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## Enhancing Mahārah al-Qirā'ah through Halaqah and Muhafazah Methods in Surau of Sogian Village

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### EN Abstract

**Background:** Although the *halaqah* and *muhāfazah* methods are widely practiced in pesantren education, few empirical studies have directly compared their impact on *mahārah al-qirā'ah* (Arabic reading skills), especially in rural surau contexts. This study addresses that gap by examining the relative effectiveness of the two methods.

**Methods:** A cluster-randomized controlled trial was conducted with ten students (aged 11–14) in two surau in Sogian Village: Surau al-Ma'ruf applied the *halaqah* method, while Surau al-Sufyan applied the *muhāfazah* method. Data were gathered through interviews, weekly observations, and reading tests using unvowelled passages from *al-Akhlāq li al-Banīn*. Mixed-methods analysis combined descriptive qualitative insights with comparative quantitative measures.

**Results:** The *muhāfazah* group achieved higher fluency, with 80% of students able to read unfamiliar texts to some extent, while the *halaqah* group showed stronger comprehension support but limited decoding ability. Memorization fostered vocabulary retention and automaticity, whereas discussion enhanced interpretive understanding.

**Conclusions:** The findings highlight the pedagogical value of integrating both methods: *muhāfazah* strengthens fluency, and *halaqah* cultivates comprehension. This study contributes empirical evidence for Arabic pedagogy in pesantren and recommends a combined approach for balanced reading development.

### EN Keywords

*Mahārah al-Qirā'ah*; *Halaqah Method*; *Muhāfazah Method*.

### ID Abstrak

**Latar Belakang:** Metode *halaqah* dan *muhāfazah* banyak digunakan dalam pendidikan pesantren, namun sedikit penelitian empiris yang secara langsung membandingkan dampaknya terhadap *mahārah al-qirā'ah* santri, khususnya di konteks surau pedesaan. Penelitian ini menutup celah tersebut dengan menelaah efektivitas keduanya.

**Metode:** Penelitian menggunakan desain cluster-randomized controlled trial dengan sepuluh santri (usia 11–14) di dua surau di Desa Sogian: Surau al-Ma'ruf menerapkan metode *halaqah*, sementara Surau al-Sufyan menerapkan metode *muhāfazah*. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara, observasi mingguan, dan tes baca teks Arab gundul dari kitab *al-Akhlāq li al-Banīn*. Analisis mixed-methods menggabungkan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dan kuantitatif komparatif.

**Hasil:** Kelompok *muhāfazah* menunjukkan kelancaran lebih tinggi, dengan 80% santri mampu membaca teks baru meskipun sebagian belum tepat secara gramatikal. Kelompok *halaqah* lebih terdukung dalam pemahaman, tetapi masih lemah dalam aspek dekoding. Aktivitas hafalan memperkuat kosakata dan otomatisasi, sedangkan diskusi mendorong pemahaman makna.

**Kesimpulan:** Temuan menegaskan nilai pedagogis integrasi kedua metode: *muhāfazah* memperkuat kelancaran, *halaqah* menumbuhkan pemahaman. Penelitian ini memberikan bukti empiris bagi pedagogi bahasa Arab di pesantren dan merekomendasikan kombinasi keduanya untuk pengembangan membaca yang seimbang.

### ID Kata Kunci

*Mahārah al-Qirā'ah*; Metode *Halaqah*; Metode *Muhāfazah*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mahārah al-qirā'ah (reading skill) is one of the four core language competencies, yet it remains particularly challenging for Indonesian learners of Arabic. Supriadi Ansyah et al. (2020) identify two major contributing factors: internal barriers related to comprehension processes and external barriers associated with instructional practices. Beyond differences in script and grammar, understanding Arabic texts—whether *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts) or the Qur'an—requires deep linguistic and contextual analysis. Even learners who have memorized rules of Arabic grammar (*naḥw* and *ṣarf*) often struggle to apply them effectively when reading.

