

EMPOWERING MUSLIM YOUTH THROUGH SPIRITUAL LITERACY: AN IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF THE TAQWA PROGRAM IN MELAKA

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Abstract: *The increasing disengagement of Muslim youth from foundational religious practices such as prayer (salah) and Quranic recitation has become a growing concern in contemporary Malaysian society. This gap in spiritual literacy not only affects personal faith development but also weakens communal religious continuity. In response to this challenge, the Transformasi Asas Quranic & Worship Advancement (TAQWA) program was implemented in Melaka as a structured intervention to empower Muslim youth through comprehensive training in Quran and prayer fundamentals. This study aims to assess the effectiveness of the TAQWA program in enhancing spiritual literacy and community leadership among youth participants. Adopting a three-phase community engagement model, the program involved 30 youth participants who underwent interactive modules covering tajwid, tahsin, fiqh, and practical salah performance. Pre- and post-assessments were conducted using digital platforms and oral evaluations, followed by a practicum phase where selected participants facilitated sessions for younger children. The findings indicate a significant improvement in participants'*

confidence, knowledge, and practical religious skills, along with an increased readiness to contribute to community-based da'wah initiatives. This article concludes with recommendations for replicating the TAQWA model in other regions, integrating spiritual training with broader youth development strategies.

Keywords: *Youth empowerment, Quranic literacy, prayer skills, community da'wah, TAQWA module*

Introduction

The role of spiritual literacy among Muslim youth is becoming increasingly critical in the face of rapid socio-cultural transformations, technological distractions, and declining engagement with religious practices. Foundational religious competencies, particularly those relating to salah (ritual prayer) and Qur'anic recitation, are not only obligatory (fardu 'ain) but serve as spiritual anchors that shape character, discipline, and identity (Mohd Sani et al., 2021). However, studies have shown that a significant number of Muslim adolescents in Malaysia exhibit weak performance in these core areas due to limited reinforcement outside the formal schooling system and a lack of engaging, community-based interventions (Aziz & Abdullah, 2019; Rahman et al., 2020). This disconnect threatens the transmission of religious values across generations and calls for alternative pedagogical approaches that are participatory, contextualised, and empowering.

Recognising this challenge, the Transformasi Asas Quranic & Worship Advancement (TAQWA) program was introduced in Melaka as a youth-focused spiritual literacy initiative. It was designed not only to strengthen technical competencies in tajwid, tahsin al-Qira'ah, and fiqh al-salah, but also to promote reflective understanding and proactive engagement with acts of worship. Unlike conventional classroom methods, the TAQWA program adopted a modular, multi-phase approach involving workshops, assessments, and practical leadership tasks through peer facilitation. It reflects a growing need for Islamic educational models that are grounded in experiential learning, community relevance, and spiritual internalisation (Ishak & Shukor, 2020).

This article presents a systematic evaluation of the TAQWA program's impact on Muslim youth in Melaka. Specifically, it aims to: (1) assess improvements in participants' religious knowledge and practical worship skills; (2) explore the potential of youth as community da'wah agents; and (3) propose scalable strategies for implementing spiritual literacy programs through university–community collaboration. The findings contribute to the discourse on faith-based empowerment and underline the importance of context-sensitive approaches in addressing the religious education needs of contemporary Muslim youth.

Problem Statement

Recent national indicators and local studies point to persistent weaknesses in spiritual literacy and ritual practice among Malaysian youth, an issue with implications for personal faith and collective religious continuity. The Malaysia Youth Index (MYI) 2022 highlights domains of youth wellbeing where spirituality and civic engagement require sustained attention, signalling room for improvement in how religious identity is nurtured at the community level. In parallel, national social statistics reveal youth-facing social trends (e.g., patterns in juvenile cases, school disengagement) that underscore the need for preventive, value-based interventions delivered

outside purely classroom settings. Local empirical work also documents specific gaps in foundational religious competencies, such as inconsistent prayer adherence and limited fardhu-
'ain (Qur'anic recitation and prayer) mastery among adolescents, which reduce the likelihood that formal instruction alone will generate sustained worship practices.

