P6, P9, P10
3. Reflective meaning-making	Islam as closeness to God; life as a trust; simplicity of death	Reflective meaning-making	P8, P10
4. Embodied piety, moral change, and identity	respect toward parents; moral change; father's conversion; fear of shaming parents; telling the family	Embodied piety and moral-identity reorientation	P1, P7, P8, M
5. Relational safety within accompaniment	not forced or judged; slow teaching; akhlak first; guidance in worship	Pedagogical accompaniment	P1, P6, P8, M

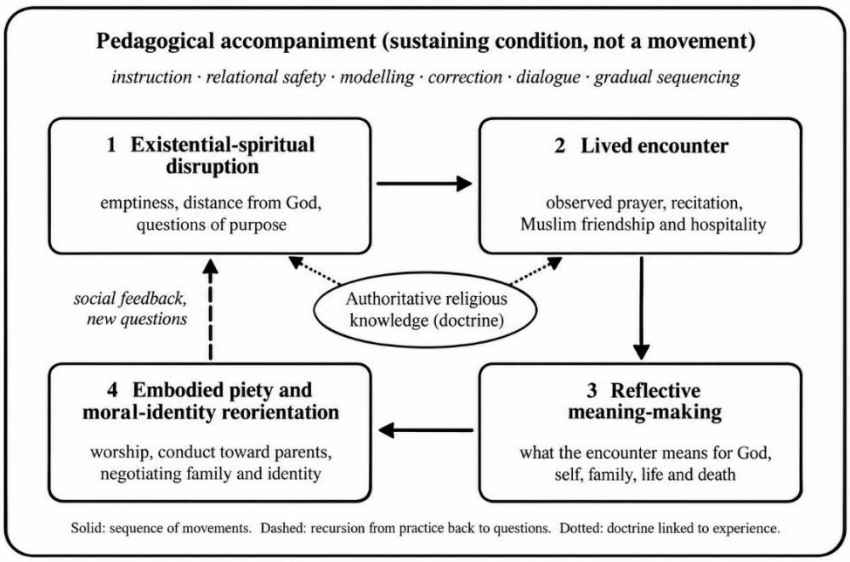


Figure 1. Experience-to-piety framework: four recursive movements sustained by pedagogical accompaniment

Existential-spiritual disruption refers to moments in which earlier meaning structures no longer orient the person. Lived encounter is concrete contact with Islamic practice, people, and texts. Reflective meaning-making is the interpretive bridge in which the convert asks what the encounter means for God, self, and others; here, doctrine can be introduced as an answer to a lived question. Embodied piety is the practical testing of that understanding in worship and relationships, and its consequences return the learner to reflection. Accompaniment comprises doctrinal instruction, emotional support, modeling, correction,

and gradual sequencing. It guards against two errors: doctrinal reductionism, in which education becomes the transfer of information, and experiential romanticism, in which feeling becomes sufficient.

The relationship between the framework and existing models should be stated plainly (Table 4). The overlaps are substantial, and the framework is best read as a domain-specific specification of these approaches rather than a replacement for them.

Table 4. The framework compared with Rambo, Kolb, and Mezirow

Model	Core process	What the experience-to-piety framework specifies
Rambo (1993)	Context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, consequences	Treats the consequences stage as an educational process and identifies what mentors can do within it
Kolb (1984)	Concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation	Conceptualization is guided by an authoritative tradition and a mentor; experimentation is moral and relational, with social feedback.
Mezirow (1991)	Disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, rational discourse, revised meaning perspectives.	Disruption is often existential and spiritual rather than cognitive; reflection re-anchors meaning in a normative tradition rather than only revising it; trust-based accompaniment supports it.
Experience-to-piety framework	Four recursive movements sustained by accompaniment	Locates the process in Islamic spiritual education (tarbiyah, ta'dib, tazkiyah), makes accompaniment constitutive, and adds embodied piety within family and community

Pedagogical Propositions

RQ2 asks what pedagogical implications follow. Four propositions are offered (Table 5). They were formulated by identifying, for each theme, what participants valued or what the mentor described, and then merging overlapping candidates: biographical entry and relational diagnosis, which both concern knowing the learner, were combined, as were relational safety and social exemplarity, which both concern the accompanying person. The propositions are consistent with andragogy's emphasis on adult learners' experience, readiness, and orientation to real-life problems.[48] They derive from converts' accounts and one mentor's account, not from a program evaluation, and they require testing.

[48] See note 17 above.

Table 5. Pedagogical propositions for testing

Proposition	Themes	Illustrative practice	Conceptual link
1. Begin from the biography and diagnose relationally	1, 4	A structured opening conversation on conversion background, current worship, family relations, and urgent questions	Andragogy: experience and readiness
2. Anchor teaching in experience and invite articulation	2, 3	Link each topic to a practice the learner has encountered, with guided dialogue or a reflective journal on its meaning.	Kolb; Mezirow; dhawq and discernment
3. Accompany safely, exemplarily, and with normative clarity	4, 5	Pace norms, prioritize akhlak over legal details, and align mentors' conduct with the values taught.	Bandura; uswah hasanah; tarbiyah and ta'dib
4. Link lessons to conduct and build autonomy	4	Connect lessons to a concrete act in the family or community, review it, and record reflective milestones.	Moral transfer; tazkiyah

Contribution to Islamic Spiritual Education

First, in convert mentoring tarbiyah, ta'dib, and tazkiyah appear to operate together rather than in separate modules. The mentor's akhlak-first sequencing enacts tarbiyah as gradual nurturing and ta'dib as the formation of right relation, in Al-Attas's sense of education as the recognition of right order,[49] While reflective articulation approaches tazkiyah as an examination and reorientation of the self, a theme developed in Al-Ghazali's account of the disciplining of the soul and in Miskawayh's account of the habituation of character.[50] The alignment is interpretive; the study does not test classical doctrines.