In pesantren, the development of mahārah al-qirā'ah typically relies on *kitab kuning* as primary learning material, with comprehension of these texts as the main instructional goal. To achieve this, teachers commonly employ the traditional methods of *halaqah* and *muḥāfazah*. The *muḥāfazah* method involves memorization of vocabulary or passages under teacher supervision within a set timeframe, while the *halaqah* method—also known as *bandongan*—is based on guided explanation and discussion of texts from both grammatical and semantic perspectives. These approaches are still widely used in village *surau*, where *kitab kuning* remains the core reference (Adib, 2021).

In Sogian village, both methods remain central to teaching practices. This study aims to examine and compare their effects on students' mahārah al-qirā'ah, focusing not only on decoding and comprehension but also on teachers' pedagogical rationale for maintaining these traditional practices despite the emergence of more modern approaches.

Previous studies have investigated related strategies. Supriadi Ansyah, Mahyudin Ritongan, and Fitri Alrasi examined the *sistem kaji duduak*, which resembles *halaqah*, and found it improved reading skills at MTI Batang Kabung, although the approach leaned toward *qawā'id wa al-tarjamah*. Miftahul Karimah (2012) analyzed the application of memorization in the Program Qirā'atul Kutub (PQK) and demonstrated its effectiveness in deepening comprehension of Arabic texts. More recent research highlights similar benefits: Ghofur and Husniah (2022) showed that *muḥāfazah* of *naẓam* grammar texts

facilitated fluency in reading *kitab kuning*, while Addaraini and Inayati (2023) reported that *halaqah* enhanced both retention and comprehension in Qur'anic learning contexts.

**Research gap and objectives.** Despite their widespread use, no prior study has directly compared the effectiveness of *halaqah* and *muḥāfazah* under controlled experimental conditions with reading outcomes as the primary focus. This study addresses that gap by evaluating their effects on beginner learners' development of reading fluency (decoding) and comprehension in rural *surau* contexts, while also exploring teachers' pedagogical reasons for continuing these practices.

**Novelty and contribution.** Unlike earlier studies that examined each method in isolation, this research compares both methods side by side and provides a systematic analysis of their relative impacts. Practically, it offers evidence-based insights for pesantren educators on how to balance memorization and discussion. Theoretically, it contributes to Arabic pedagogy by clarifying how repetitive memorization fosters automaticity and word recognition, while guided discussion promotes language comprehension. By situating Indonesian pesantren practices within broader debates on Arabic reading pedagogy, this study contributes both local insights and global significance (Syafei, 2023; Ali, Abdullah, & Ab Rahman, 2020).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. On Reading

Reading is one of the four fundamental language skills. Sri Prastisi (2009, p. 2) notes that reading involves complex processes encompassing visual activity, cognitive processing, psycholinguistics, and metacognition. According to Hodgson, reading is essentially the act of obtaining messages from a text produced by an author. Linguistically, reading comprises both encoding and decoding processes, enabling readers to connect textual input with prior knowledge, experience, and information.

Reading ability includes recoding—associating words and sentences with sounds according to the writing system—and decoding, i.e., translating sound sequences into words. Through these processes, readers extract meaning from written messages. In foreign language learning,

reading facilitates mastery by building vocabulary and cognitive processing capacity (West, in Saepudin, 2012, p. 85). More recent studies confirm that effective reading instruction requires scaffolding both decoding skills and comprehension strategies. For instance, Ali, Abdullah, and Ab Rahman (2020) showed that structured comprehension strategies such as SQ3R significantly improved Arabic reading comprehension among Malaysian students, while Syafei (2023) demonstrated that innovative literacy models in pesantren enhanced students' ability to decode and understand religious texts more effectively than conventional methods.

In Arabic, reading is termed *qirā'ah* and forms part of *mahārah al-qirā'ah*. It entails cognitive effort to extract meaning and messages from Arabic texts, often supported by oral performance. For Indonesian learners, reading Arabic remains challenging because *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts) demand both grammatical mastery and interpretive skills. Even students who memorize grammar often fail to apply it effectively. Grammar instruction itself is often perceived as difficult, due to monotonous delivery, limited examples, and overly abstract explanations (Ridho Hidayah, 2022). This discourages motivation and impedes skill development.