Existing interventions (short workshops, episodic mosque classes, or digital apps operating in isolation) have shown merit in accessibility or reach but remain limited in producing long-term internalisation and leadership outcomes. Many initiatives are short-term, lack integrated community mentorship, or fail to evaluate behavioural retention systematically. These insufficiencies justify the need for a community-anchored, mixed-method impact assessment of systematic spiritual-literacy programs such as TAQWA; to determine not only immediate skill gains but also retention, transformative disposition (taqwa), and youth capacity for peer/facilitator leadership.

Literature Review

The issue of youth moral decline has become a recurring theme in both academic and policy discussions, particularly in societies grappling with the tension between modernisation and traditional religious values. Numerous studies have pointed to worrying trends among youth, including rising levels of disciplinary problems, social deviance, and a weakening sense of religious obligation (Haron, 2018; Nordin & Wahab, 2021). This has raised concerns regarding the effectiveness of current educational frameworks in shaping ethical and spiritually grounded individuals. In response, scholars and practitioners have increasingly advocated for integrative models that combine moral education with structured religious literacy to guide youth behaviour and decision-making. This review explores three interconnected themes that underpin the theoretical foundation of the TAQWA program: (1) youth moral challenges; (2) religion as a moral compass; and (3) structured guidance through moral training modules:

Youth Moral Challenges in Contemporary Society

In recent decades, Malaysian society has witnessed a growing number of behavioural issues involving youth, including social deviance, substance abuse, online misconduct, and disrespect toward authority figures. According to the Malaysian Youth Index Report (Kementerian Belia dan Sukan Malaysia, 2019), a significant percentage of youth scored low in domains related to spiritual resilience, ethical reasoning, and civic responsibility. Factors contributing to this trend include broken family structures, excessive digital exposure, weak religious orientation, and a lack of effective moral role models (Roslan et al., 2020).

This moral decline is not merely symptomatic of individual failure but reflects broader systemic shortcomings in addressing youth needs through holistic educational strategies. While formal religious education exists within national curricula, the focus is often theoretical, exam-oriented, and insufficiently internalised. Scholars such as Haron (2018) argue that without personal engagement and experiential learning, religious knowledge fails to translate into moral behaviour. Moreover, youth are increasingly navigating value conflicts between Islamic teachings and modern secular ideals promoted via social media and peer networks (Nordin & Wahab, 2021). These conditions underscore the urgent need for dynamic, community-based platforms that bridge knowledge and practice.

Religion as a Moral Compass

From an Islamic pedagogical perspective, religion plays a pivotal role not only in guiding acts of worship but also in cultivating akhlaq, or virtuous conduct. The Qur'an consistently links belief with behaviour, and the Prophet Muhammad SAW is upheld as the supreme exemplar of moral excellence (Qur'an, 33:21; 68:4). Classical scholars like al-Ghazali, Ibn Miskawayh, and more recently, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas have asserted that the goal of Islamic education is the inculcation of adab, understood as the proper ordering of knowledge, action, and character (Al-Attas, 1993). In this view, taqwa, is not simply fear of divine punishment, but a cultivated awareness that governs all aspects of personal and social behaviour.

Empirical studies support the association between religious engagement and positive moral outcomes. Zainal and Halim (2021) found that adolescents who regularly participated in religious activities, such as Quranic classes and mosque programs, exhibited higher levels of empathy, respect, and self-control. Religion provides not only a value system but also an internalised source of motivation that strengthens moral decision-making, especially when social norms are in flux. However, for religious teachings to function as an effective moral compass, they must be transmitted in ways that are age-appropriate, relevant, and emotionally resonant (Ishak & Shukor, 2020).

Structured Moral Training Modules

Moral development is a process that requires consistency, reinforcement, and contextual application. Studies in Islamic education and developmental psychology suggest that structured, modular training, particularly when integrated with practice and reflection, can lead to measurable improvements in youth behaviour (Ahmad & Mahamood, 2017). These modules often include components such as theoretical learning, simulation, role-playing, peer mentorship, and community service, all of which align with Islamic educational principles. In Malaysia, several initiatives such as Kem Sahsiah Muslim, Program Jati Diri Remaja, and usrah-based leadership camps have shown promising results in shaping positive youth identity (Hamzah et al., 2020). These programs typically blend worship-related modules (e.g., tahsin and fiqh al-ibadah) with personal development activities and group reflection. Importantly, they emphasise experiential learning and community contribution; elements that resonate strongly with youth and enhance knowledge retention.

