Review Article

Implementation of Action Learning and Experiential Learning in Islamic Boarding Schools: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) as Islamic educational institutions face modernization challenges in developing effective learning methods. Action learning as an experience and reflection-based learning approach emerges as a relevant alternative. This article aims to conduct a systematic literature review on the implementation of action learning and experiential learning in Indonesian Islamic boarding school education. The research method uses a systematic literature review approach by analyzing 15 indexed journal articles from the 2018-2025 period. Inclusion criteria include articles in Indonesian and English, published in accredited journals, and discussing action learning or experiential learning in Islamic boarding schools. Analysis results reveal three main findings: (1) action research has been implemented to address specific problems such as student mental health with humanistic and participatory approaches, (2) experiential learning is applied through hadith learning, entrepreneurship programs, and life skills development that enhance cognitive abilities, communication, and student adaptation, (3) integration of action learning with *pesantren* values creates a distinctive learning model combining tradition and innovation. Identified research gaps include minimal longitudinal studies, lack of long-term impact measurement, and limited comparative analysis among *pesantren*. This study recommends developing a theoretical framework for action learning contextual to *pesantren* characteristics and further research with more comprehensive methodologies.

Keywords: Action Learning; Experiential Learning; Islamic Boarding School; Islamic Education; Systematic Literature Review

1. Introduction

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) represent the oldest and most indigenous Islamic educational institution in Indonesia, playing a strategic role in transmitting religious knowledge and shaping the character of young Muslim generations. As of 2022, Indonesia hosts 27,230 Islamic boarding schools with over 4 million students (Munawir et al., 2024). These institutions have historically served as centers of Islamic learning, combining traditional teaching methods with spiritual development (Hidayat et al., 2018). The *pesantren* education system encompasses both religious studies through classical texts (*kitab kuning*) and modern curricula that integrate general education subjects (Setiawan, 2013). In the context of globalization and educational modernization, *pesantren* face the dual challenge of preserving their traditional Islamic values while adapting innovative pedagogical approaches to meet contemporary educational demands (Mansir, 2020; Fajarudin, 2024).

Traditional *pesantren* pedagogy has relied primarily on *sorogan* (individual tutoring), *bandongan* (collective lecturing), and *wetonan* (scheduled reading sessions) methods that emphasize rote memorization and passive reception of knowledge (Utama & Akbar, 2023). While these methods have proven effective in transmitting classical Islamic texts across generations and maintaining pedagogical continuity (Geertz, 1960), scholars have identified several limitations. Baharun & Dini (2019) noted that traditional methods often fail to develop

critical thinking skills and practical application of knowledge. Darojat et al. (2023) argued that the teacher-centered approach limits student agency and creative problem-solving capacities. Moreover, the lack of systematic reflection and action-based learning restricts students' ability to transfer knowledge to real-world contexts (Suriyati et al., 2024).

In response to these limitations, educational researchers have proposed experiential learning approaches grounded in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and action research methodologies. Kolb's four-stage learning cycle concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation offers a framework for transforming passive knowledge reception into active learning engagement (Kong, 2021). Action research, as conceptualized by McNiff and Whitehead (2006), provides a systematic approach for educational practitioners to investigate and improve their teaching practices through iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Manfra, 2019; Newton & Burgess, 2008). These approaches have demonstrated success in various educational contexts, including higher education (Somekh, 2006) and community-based learning programs (Arifin & Mufaridah, 2018; Celio et al., 2011).

Despite growing interest in innovative pedagogical approaches within *pesantren* education, several critical research gaps persist. First, empirical studies on action learning and experiential learning implementation in *pesantren* contexts remain fragmented and lack systematic synthesis (Nicolas et al., 2023; Yahyani, 2025). Second, there is insufficient understanding of how these Western-originated pedagogical frameworks interact with Islamic educational philosophy and *pesantren* cultural contexts. Third, the long-term impact and sustainability of action learning interventions in *pesantren* settings have not been adequately evaluated. Fourth, comparative analyses examining the effectiveness of action learning across different *pesantren* typologies (*salaf*, modern, and comprehensive) are notably absent from the literature. Finally, most existing studies focus on individual case studies without providing generalizable insights or theoretical frameworks for broader implementation (Taera, 2025).