**Synthesis.** Findings across Arabic reading research suggest that morphological awareness and grammatical knowledge underpin comprehension, while automatic word recognition drives fluency (Ali et al., 2020; Syafei, 2023). Effective pedagogy, therefore, should integrate repetitive practice to build automaticity with guided analysis to construct meaning. This dual focus justifies comparing *halaqah* (discussion-based) and *muḥāfazah* (memorization-based) methods, as both emphasize complementary aspects of reading development.

## 2.2. On the *Halaqah* Method

The *halaqah* method, historically rooted in the Prophet's era, literally means "circle." It typically involves 3–12 learners engaging in the study of Arabic texts, focusing on both grammar and content, with a teacher (*ustādh*) moderating discussion. Students listen as the teacher reads *mufradāt* and explains meanings. The method covers both religious and general topics, and sometimes extends to philosophical analysis—e.g., identifying 'āmil—which has drawn criticism from

reformist grammarians (Ibrahim Mustafa, Ibrahim Anis) for overemphasis on theoretical constructs such as *i'rāb* and *'awāmil*.

In contemporary practice, *halaqah* resembles an interactive lecture but should emphasize **active engagement**: student discussion, peer correction, and guided analysis. Zulfikri (2012) likened it to a public lecture, but updated applications stress participation. Recent research confirms its effectiveness: Addaraini and Inayati (2023) found that *halaqah* improved Qur'anic memorization and discipline among female students, while Hasna, Suhadi, and Sulistyowati (2022) reported improved pronunciation and *tajwīd* through *halaqah tahfidz*. Similarly, Soleh et al. (2018) emphasized that *halaqah* fosters collaborative learning in Qur'anic memorization. These findings highlight that *halaqah* strengthens accuracy, discipline, and comprehension when structured to ensure participation. Conversely, when limited to teacher exposition, *halaqah* risks reinforcing passivity and underdeveloping automatic decoding.

## 2.3. On the *Muḥāfazah* Method

*Muḥāfazah* derives from *ḥafīẓa-yuḥāfīẓu-muḥāfazatan* (to memorize) and emphasizes memorization as a route to mastery. Historically, memorization was central in Arab oral culture, where poetry, *naẓam*, and Qur'anic verses were transmitted without reliance on literacy. This legacy persists in Islamic education, particularly for children with stronger recall capacities.

Pedagogically, *muḥāfazah* is prescriptive: learners commit texts to memory according to established rules. Typical stages include (1) introduction of material, (2) grouping (peer support under a senior student), and (3) teacher-led definition of grammatical rules. In pesantren, *muḥāfazah* often integrates with *qawā'id wa at-tarjamah*, where memorization of *mufradāt* and formulae reinforces grammatical understanding.

Recent evidence supports its impact. Ghofur and Husniah (2022) found that *muḥāfazah* of *Naẓam Jurūmiyyah* enabled 85% of students to achieve "very good" scores in reading *kitab kuning*. Karimah (2012) also reported that memorization-based teaching in *qirā'atul kutub* enhanced comprehension. More broadly, Sudiarti (2015) demonstrated that structured memorization paired with grammatical

explanation improved intensive reading accuracy among university students. These results confirm that memorization builds fluency and decoding ability, though with the risk of “word calling”—accurate recitation without deep understanding. Hence, muḥāfazah is most effective when paired with analytic approaches (e.g., *halaqah*) to interpret memorized texts.

#### 2.4. Implementation of the *Ḥalaqah* Method at Surau al-Ma’ruf

Surau al-Ma’ruf in Sogian hosts 30 students, with five (aged 12–14) selected for this study. Instruction relies on *ḥalaqah*. Ideally, this involves collaborative text analysis at both grammatical and semantic levels. However, in practice, two factors limited effectiveness: (1) students were grammar beginners, and (2) emphasis was placed on content comprehension rather than grammar. Thus, students remained passive, despite Q&A sessions.

The process unfolded in three stages: (1) the teacher read and explained the text, (2) students noted explanations and vowel marks, and (3) students restated their learning. Teachers viewed this as efficient, while students benefited from clarified meanings but lacked grammar training. Supporting literature (Adib, 2021; Harahap, 2023) shows that pesantren often rely heavily on traditional methods such as *bandongan* or *halaqah*, which prioritize meaning over grammar, sometimes leading to student boredom and weak grammar application. This underscores the need to modify *halaqah* into an interactive model that enforces participation and explicitly links to grammar development.