Research on mosque-based education and youth religiosity shows converging but incomplete findings. Several studies argue that mosque programmes can cultivate communal values and leadership when they combine ritual training with experiential activities (Hamzah et al., 2020; Ishak & Shukor, 2020). However, evaluations often report short-term engagement with limited measures of behavioural retention, suggesting that program design (duration, mentoring, and follow-up) matters as much as content. At the same time, the landscape of digital Islamic pedagogy has rapidly expanded: digital Qur'an tools and hybrid course models increase accessibility and provide scalable assessment options, yet they commonly lack the relational mentorship that anchors practice within community life.

Recent empirical and practitioner literature (2022–2024) highlights three tendencies relevant to TAQWA. First, hybrid youth programs that combine online assessments with face-to-face mentorship show promise for improving uptake but require robust integration strategies to sustain behaviour. Second, digital da'wah and mosque information systems are proliferating, yet they remain fragmented and unevenly linked to pedagogy and evaluation. Third, mosque-

based leadership initiatives emphasize youth cadres and peer mentorship as vehicles for internalisation and continuity, but many lack systematic outcome measures.

From this body of work a clear gap emerges: there is a scarcity of mixed-method, systematic assessments that simultaneously measure (a) immediate gains in ritual competence, (b) medium-term retention of practices, and (c) development of youth leadership capacity, using validated instruments and community-anchored sampling. Existing studies either emphasise qualitative narratives of engagement or report quantitative pre/post gains without triangulating oral skills assessments, digital test scores, and longer-term behavioural markers. The present study addresses this gap by combining Quizizz-based pre/post tests, oral/practical evaluations, reflection journals, and mentor observations within a community-embedded program design

The TAQWA program aligns with this tradition by offering a three-phase model: theoretical mastery, practical application, and community empowerment. The integration of digital assessments (e.g., Quizizz), oral recitation tests, and peer-led mentoring reflects best practices in contemporary Islamic pedagogy. Such models address not only knowledge gaps but also build leadership capacity, reinforcing the idea that youth can be both learners and educators within their own communities.

Methodology

This impact assessment applies a mixed-methods design (quantitative pre/post measures and qualitative thematic inquiry) embedded in a participatory action research (PAR) framework. The sample size of 30 youth was selected for the pilot nature of the program and the goals of intensive mentorship and quality oral assessment. Practically, the cohort scale ($n \approx 30$) allows for small group pedagogies, repeated supervised practice, and feasible inter-rater oral evaluations while enabling initial statistical comparison (pre/post) to estimate effect sizes for future power calculations. The age range 15–25 was chosen because it captures late adolescents and emerging adults who (a) are developmentally transitioning into leadership roles, (b) can function as near-peer mentors (TAQWA Cilik facilitators), and (c) often show the greatest variability in ritual adherence; making them an appropriate target for intervention. Participants were recruited via surau/komuniti nominations to ensure local legitimacy and to evaluate the model in an authentic community setting; nomination also facilitates subsequent community deployment of trained youth as facilitators.

The digital multiple-choice instrument was developed from the TAQWA curriculum objectives (tajwid rules, basic fiqh, and key terminology). To establish content validity, items were reviewed by three subject-matter experts (tajwid instructor, fiqh lecturer, and community imam) prior to deployment; items with <70% expert agreement were revised. The Quizizz platform provides time-stamped response data for item analysis; post-hoc item difficulty and discrimination indices were calculated to evaluate test properties. Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for knowledge subscales was computed from pilot responses; scales with $\alpha < .65$ were reworded and re-piloted. Oral recitation and prayer performance were evaluated using a structured rubric (pronunciation/makhraj accuracy, tajwid application, fluency, posture, and khushu' indicators).

