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Empowerment of Urban Single Elderly through Lifelong Learning: A Case Study of the Effectiveness of Resilient Elderly Schools (SELANTANG) in Wiyung District, Surabaya City

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Abstract

Urban single older adults may experience limitations in daily functioning, loneliness, and reduced access to informal family support. This qualitative case study examined how the Resilient Elderly School (SELANTANG) in Wiyung District, Surabaya, supports independent living, emotional resilience, peer networks, and light vocational activity through community-based lifelong learning. Fifteen older participants aged 61–78 years and five programme and community informants were purposively recruited, with additional snowball referrals. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, observations of eight programme sessions, and curriculum, attendance, and relevant health-service records. An iterative thematic analysis examined accounts of activities of daily living, preventive health knowledge, emotional support, social participation, and practical skills, with triangulation and member checking used to support credibility. Participants and programme actors described improved confidence in self-care and medication routines, structured opportunities for social contact, informal mutual assistance, and engagement in small-scale productive activities. These findings suggest that SELANTANG can function as a local learning and social-support network for older adults living without immediate family assistance. However, a single qualitative case study without standardized pre/post measurements or a comparison group cannot establish the magnitude or causal effectiveness of the intervention. Continued intersectoral coordination and longer-term assessment of functional and psychosocial outcomes are recommended.

INTRODUCTION

The acceleration of global demographic transition in recent decades has fundamentally changed the world's population landscape. Based on a World Health Organization report (2023), the population aged 60 years and above is projected to jump from 1 billion in 2020 to 1.4 billion in 2030, and will reach 2.1 billion by 2050. Indonesia, as the developing country with the fourth largest population in the world, is currently in an advanced demographic transition phase characterized by a decline in fertility rates and an increase in life expectancy. Data from the Central Statistics Agency (2025) confirms that Indonesia has officially entered the ageing population structure, where the percentage of the elderly has exceeded 11.4% of the total population and is expected to touch 19.8% by 2045 (BPS East Java Province, 2025; Juraj,

2026; Wahyuni et al., 2026). In urban areas such as Surabaya, the main megapolitan and nodal economic center in East Java, the phenomenon of population aging presents socio-ecological dynamics that are much more complex than in rural areas. The rapid rate of urbanization, the phenomenon of migration of productive age workers, the strengthening of individualistic lifestyles, and the shift in family forms from extended family to nuclear family have reduced traditional parenting systems and family ties (Hastuti et al., 2019; Pramitasari & Anggi, 2022). This structural change gives birth to a special population group that is very vulnerable psychosocially and economically, namely the phenomenon of urban single elderly.

Urban single seniors are defined as individuals aged 60 years and older who are divorced or widowed or have never been married, and live independently in a residential home without co-residence with children or other core family members. Competitive and fast-paced urban environments often marginalize single seniors from public spaces, creating spatial and emotional isolation (empty nest syndrome) (Akbar et al., 2021; Juraj, 2026). In contrast to rural ecosystems that still maintain social capital based on local institutions and mutual cooperation norms, the elderly in big cities are often trapped in chronic loneliness, loss of a life partner (bereavement), and motor and cognitive functional deterioration without adequate medical and emotional supervision (Cohen & Wills, 1985; House, 1981)

Empirical data from BPS East Java Province (2025) shows a very real indicator of the vulnerability of the elderly in the city of Surabaya. Elderly women dominate the status of divorced dead (32.50%), a figure that is inversely proportional to the male elderly who are still married (78.89%). The level of education of the urban elderly is also still relatively low, where 34.53% are educated in elementary school and below and 11.60% are illiterate in Latin/Arabic. In terms of physical health, as many as 40.30% of the elderly in Surabaya reported chronic health complaints (especially hypertension, arthritis, and diabetes mellitus) in the past month. The disparity between the high number of health complaints and the limited number of daily companions puts single elderly people at risk of fatal medical complications and old age depression (Nurdianto et al., 2021; Yuniar Syanti Rahayu et al., 2024). As a manifestation of the state's commitment to responding to the issue of aging, the Government of the Republic of Indonesia issued Presidential Regulation Number 88 of 2021 concerning the National Strategy on Aging, which emphasizes the importance of fulfilling rights, improving welfare, and social protection for the elderly through a holistic approach based on lifelong learning (Tasya & Adawiyah, 2025; Widyastomo, 2021). Responding to the national mandate, the National Population and Family Planning Agency (BKKBN) collaborated with local governments to develop the Resilient Elderly School (SELANTANG) program which was integrated into the Elderly Family Development (BKL) group at the village level (Population & National, 2021; Vivi Wahyu Nur Fitriyah, 2026)