#### 2.5. Implementation of the *Muḥāfazah* Method at Surau al-Sufyan

Surau al-Sufyan has 25 students, with five (aged 11–14) involved in this study. Instruction applied the *muḥāfazah* method, requiring students to memorize passages over three days. This produced stronger fluency: students could reread memorized passages and attempt new ones with partial success. However, beginners still faced difficulties due to weak grammatical grounding.

For teachers, *muḥāfazah* was manageable since it emphasized recitation. For students, outcomes varied according to memorization capacity. The study’s findings align with Ghofur

and Husniah (2022), who confirmed that *muḥāfazah* facilitated reading of *kitab gundul* by reinforcing recall of vocabulary and patterns. Yet, as noted by Adib (2021), heavy reliance on rote memorization risks disengagement if not paired with understanding. Thus, while *muḥāfazah* strengthened fluency and confidence, it requires supplementation with analytic guidance to develop comprehensive reading competence.

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1. Research Design and Sample

This study employed a cluster-randomized controlled trial (RCT), as recommended in educational experiments (Solomon et al., 2009). Two surau in Sogian Village were purposively selected: Surau al-Ma’ruf, assigned to the *ḥalaqah* method, and Surau al-Sufyan, assigned to the *muḥāfazah* method. From each surau, five students aged 11–14 were randomly chosen (total  $N = 10$ ). A baseline diagnostic test of Arabic reading was conducted to ensure comparable starting ability between groups.

*First, Ethics.* Participation was voluntary, with parental/guardian consent obtained for all minors and permission secured from surau instructors. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Tarbiyah, Institut Ilmu Keislaman Annuqayah (INSTIKA) (Approval No. 012/EC-FT/2024). This design follows best practices in Arabic education research, where experimental and quasi-experimental methods are increasingly used to evaluate instructional interventions (Syafei, 2023; Ali et al., 2020).

*Second, Procedure.* The intervention lasted four weeks. 1) Week 1 (Pre-test): Students read an unvowelled passage from *al-Akhlāq li al-Banīn* to establish baseline decoding ability; 2) Week 2 (Fidelity check): Semi-structured interviews with teachers and students ensured that each group adhered to its designated method; 3) Weeks 3–4 (Implementation): a) *Ḥalaqah group*: Engaged in guided discussions, teacher-led text explanation, and brief grammar references; b) *Muḥāfazah group*: Engaged in memorization and recitation drills, with assigned passages to be recalled after three days; 4) Week 4 (Post-test): Students attempted a passage of equivalent difficulty from the same book to measure improvement.

The use of *al-Akhlāq li al-Banīn* was based on its accessibility for beginners, while still requiring grammatical awareness, consistent with findings on kitab kuning literacy in pesantren contexts (Harahap, 2023; Adib, 2021). This choice ensured ecological validity, as the text is commonly used in beginner-level pesantren instruction.

### 3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected using three instruments: 1) Teacher–student interviews, to gather perceptions of method effectiveness, challenges, and motivational aspects (Addaraini & Inayati, 2023); 2) Arabic reading tests (pre/post), assessing: a) *Accuracy* — correct pronunciation and application of *naḥw-ṣarf* rules; b) *Fluency* — smoothness, pace, and hesitation-free reading; 3) Weekly classroom observations, documenting participation, peer interaction, and fidelity to method.

This triangulation follows recommendations for enhancing reliability in Arabic literacy research (Ghofur & Husniah, 2022). Observations were recorded in structured field notes, and interviews were audio-recorded with consent, ensuring transparency in the data collection process.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

A mixed-methods approach was applied: 1) Qualitative. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and field notes identified patterns in teacher practices, learner strategies, and contextual constraints. Coding was conducted inductively, with recurring themes validated through member checking; 2) Quantitative: Given the small sample, descriptive statistics were prioritized (Ali et al., 2020). Indicators included: a) Proportion of students able to read new texts correctly, partially, or not at all; b) Individual improvement in accuracy and fluency scores (pre–post); Results were tabulated for cross-group comparison (see Table 1). This combined design mirrors recent studies in pesantren-based Arabic literacy (Syafei, 2023; Hasna et al., 2022), providing both numerical trends and contextual interpretation.