Results and Analysis

This study employed a participatory action research (PAR) framework to explore the design, implementation, and impact of the Transformasi Asas Quranic & Worship Advancement (TAQWA) program on Muslim youth in Melaka. The methodological process was structured around three interrelated phases; planning, execution, and post-intervention evaluation; conducted over a four-month period from April to August 2025. The program was carried out in partnership with local community stakeholders, including Surau As-Sa'adah, the Melaka Mufti Department, Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia (YADIM), Politeknik Melaka, Universiti Islam Melaka, and Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Melaka. The planning phase focused on the development of a tailored training module that combined theoretical instruction, practical engagement, and evaluative mechanisms. Consultative sessions with religious educators and community leaders were held to ensure that the content aligned with both religious standards and the developmental needs of youth. Communication and coordination were facilitated through digital platforms, including a dedicated WhatsApp group involving key stakeholders from the university and the surau committee.

The second phase involved the implementation of the first series of the TAQWA workshop in July 2025, which took place at Surau As-Sa'adah. Thirty youth participants aged between 15 and 25 were selected through nominations by local surau networks. The workshop delivered structured sessions on tajwid, tahsin al-Qira'ah, fiqh al-salah, and practical salah refinement. These were conducted through interactive teaching methods, peer collaboration, and guided practice. Assessments were conducted both before and after the sessions using the Quizizz platform for theoretical knowledge and oral/practical evaluations for skills assessment. The final phase, held in August 2025, served as the post-intervention component. One month after the initial training, participants were reassessed through online oral sessions conducted via Google Meet, aimed at measuring retention and progression. Based on performance scores, ten of the most proficient participants were appointed as junior facilitators under the "TAQWA Cilik" program. These facilitators then mentored twenty children aged 7 to 12 in basic Quranic recitation and salah, allowing the youth to apply their knowledge while contributing to community religious development.

This section presents the findings of the TAQWA program implementation based on quantitative assessments and qualitative reflections gathered from participants. The evaluation is structured into two dimensions: first, the effectiveness of the TAQWA module in enhancing participants' knowledge and practical skills in Qur'anic recitation and prayer performance; and second, the broader program-level impact, which includes participants' perceptions, youth leadership outcomes, and community engagement. The combination of pre- and post-assessments, self-evaluation surveys, and facilitator observations provides a multidimensional view of the program's educational and developmental outcomes. These findings are discussed considering the program's objectives and relevant literature on Islamic education, youth empowerment, and community-based learning. The analysis highlights the degree to which the TAQWA program contributed to improved fardu 'ain literacy, internalisation of taqwa, and the emergence of proactive youth leaders within a community religious setting.

a) Effectiveness of the TAQWA Module

The pre- and post-assessment data from 28 participants indicate a significant improvement in core domains of religious literacy. The module specifically focused on tajwid, tahsin al-Qira'ah,

fiqh al-salah, and practical prayer application. Self-assessed Likert-scale responses (1–5) demonstrated notable increases across all items.

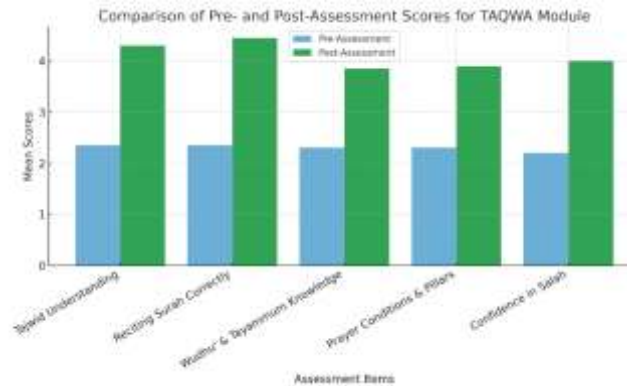


Figure 1: Effectiveness of the TAQWA Module

For instance, the mean score for understanding of tajwid rose from 2.35 (SD = 1.27) to 4.30 (SD = 0.66), while confidence in performing salah improved from 2.20 to 4.00. Similarly, the ability to recite Surah al-Fatihah and selected short surahs improved from a mean score of 2.35 to 4.45. These gains suggest not only cognitive understanding but also affective engagement, as reflected in participants' increased self-assurance and spiritual motivation. The narrowing of standard deviation post-assessment indicates greater consistency and shared mastery among the cohort. These findings corroborate studies by Ahmad and Mahamood (2017) and Ishak and Shukor (2020), which highlight the impact of experiential and values-integrated Islamic pedagogy on behavioural outcomes.

b) Perceived Impact of the TAQWA Program

Analysis of post-program evaluation involving 28 respondents further validates the success of the TAQWA initiative. Items evaluating the overall impact, facilitation quality, content delivery, and spiritual transformation received average ratings between 4.5 and 4.8 out of 5.