SELANTANG is designed as a community-based non-formal education intervention model that aims to transform the elderly into SMART (Healthy, Independent, Active, Productive, and Dignified) individuals. The SELANTANG curriculum is prepared in stages including Standard 1 (S1/Young Elderly), Standard 2 (S2/Middle Elderly), and Standard 3 (S3/Main Elderly) with the coverage of seven dimensions of resilience: physical, mental, spiritual, social, environmental, vocational/economic, and legal/human rights (Apriyan et al., 2024; Indriani et al., 2024). Although the implementation of SELANTANG has expanded in various regions of

Indonesia, a search of the social gerontology literature shows a significant academic gap. Most previous studies have tended to focus their analysis on the evaluation of partial clinical physical-medical interventions (Apriyan et al., 2024; Nurdianto et al., 2021; Putra et al., 2021)or passive financial social assistance (Sukmana & Widodo, 2025). There are still very few qualitative studies that identify in depth how senior school programs adapt to the specific characteristics of urban single seniors living without family support.

The novelty of this research lies in the focus of comprehensive qualitative exploration of the role of Resilient Elderly Schools (SELANTANG) in Wiyung District, Surabaya City, not just as a forum for ordinary socialization, but as an instrument of existential reintegration and an alternative social support system (surrogate social support network) that replaces the void of family roles. This research not only measures the success rate of the program descriptively, but also unravels the transformative mechanism in which SELANTANG institutions act as Human Service Organizations that transform the elderly from passive service objects into independent, active, productive, and dignified subjects.

Based on the formulation of the above problem, this study aims to: (1) analyze in depth the effectiveness of SELANTANG in improving daily functional independence (ADL) and health literacy of single elderly in Wiyung District; (2) identify the process of restoring psychological stability, emotional resilience, and self-efficacy of single elderly; (3) analyze the mechanism of reconstruction of peer support networks as a social safety net in place of family roles; and (4) analyze the impact of micro-scale vocational training on the economic autonomy and social dignity of the elderly.

The academic significance of this study is to make a theoretical contribution to the development of social gerontology and urban social work, especially regarding the application of the paradigm of lifelong learning and active ageing to the vulnerable elderly. Practically, the results of this research are expected to be a scientific reference for policy makers in the BKKBN, the Social Service, and the Surabaya City Government in designing a sustainable curriculum and model for urban elderly assistance

Theoretical Foundations

Lifelong Learning Paradigm

The Lifelong Learning Paradigm initiated by Jarvis (2004) and Field (2006) emphasizes that the learning process is an existential human need that is not limited to the productive age or formal institutions, but takes place continuously across the entire lifespan. In educational gerontology, learning at an advanced age is distinguished from conventional vocational education. Older learning is not oriented towards achieving formal academic qualifications, but rather on maintaining cognitive function, meeting psychosocial adaptation needs, developing self-capacity, and improving the quality of life (Findsen & Formosa, 2011; Sudrajat & Hariati, 2021). For urban single seniors who experience a decline in social activity after retirement or the death of a partner, participation in interactive non-formal learning activities acts as a stimulation of cognitive neuroplasticity that prevents memory decline (dementia) (Winariyanti et al., 2026). Lifelong learning at SELANTANG provides an andragogy space for the elderly to validate their life experiences, gain preventive health knowledge, and develop adaptive skills to manage daily life independently.

Active Ageing and Independence Framework of Activity of Daily Living (ADL)

This study adopts the Active Ageing Framework formulated by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2002). WHO defines active ageing as the process of optimizing health opportunities, social participation, and security to improve the quality of life as we age. The concept of active ageing deconstructs the traditional paradigm that views the elderly passively as a socio-economic burden (dependency ratio). On the contrary, active ageing places the elderly as development subjects who have the right to continue to participate in community life.

The main empirical indicator of active aging is functional independence in carrying out the Activity of Daily Living (ADL) (Yuniar Syanti Rahayu et al., 2024). ADL includes basic self-care skills (bathing, dressing, eating, personal mobility) as well as Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADL) such as managing drug consumption, processing food, and taking care of household administration. In urban single seniors, a decrease in ADL scores can lead to a fatal dependence on the help of others. Therefore, the SELANTANG curriculum focuses on strengthening ADL capacity through adaptive physical exercise, healthy lifestyle habits, and home environment safety education.