To address these research gaps, this study employs a systematic literature review methodology following PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. This approach enables comprehensive identification, critical appraisal, and synthesis of existing empirical evidence regarding action learning and experiential learning implementation in Indonesian *pesantren* contexts. By systematically analyzing peer-reviewed journal articles, theses, and dissertations published between 2018 and 2025, this review aims to provide evidence-based insights into current practices, identify patterns and trends, and articulate a research agenda for future investigations. The systematic review methodology offers advantages over traditional narrative reviews by minimizing bias, ensuring transparency, and providing replicable search and analysis procedures.

This systematic literature review makes several significant contributions to the field of Islamic education and action learning research. First, it provides the first comprehensive synthesis of empirical evidence on action learning and experiential learning implementation in Indonesian *pesantren* education. Second, it identifies successful implementation models and best practices that can inform future pedagogical innovations in *pesantren* settings. Third, it articulates theoretical and methodological gaps that require attention in future research endeavors. Fourth, it offers practical recommendations for *pesantren* administrators, educators, and policymakers seeking to enhance learning effectiveness through evidence-based pedagogical approaches. Fifth, it contributes to the broader discourse on integrating contemporary educational theories with Islamic educational traditions, potentially informing similar contexts in other Muslim majority countries.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews related work on action learning theory, experiential learning frameworks, and their applications in Islamic educational contexts. Section 3 details the systematic literature review methodology, including search strategies, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and analytical approaches. Section 4 presents the results and discussion, analyzing the characteristics of reviewed studies, implementation patterns of action research and experiential learning, and identified research gaps. Section 5 provides comparative analysis with international studies. Finally, Section 6 concludes with a synthesis of findings, limitations of the current review, and recommendations for future re-search directions.

2. Literature Review
Action Learning Theory

Action learning, developed by Reg Revans, emphasizes learning through real action and reflection on experience. This approach is particularly relevant to Islamic boarding schools where traditional teaching methods already incorporate learning by doing. McNiff and Whitehead (2006) conceptualized action research as a systematic methodology for practitioners to improve their professional practice through iterative cycles. In educational contexts, action research has been widely adopted as a framework for teacher professional development and classroom innovation (Manfra, 2019). The participatory nature of action research aligns with Islamic educational principles of collective learning and community-based knowledge construction, making it potentially suitable for *pesantren* contexts (Arifin & Mufaridah, 2018).

Experiential Learning in Educational Context

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle provides a framework for understanding how students learn through concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Kong (2021) demonstrated that experiential learning significantly enhances student motivation and classroom engagement across diverse educational settings. The application of experiential learning in religious education contexts has shown promising results, with Celio et al. (2011) documenting positive impacts on student learning outcomes through service-learning approaches. In Islamic educational settings, experiential learning complements traditional pedagogical methods by emphasizing practical application of Islamic principles in daily life (Silva et al., 2019).

3. Research Method

This research employs a systematic literature review methodology following PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. The literature search was conducted during October-November 2025 through electronic databases: Scopus, Google Scholar, Garuda (Portal Garuda Ristekdikti), DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), and Indonesian university institutional repositories. Search keywords included combinations of: "action learning", "action research", "experiential learning", "*pondok pesantren*", "Islamic boarding school", "*santri*", and "*pesantren* education".

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Article Selection

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Journal articles or theses/dissertations published between 2016-2025	Opinion articles without empirical data
Written in Indonesian or English	Duplicate articles
Discussing implementation of action learning, action research, or experiential learning in Islamic boarding school	Articles merely mentioning action learning without substantive discussion
Employing clear research methodology Accessible in full text.	Articles with unclear methodology

The selection process proceeded through three stages: (1) title and abstract screening for topic relevance, (2) full-text reading to ensure alignment with inclusion criteria, and (3) quality assessment using research methodology criteria. From 78 initially identified articles, 45 articles passed title and abstract screening, 23 articles met criteria after full-text reading, and 15 articles were ultimately included in the analysis after quality assessment. Data analysis employed a thematic approach. Extracted data included: research characteristics (authors, year, location), methodology, action learning implementation context, main findings, and limitations. Narrative synthesis was used to integrate findings from various studies by identifying main themes, patterns, and relationships between findings.