Table 1: Impact of the TAQWA Program

Item	Score
Program improved my Quran & prayer skills	4.52
Program raised my awareness to change positively	4.76
Facilitators were effective and knowledgeable	4.43
Activities were engaging and interactive	4.67
Content was well-organised and easy to follow	4.57
Venue was comfortable and conducive	4.71
Registration and logistics were well-managed	4.81
I am committed to applying what I learned	4.57
The program should be expanded for more youth	4.57

The highest-rated item, “This program raised my awareness to change for the better”, scored a mean of 4.76, indicating a strong psychological and moral resonance with the participants. Notably, 100% of respondents agreed that the program should be expanded to more youth, and 95% indicated a strong intention to apply the knowledge in their daily religious practice. These findings align with the goals of the module in cultivating taqwa not only as a concept, but as a lived reality embedded in daily worship and character.

c) Youth Leadership and TAQWA Cilik Implementation

The third phase of the program involved the selection of ten high-performing youth to lead TAQWA Cilik, a parallel module for children aged 7–12. These facilitators conducted Qur'an and prayer workshops under supervision, successfully transferring knowledge while reinforcing their own learning. Feedback from surau committee members, parents, and the children themselves confirmed that the facilitators showed confidence, clarity, and a strong sense of religious responsibility. This aspect of the program exemplifies murabbi–mutarabbi pedagogy, where the learner becomes a teacher. It also reinforces findings from mosque-based youth empowerment research (Hamzah et al., 2020), where peer mentorship fosters long-term commitment and identity formation.

d) Institutional and Community Collaboration

The program was successfully delivered through strategic collaboration involving Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Melaka, Surau As-Sa'adah, the Melaka Mufti Department, Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia (YADIM), Politeknik Melaka, and Universiti Islam Melaka. The initiative, funded by the TEJA Community Grant, also served as a functional model of University Social Responsibility (USR), creating a feedback loop between academia and local religious communities. This integrated effort enhanced community engagement, diversified the delivery of Islamic education, and empowered local stakeholders to sustain similar programs in the future.

Discussion

The TAQWA program yielded several notable outcomes, both in terms of participants' individual growth and broader community engagement. The data collected through pre- and post-assessment scores, oral evaluations, and observational notes revealed clear improvements in religious literacy, confidence, and leadership readiness among the youth participants. The most significant quantitative finding was the marked increase in theoretical understanding and practical performance of both Qur'anic recitation and prayer rituals. Quizizz-based pre-tests indicated a wide variation in participants' baseline knowledge, with many scorings below 50% accuracy in tajwid rules and fiqh essentials. However, post-program assessments showed an average increase of 30–40% in correct responses, reflecting the effectiveness of interactive instruction and modular learning. Similarly, oral assessments demonstrated improvement in fluency and tajwid accuracy during Qur'anic recitation. Participants who had previously struggled with articulation or lacked confidence in public religious performance showed measurable progress in recitation speed, tone modulation, and rule application.

More qualitatively, facilitator observation and participant reflections suggested a heightened sense of spiritual awareness and personal discipline. Several participants reported renewed commitment to daily prayer, increased attendance at local mosque events, and a stronger desire to guide others in basic acts of worship. This aligns with previous studies which highlight the link between experiential Islamic learning and sustained moral behaviour (Ishak & Shukor,

2020). One of the most impactful elements of the program was the transition from trainee to facilitator. The selection of ten high-performing participants as mentors for the TAQWA Cilik module served a dual function: it validated their learning through teaching and extended the program's reach to younger children aged 7–12. These youth facilitators not only reinforced their own competencies through guided repetition but also developed essential soft skills such as communication, patience, and leadership. Their role in mentoring children within the community provided a tangible expression of dakwah fardiyyah; a person-to-person approach that is particularly effective in grassroots Islamic education.