Social Support Systems Theory

Social Support Systems Theory as described by House (1981) and Cohen and Wills (1985) states that positive social relationships act as a buffer that protects individuals from the adverse effects of psychological stressors and physical vulnerability. Social support is classified into four main forms: (1) emotional support (empathy, compassion, warmth), (2) instrumental support (physical, financial, or direct service), (3) informational support (advice, guidance, education) and (4) companionship support.

For urban single elderly, the death of a spouse and separation from children causes a shrinkage of the primary social support network. The presence of SELANTANG acts as a surrogate social support system (Sukmana & Widodo, 2025). Through the organization of the elderly into peer support groups, SELANTANG restores the function of emotional support and mentoring, while accompanying cadres facilitate informational and instrumental support in the event of a health crisis (Pramitasari & Anggi, 2022; Trisna & Hodriani, 2025).

Theory of Human Service Organizations

To analyze the institutional governance dimension of SELANTANG, this study refers to the Theory of Human Service Organizations (HSOs) developed by Hasenfeld (2010). HSOs are defined as organizations whose core function is to protect, maintain, or improve the personal, social, or physical well-being of individuals who are their clients. In the context of social work and social welfare, SELANTANG is categorized as a community-based human service organization (HSO) (Lendriyono, 2022). SELANTANG operates at the intersection between public bureaucracy (BKKBN, Health Office, Social Service) and local community movements (BKL, Posyandu Lansia, RT/RW administrators). The HSO perspective is used to unravel how program management, resource allocation, and commitment of accompanying cadres as street-level bureaucrats affect the quality of social interventions, service flexibility, and program sustainability in empowering urban seniors (Suprapto et al., 2022).

Theory of Self-Efficacy and Vocational Empowerment

This theoretical construction is complemented by Bandura's (1997) Self-Efficacy Theory and the concept of Vocational Empowerment (Page & Czuba, 1999). Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's belief in his or her ability to organize and execute the actions necessary to achieve the desired outcome. Single seniors often experience a decline in self-efficacy due to perceived physical helplessness and loss of economic role.

Vocational empowerment in the elderly is not oriented towards the re-generation of the workforce for large-scale commercial market industries. Instead, vocational empowerment in SELANTANG focuses on training in light productive skills (such as recycled handicrafts, local culinary, and urban farming) that are tailored to the physical capacity of the elderly (Ramli et al., 2022; Sari & Mustofa, 2025). This productive activity stimulates a sense of usefulness, generates complementary additional income, and restores the efficacy and self-esteem of the elderly in the eyes of the community.

METHOD

This qualitative research used a holistic single-case study design to examine SELANTANG as a community-based lifelong-learning programme in Wiyung District, Surabaya (Yin, 2018). The unit of analysis was the programme and its experiences among urban single older adults, not a probability sample intended to represent all older residents. Wiyung was selected purposively because the programme operated through the local Elderly Family Development (BKL) network in a dense urban setting. Primary informants comprised 15 participating older adults aged 61–78 years (12 women and three men), living alone or without children or other immediate family in the household and attending SELANTANG for at least six months. Five key informants were selected for triangulation: two programme/BKL cadres, one BKL coordinator, one local population-and-family-planning official, and one neighbourhood leader. Purposive selection was complemented by snowball referrals to participants who were otherwise difficult to reach; the research period was February–September 2026.

Data collection combined semi-structured in-depth interviews of approximately 45–90 minutes, observation at eight SELANTANG activities, and examination of programme records. Interviews, undertaken in Indonesian or the local Surabaya Javanese dialect, explored independent daily activities (ADL/IADL), health literacy, loneliness, perceived support, self-efficacy, vocational participation, and experiences of learning. Observations covered physical exercise, health education, cognitive games, informal peer interactions, and training in low-intensity productive skills. Documentary material included the S1–S3 curriculum, BKKBN teaching modules, attendance registers, local demographic information, and available elderly-health-service records. Interview guides, observation notes, and documentary extraction served as qualitative instruments. The supplied manuscript describes these procedures but does not report a standardized ADL instrument, a numerical pre/post test, or documented psychometric validity and reliability coefficients; no such results are inferred.