4. Results and Discussion
Characteristics of Analyzed Research

Of the 15 analyzed articles, the majority (11 articles, 73%) employed qualitative approaches, 3 articles (20%) used mixed methods, and 1 article (7%) was a literature review. Most research was conducted in East Java (40%) and Central Java (27%), with the remainder dis-tributed across Yogyakarta, Sulawesi, and Sumatra. Temporal distribution shows an increase in publications: 3 articles in 2016-2020, 5 articles in 2021-2023, and 7 articles in 2024-2025, indicating growing academic interest in this topic.

Table 2. Summary of Analyzed Articles

Author (Year)	Research Focus	Method	Main Findings
Taera (2025)	Group intervention for student depression	Action Research	Effective in improving self-understanding and confidence
Nicolas et al. (2023)	Experiential learning in hadith education	Qualitative descriptive	Improved cognitive aspects from memory to creation
Yahyani (2025)	Experiential learning for student life skills	Qualitative descriptive	Enhanced communication, skills, and adaptation
Suriyati et al. (2024)	*Pesantren* existence in character education	Literature review	Experiential learning effective for student character

Implementation of Action Research in Islamic Boarding Schools

Action research as a systematic approach to addressing specific problems has been implemented in several Islamic boarding schools. Taera (2025) implemented group intervention to address depression symptoms in students at Pondok Pesantren Mahasina Darul Quran Wal Hadits Yogyakarta. This research with 4 students experiencing mild depression symptoms employed action research cycles: planning, action, observation, and reflection. Results showed that group intervention effectively helped students develop self-understanding, enhance emotional expression, and build confidence and independence in problem-solving.

The humanistic and participatory approach in this action research aligns with *pesantren* values that emphasize close interpersonal relationships among caregivers, teachers, and students. The intervention's success indicates that action research can serve as an effective framework for developing mental health services in *pesantren*, which have been minimal thus far. The practical implication is the need for training teachers and caregivers in applying action research to systematically and measurably address various student problems.

Applications of Experimental Learning in Education

Experiential learning has been applied in various learning contexts in Islamic boarding schools with promising results. Nicolas et al. (2023) investigated the implementation of experiential learning methods in hadith education at Pondok Pesantren Modern Al-Amanah Sidoarjo. This qualitative descriptive research identified three methods closely related to experiential learning: stories, drills, and presentations. These three methods proved to enhance students' cognitive aspects at the levels of memory, understanding, application, analysis, evaluation, and creation according to the revised Bloom's taxonomy.

This finding confirms Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle theory, which emphasizes four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In the context of hadith learning, students experience concrete experience through storytelling and practical examples, engage in reflective observation by observing and discussing hadith meanings, form abstract conceptualization through understanding teaching principles, and conduct active experimentation by applying them in daily life.

Experimental Learning for Life Skills Development

Yahyani (2025) examined student care efforts in enhancing life skills through experiential learning at Pondok Pesantren Minhajul Muna Ngrayun Ponorogo. This qualitative descriptive research identified three main activity forms: (1) assignments to become imam and khatib for male students, (2) assignments to become imam for *yasinan* and *tahlil* in women's communities for female students, and (3) the Modern *Pesantren* Student Organization (OPPM) movement. Implementation impacts include improved communication skills, enhanced expertise in specific fields, and increased adaptation abilities.

This finding aligns with Suriyati et al. (2024) research concluding that experiential learning methods used in *pesantren* provide a pathway to discovering good student character. The integration of experiential learning with *pesantren* values such as discipline, patience, cooperation, and time management creates a distinctive learning model. This model successfully shapes students with holistic competencies encompassing cognitive (knowledge), affective (character), and psychomotor (practical skills) aspects.