Furthermore, the community-centred nature of the TAQWA program contributed to increased trust and collaboration between the university and local stakeholders. Surau committee members, parents, and religious officers expressed appreciation for the program's structured yet practical approach to religious development. This feedback suggests that university social responsibility (USR) initiatives that focus on religious literacy can serve as viable platforms for long-term collaboration in moral and spiritual education. Nevertheless, the program also encountered several challenges. Some participants required additional time beyond the workshop duration to master the recitation techniques, indicating a need for longer or follow-up sessions. Technological limitations during online post-assessments also affected the fluency of evaluation. Future iterations of the program could consider hybrid formats or mobile-friendly tools to increase accessibility and continuity.

In summary, the findings affirm the effectiveness of the TAQWA program in promoting religious literacy, enhancing moral confidence, and cultivating youth leadership through a community-based framework. The results also suggest that structured intervention models; when grounded in faith, practice, and mentorship, can address critical gaps in youth religious education in Malaysia.

Future Direction And Recommendations

The TAQWA program, developed as a modular religious education intervention grounded in Qur'an and salah training, has demonstrated significant effectiveness in improving spiritual literacy, nurturing personal transformation, and developing youth leadership. Quantitative data shows strong gains in tajwid understanding, practical prayer confidence, and commitment to religious practice. Qualitative observations and participant feedback further confirm the program's holistic impact on individual motivation, communal interaction, and educational satisfaction. The peer-led TAQWA Cilik phase proved that young participants, when sufficiently trained and supported, can contribute meaningfully to grassroots religious education. This offers a scalable model for dakwah fardiyyah and faith-based community development. Given these positive outcomes, several recommendations are proposed:

- a) **Program Expansion:** The TAQWA module should be expanded to other regions, with tailored adaptations for specific community contexts. The three-phase model; training, evaluation, and outreach, can serve as a replicable template.
- b) **Structured Follow-up and Mentoring:** Post-program engagement, including digital mentoring, refresher sessions, or micro-teaching opportunities, should be institutionalised to sustain participant growth.
- c) **Digital Tools and Hybrid Delivery:** Elements such as Quizizz, Google Meet, and mobile-friendly modules should be integrated into future iterations to widen access and enhance learning retention.

- d) Policy and Institutional Integration: The model can be formalised as a co-curricular or community engagement initiative within university portfolios, aligned with service-learning or religious education mandates.

In conclusion, the TAQWA program demonstrates how faith-based educational innovation, when grounded in community collaboration and pedagogical integrity, can meet the spiritual, moral, and leadership needs of Muslim youth in Malaysia.

Conclusions

The TAQWA Program represents a promising model for youth religious empowerment, particularly in contexts where foundational spiritual literacy is lacking or underdeveloped. By integrating Qur'anic and ibadah-based training with interactive teaching, practical evaluation, and peer-led facilitation, the program successfully bridged the gap between knowledge and application among Muslim youth in Melaka. The findings of this study confirm that structured, community-embedded modules can significantly enhance religious competence, personal discipline, and leadership potential among young participants. Importantly, the program's emphasis on taqwa, as both a goal and a guiding principle ensured that learning was not limited to ritual performance but extended to ethical development and social responsibility. The transformation of trainees into facilitators through the TAQWA Cilik initiative further reinforced this by positioning youth as active agents of change within their communities. This dual-impact approach personal empowerment coupled with community outreach, demonstrates how Islamic pedagogy can be made dynamic, relevant, and sustainable.

Considering these outcomes, several recommendations are proposed. First, the TAQWA model should be adapted and expanded to other localities, particularly in semi-urban and rural areas where access to religious training is limited. Local mosques and community centres can serve as strategic hubs for implementation, with universities providing academic oversight and volunteer support. Second, future programs should incorporate a longer intervention period to allow for more gradual skill acquisition, especially for participants with limited prior exposure to formal religious education. Third, technological tools such as mobile learning apps, gamified assessments, and virtual mentoring platforms can be further explored to enhance engagement and accessibility. Lastly, it is recommended that stakeholders in religious education, particularly at the tertiary level, embed service-based learning initiatives such as TAQWA within their institutional community engagement frameworks. Doing so not only fulfils the objectives of University Social Responsibility (USR) but also contributes to the long-term cultivation of spiritually literate and socially conscious Muslim youth.

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