### 3.4. Data Validation

To ensure rigor, multiple validation strategies were employed: a) Triangulation.

Cross-checking findings from interviews, observations, and test scores; b) Member checking. Summaries of results were verified with teachers and selected students; c) Expert review. Two senior Arabic instructors validated the appropriateness and level of the reading passages; d) Inter-rater reliability. A second trained assessor independently scored 30% of the reading tests; agreement exceeded 90%, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

These measures align with methodological guidance in both national (Addaraini & Inayati, 2023) and international Arabic literacy studies (Syafei, 2023). Together, they strengthen the credibility, dependability, and transferability of the findings.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Results of the Ḥalaqah Method*

At Surau al-Ma'ruf, five participants received an unvowelled passage from *al-Akhlāq li al-Banīn* and were asked to read it prior to teacher explanation. Initially, all five struggled to decode and comprehend the text. Only one student managed to read it correctly—likely due to repeated practice, recall, and occasional informal discussion—yet this student was unable to explain the sentence structure, suggesting that accuracy was achieved by habit rather than through application of grammatical rules. The limited emphasis on grammar (given most were beginners) and the absence of structured peer discussion constrained independent decoding gains. This finding resonates with Hidayah (2020), who reported that ḥalaqah in beginner pesantren contexts often shifted toward teacher-centered explanation, thereby reducing opportunities for students to internalize grammar. Similarly, Adib (2021) observed that while ḥalaqah provided exposure to classical texts, the method risked student passivity unless combined with structured engagement and active participation.

### *Results of the Muḥāfazah Method*

At Surau al-Sufyan, five participants engaged in the muḥāfazah routine. All could reread memorized passages with accuracy. When presented with a new passage from the same book, one student read it correctly, while four read partially—drawing on memorized patterns

but committing grammatical errors. This indicates that fluency gains from memorization did not translate into robust grammatical understanding, which is typical among beginners. These results echo the findings of Ghofur and Husniah (2022), who demonstrated that applying muḥāfazah to *Nazam Jurūmiyyah* significantly boosted students' ability to read *kitab kuning* fluently, though mastery of grammar remained limited. Similarly, Meiliyanti and Ilmiani (2025) found that habitual memorization of Qur'anic passages strengthened reading fluency but still required complementary analytical activities to support comprehension.

#### *Factors Inhibiting Reading Ability*

Across both methods, the development of *mahārah al-qirā'ah* was hindered by several factors:

- In ḥalaqah, the lack of structured follow-up or peer study, the minimal grammar focus for beginners, and the tendency of students toward passivity limited progress.
- In muḥāfazah, variation in memorization capacity and limited grammatical understanding constrained students' ability to transfer fluency into comprehension.

Although *al-Akhlāq li al-Banīn* is relatively accessible due to its simpler narrative style, its use alone did not guarantee automatic decoding. This supports Harahap (2023), who found that even accessible *kitab kuning* texts still demand scaffolding for novice readers.

#### *Comparative Summary*

**Table 1. Endline Outcomes**

Group (Method)	Able to Read New Text Correctly	Partially Read (some errors)	Unable to Read
Surau al-Ma'ruf – ḥalaqah	1/5 (≈20%)	0/5 (0%)	4/5 (≈80%)
Surau al-Sufyan – muḥāfazah	1/5 (≈20%)	4/5 (≈80%)	0/5 (0%)

**Interpretation.** Under ḥalaqah, most students (≈80%) could not decode new texts independently. Under muḥāfazah, all attempted new texts; 20% read fully correctly, while 80% partially correctly—showing stronger decoding fluency resulting from memorization. However, both groups lacked grammatical comprehension,

reinforcing the need to combine repetitive practice with analytical discussion.

These findings can be explained through the Simple View of Reading, which posits that reading comprehension arises from the interaction of decoding and linguistic comprehension. Muḥāfazah strengthened word recognition and fluency, while ḥalaqah supported comprehension when discussions were substantive. Yet, because beginner readers require both fluency and comprehension, neither method alone was sufficient.