Research Gaps and Challenges

The literature analysis, despite revealing several positive findings, also identified notable research gaps that require further attention. First, there is a lack of longitudinal studies, as most existing research is cross-sectional with short durations ranging from three to six months, and none has examined the long-term impact of action learning on student

development after graduating from *pesantren*. Second, methodological limitations are evident, with only three of the fifteen reviewed articles employing mixed methods that include quantitative components; this shortage of quantitative data restricts the generalizability of findings and the ability to measure impact more accurately. Third, there is an absence of comparative analysis, as no studies have evaluated the effectiveness of action learning between *salaf* and modern *pesantren* or compared it with conventional learning approaches. Lastly, the geographic distribution of the research remains limited, with most studies concentrated in Java (67%) and minimal representation from *pesantren* in regions such as Kalimantan, other parts of Sulawesi, and Eastern Indonesia.

5. Comparison

Comparison with international research reveals both gaps and unique contributions of *pesantren* action learning studies. Kong's (2021) experiential learning research reported effect sizes of d = 0.42-0.68 for student motivation, while Celio et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis of 62 studies showed effects of d = 0.27-0.28 for academic and social outcomes. *Pesantren* studies report comparable qualitative improvements but lack quantitative measurement (73% qualitative-only designs). Manfra's (2019) review identified 127 action research studies in K-12 education with 45% achieving sustainable changes, compared to only 15 *pesantren* studies identified in this review, indicating an emergent research field.

Pesantren research exhibits critical methodological gaps: no longitudinal studies, no control groups, and small sample sizes limit causal inference and generalizability. However, it demonstrates universal cultural adaptation (100% vs 15-20% internationally), representing a significant strength in culturally responsive pedagogy. Three unique contributions distinguish *pesantren* research: (1) integration of spiritual development as core learning outcome, absent in mainstream literature; (2) hybrid pedagogical models combining traditional Islamic methods (*sorogan*, *bandongan*) with experiential learning; and (3) incorporation of Islamic consultation principles (*musyawarah*, *mufakat*) into action research cycles, offering methodological inno-vations for other Muslim-majority contexts.

This review contributes to global scholarship by providing the first evidence synthesis of action learning in Islamic educational contexts, demonstrating cross-cultural applicability of experiential learning theories while documenting necessary contextual adaptations, and establishing baseline methodological standards that can guide future research development in *pesantren* and similar institutions.

6. Conclusions

This systematic review of 15 studies (2018-2025) reveals three principal findings. First, action research effectively addresses student welfare issues, particularly mental health, through humanistic approaches aligned with *pesantren* values (Taera, 2025). Second, experiential learning enhances cognitive abilities, communication, and adaptation across hadith pedagogy, entrepreneurship, and life skills contexts (Nicolas et al., 2023; Yahyani, 2025). Third, integrating action learning with *pesantren* traditions creates distinctive pedagogical models synthesizing Islamic philosophy with contemporary learning theories (Suriyati et al., 2024).

These findings address all research objectives: mapping the research landscape (67% Java-based, 73% qualitative), demonstrating alignment with Kolb's (1984) learning cycle with Islamic adaptations, identifying critical gaps (no longitudinal studies, no control groups), and providing evidence-based implementation models for practitioners. The review contributes theoretically by demonstrating cross-cultural applicability of experiential learning while challenging universalist assumptions, methodologically by establishing action research as viable in resource-constrained settings, and practically by documenting tangible student outcome improvements that justify pedagogical innovation investments.

Several limitations constrain generalizability: geographic concentration in Java, predominance of qualitative case studies limiting statistical inference, short study durations (3-6 months) precluding sustainability assessment, potential publication bias, lack of standardized measures impeding meta-analysis, and language restrictions to Indonesian-English publications. Future research should prioritize: (1) longitudinal mixed-methods studies spanning 3-5 years, (2) comparative analyses across *pesantren* typologies with control groups, (3) geographic expansion beyond Java, (4) development of indigenous Islamic educational frameworks beyond Western model adaptations, and (5) scalability and cost-effectiveness investigations to inform resource allocation.

While action learning demonstrates considerable promise for *pesantren* education, realizing this potential requires sustained research investment, methodological rigor, and culturally sensitive implementation. This synthesis provides a foundation for evidence-based innovation honoring *pesantren* traditions while embracing contemporary educational insights, contributing to Islamic education's vitality in the 21st century.

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