Second, converts can be treated as epistemic subjects whose comparative experience of different religious worlds is an educational resource, as in the funds-of-knowledge tradition and in andragogy's view of adult experience.[51] This complements deficit-oriented accounts that begin from what converts do not yet know. The further suggestion that born Muslims find it harder to recall how religious concepts first became meaningful is a hypothesis for future research, since no born-Muslim data were collected.

Third, "beyond doctrinal transmission" does not call for less knowledge. It calls for a richer account of how knowledge becomes formation. Participants repeatedly needed explanations of prayer, belief, and obligation; what the accounts suggest is that explanation lands more securely when it meets a question the learner already holds. Formation, as opposed to stimulation, requires continuity: the capacity to interpret an experience, connect it to doctrine, practice its implications, and sustain them after the emotional moment passes.

[49] See note 8 above.

[50] Ahmad ibn Muhammad Miskawayh, *The Refinement of Character*, ed. Constantine K Zurayk (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1968), 27–66.

[51] Luis C Moll et al., "Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms," *Theory Into Practice* 31, no. 2 (1992): 132–141, https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849209543534.

Implications for Convert-Support Institutions

The implications are addressed to mentors and managers of convert-support institutions, designers of Islamic education programs, and religious-affairs bodies that may wish to consider them. They are linked to the themes and are not drawn from program evaluation. First, mentor preparation should include listening, diagnosing the learner's questions, and prioritizing content (themes 1 and 5). Second, curricula can pair each core topic with an experience and a reflective session (themes 2 and 3). Third, mentoring should address family relations and identity as legitimate topics (theme 4). Fourth, records of progress can add reflective milestones, such as an independently sustained prayer routine or the ability to explain the personal meaning of a practice, to attendance counts. Existing guidance issued by religious authorities and guidance institutions was not analyzed, so the feasibility of these suggestions in light of that guidance remains to be examined.

Limitations

The study has the following limitations. It draws on 10 participants from one region, recruited largely through one institutional network and via snowball sampling, so converts who withdrew or returned to their former religion are absent. The accounts are retrospective and subject to recall bias. The only educator's perspective is that of one mentor; family members' perspectives were not collected. The data on meaning-making and identity negotiation are limited, and administrative matters and the stigma associated with the label "muallaf" were not covered. One participant was retained despite having a shorter time as a Muslim than the inclusion criterion required. The researcher was the main instrument of data collection and analysis, and participants' words were translated into English. The framework has not been validated, and the setting is a Muslim-majority region where Islam is socially visible, so converts in Muslim-minority societies or rural minority communities may experience learning differently. Findings should be read as transferable concepts, offered for judgment through the detailed description given, not as statistical generalizations.

CONCLUSION

Regarding RQ1, the accounts of ten converts in Malang Raya show that piety emerged gradually as they became Muslim. Disruption before and after the shahada, encounters with Muslim practice that often preceded explanation, reflective interpretation that made Islam an existential orientation, and embodied conduct within family and community together turned lived experience into meaning and practice. Routes through knowledge, family, and marriage also occurred, and the evidence for meaning-making is thinner than for the other themes.

Regarding RQ2, the findings and one mentor's account support four propositions: begin from biography and diagnose relationally; anchor teaching in experience and invite articulation; accompany safely, exemplarily, and with normative clarity; and link lessons to conduct while building autonomy. These are proposals for testing, not evaluated practices. The experience-to-piety framework, four recursive movements sustained by pedagogical accompaniment, offers a domain-specific way to understand how doctrine becomes formative, and the results suggest that Islamic spiritual education is more formative when authoritative knowledge is connected to learners' biography, relational safety, reflective

practice, and moral action.

Future research could include educators, families, and converts who left mentoring; compare convert-support institutions; follow converts longitudinally; test the propositions in practice; and examine administrative and stigma-related experiences that were not covered here.

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M. Nadhif Anwar contributed to the conceptualization of the study, research design, fieldwork, data collection, qualitative analysis, interpretation of findings, and preparation of the original manuscript. Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah contributed to the theoretical framework, methodological supervision, critical interpretation of findings, and scholarly revision of the manuscript. Imron Rossidy contributed to the development of the Islamic educational perspective, the methodological evaluation, the critical review, and the refinement of the discussion. Bakri Muhammad Bakhiet contributed to the theoretical discussion of Islamic spirituality, the critical evaluation of the conceptual framework, and the review of the manuscript. All authors reviewed the final manuscript, approved its submission, and accepted responsibility for their respective contributions.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

The authors declare that OpenAI's ChatGPT was used as an assistive tool during manuscript preparation, particularly for academic language refinement, grammatical improvement, structural editing, and bibliographic formatting assistance. AI-assisted suggestions were subject to author review and verification. The research design, empirical data, analytical interpretations, scholarly arguments, and conclusions remain the responsibility of the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, academic integrity, and final content of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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