This interpretation is consistent with Syafei (2023), who demonstrated that innovative blended models in pesantren significantly outperformed conventional single-method approaches in improving Arabic reading literacy. Addaraini and Inayati (2023) showed that ḥalaqah was highly effective in enhancing Qur'anic memorization quality, while Hasna et al. (2022) demonstrated that structured ḥalaqah improved recitation accuracy. On the other hand, memorization-based strategies (muḥāfazah) proved powerful for fluency (Ghofur & Husniah, 2022). Taken together, the evidence suggests that integrating ḥalaqah and muḥāfazah would produce more balanced learning outcomes.

#### *Practical Recommendations*

Based on the results, three practical strategies are proposed: 1) Short, regular muḥāfazah sessions (10–15 minutes daily) to build automaticity and expand vocabulary; 2) Follow-up ḥalaqah discussions to interrogate meaning, sentence structure, and grammar within the same memorized text; 3) Mandatory active participation (turn-taking oral reading, peer correction, paraphrasing) to avoid passivity in ḥalaqah.

Thus, a hybrid pedagogical model is recommended—one that leverages the fluency gains from memorization and the comprehension depth from discussion. This integrated approach addresses both decoding and comprehension gaps, aligning with contemporary findings on Arabic reading pedagogy in pesantren and madrasah.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This study compared the ḥalaqah and muḥāfazah methods in developing *mahārah al-*

*qirā'ah* among beginner students in rural surau over a four-week intervention. The findings show that the muḥāfazah method was more effective in supporting decoding fluency: most students were able to attempt and partially succeed in reading unfamiliar passages, while under the ḥalaqah method the majority struggled to decode independently. Nevertheless, neither method on its own fostered strong grammatical comprehension, confirming prior evidence that memorization primarily reinforces fluency (Ghofur & Husniah, 2022), whereas discussion-based learning is more closely associated with meaning-making (Addaraini & Inayati, 2023; Hasna et al., 2022). These findings highlight the complementary nature of the two methods: muḥāfazah cultivates automaticity through repetition and memorization, while ḥalaqah promotes deeper understanding through collaborative analysis.

In practice, teachers can adopt a blended instructional cycle that balances memorization and analysis. Short, frequent muḥāfazah sessions (10–15 minutes, three to four times weekly) can reinforce vocabulary mastery and recognition of common text patterns, while one or two ḥalaqah sessions can be used to analyze the same material, clarify meaning, explore sentence structure, and introduce light *i'rāb*. Practical strategies include turn-taking oral reading, vocabulary cards organized by root–pattern relationships, guided peer correction, and teacher-led clarification of syntactic cues. By integrating these approaches, teachers can simultaneously strengthen students' fluency and comprehension in Arabic reading, an outcome consistent with the Simple View of Reading framework, which posits that reading comprehension is the product of decoding and linguistic understanding (Syafei, 2023).

This study has several limitations. The sample was small (N = 10) and restricted to a single village, the intervention lasted only four weeks, and contextual differences between the two surau may have influenced outcomes. Moreover, the measures focused primarily on decoding accuracy and fluency rather than deeper comprehension or grammar application. Future research should adopt multi-site designs with larger and more diverse samples, extend the study duration to capture long-term impact, and employ broader assessment tools that include

comprehension and grammar usage. Classroom-based action research could also experiment with varying proportions of memorization and discussion to identify the most effective balance for optimizing *mahārah al-qirā'ah*.

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## 7. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Ahmad Zulkarnain; Methodology: Ahmad Zulkarnain and Fitri Alrasi; Data curation: Fitri Alrasi; Formal analysis: Ahmad Zulkarnain and Fitri Alrasi; Writing – original draft: Ahmad Zulkarnain; Writing – review and editing: Ahmad Zulkarnain, Fitri Alrasi, and Miftahul Karimah; Supervision: Miftahul Karimah; Project administration: Ahmad Zulkarnain. All authors have read and approved the final version of this manuscript.

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## 9. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

## 10. DATA AVAILABILITY

All data supporting the findings of this study, including anonymized test results, interview transcripts, and observation notes, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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