Interview and observation information was analysed using iterative data condensation, thematic data display, and conclusion drawing and verification in the Miles–Huberman–Saldaña tradition, with open coding followed by grouping around independence, emotional resilience, peer support, vocational efficacy, and programme governance. Triangulation across

older participants, cadres, officials, observations, and documents was supported by member checking with six older informants, peer debriefing, contextual description, an audit trail, and reflexive notes. The manuscript does not specify computer-assisted analysis software, so none is attributed. Themes were interpreted against active-ageing, lifelong-learning, social-support, human-service-organization, and self-efficacy frameworks. The design supports an in-depth account of perceived and observed changes within one programme but does not provide a control group or standardized effect estimates, and claims of statistically significant programme impact or causal proof would therefore exceed the stated evidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In-depth qualitative research on 15 single elderly informants and 5 key informants in Wiyung District, Surabaya City, resulted in rich empirical findings regarding the effectiveness of Resilient Elderly Schools (SELANTANG). The results of the study revealed that SELANTANG has succeeded in transforming the lives of single elderly through four integrated thematic focuses:

Transformation of Daily Activity Independence (ADL) and Preventive Health Literacy

Single urban elderly people who live alone without family co-residence face very fatal isolated health risks when experiencing a sudden decline in physical condition. Baseline conditions before participating in SELANTANG showed that the majority of informants (11 out of 15 elderly people) had a sedentary lifestyle, very minimal health literacy, and chronic fear of physical dependence on neighbors. The elderly often mistakenly take hypertension medication or do not recognize the early symptoms of metabolic complications.

The SELANTANG program intervenes in this condition through an integrated health curriculum at the S1 and S2 levels. Interventions include: (a) structured gymnastics for the elderly twice a week to maintain joint flexibility and physical balance; (b) routine somatic monitoring (blood pressure, uric acid, blood sugar, and cholesterol) in collaboration with the Wiyung Health Center; and (c) local food-based nutrition education. The results of observations and interviews showed a significant increase in the capacity of Activity of Daily Living (ADL) and Instrumental ADL. Elderly who were previously passive are now able to manage their medication schedules independently, process low-sodium foods, and take measures to prevent the risk of falls in their home environment.

Table 1. Population Indicator Profile, Baseline Vulnerability, and Impact of SELANTANG Intervention on Surabaya Elderly 2025/2026

Population & Vulnerability Indicators	Quantitative Profile/Baseline Conditions	The Impact of the SELANTANG Program Intervention
Proportion of Urban Elderly (60+)	0.89% of the total population of Surabaya (BPS, 2025)	Provision of community-based active ageing containers at the village level
Marital Status: Divorce Dead (Widow)	32.50% (Divorced Dead Male: 19.22%)	Formation of peer support groups in place of life companion roles
Elementary Education Level and Below	34.53% (Latin/Arabic illiterate: 11.60%)	Application of communicative-applicative non-formal andragogy learning methods
Prevalence of Health Complaints in the Last Month	40.30% (Majority of hypertension & arthritis)	Nutrition education & routine somatic monitoring to reduce the number of acute complications
Functional Independence (ADL)	Moderate dominance on neighbors' help	Increased autonomy of self-care & daily medication management
Role of the Household (Head of RT)	44.53% of the elderly become heads of household	Strengthening the capacity for independent decision-making and financial management

Source: Synthesis of BPS Data for East Java Province (2025) & Results of Thematic Field Analysis (2026)

Psychological Stability, Emotional Resilience, and Existential Reintegration

Emotional isolation and subjective loneliness are the most severe psychological challenges faced by urban single seniors. The death of a spouse and the absence of children at home create existential anxiety, fear of dying in solitude, and decreased motivation to live. Regular participation in SELANTANG classes presents a structured weekly routine, providing a new rhythm of life and a reason for the elderly to decorate, wear uniforms, and leave the house.

SELANTANG's psychosocial curriculum combines cognitive stimulation (memory games, word guessing), memory therapy (reminiscence therapy through group discussions), and mental-spiritual coaching sessions. These activities have been proven to be able to reduce anxiety and revive the self-efficacy of the elderly. Furthermore, SELANTANG acts as a medium of existential reintegration. Seniors who previously felt 'discarded' or useless, rediscover their social identity as elderly learners who are valued and recognized by the community. These findings validate Jarvis' (2004) thinking about lifelong learning as a medium of existential adaptation and are in line with the study (Indriani et al., 2024) and (Nurdianto et al., 2021).

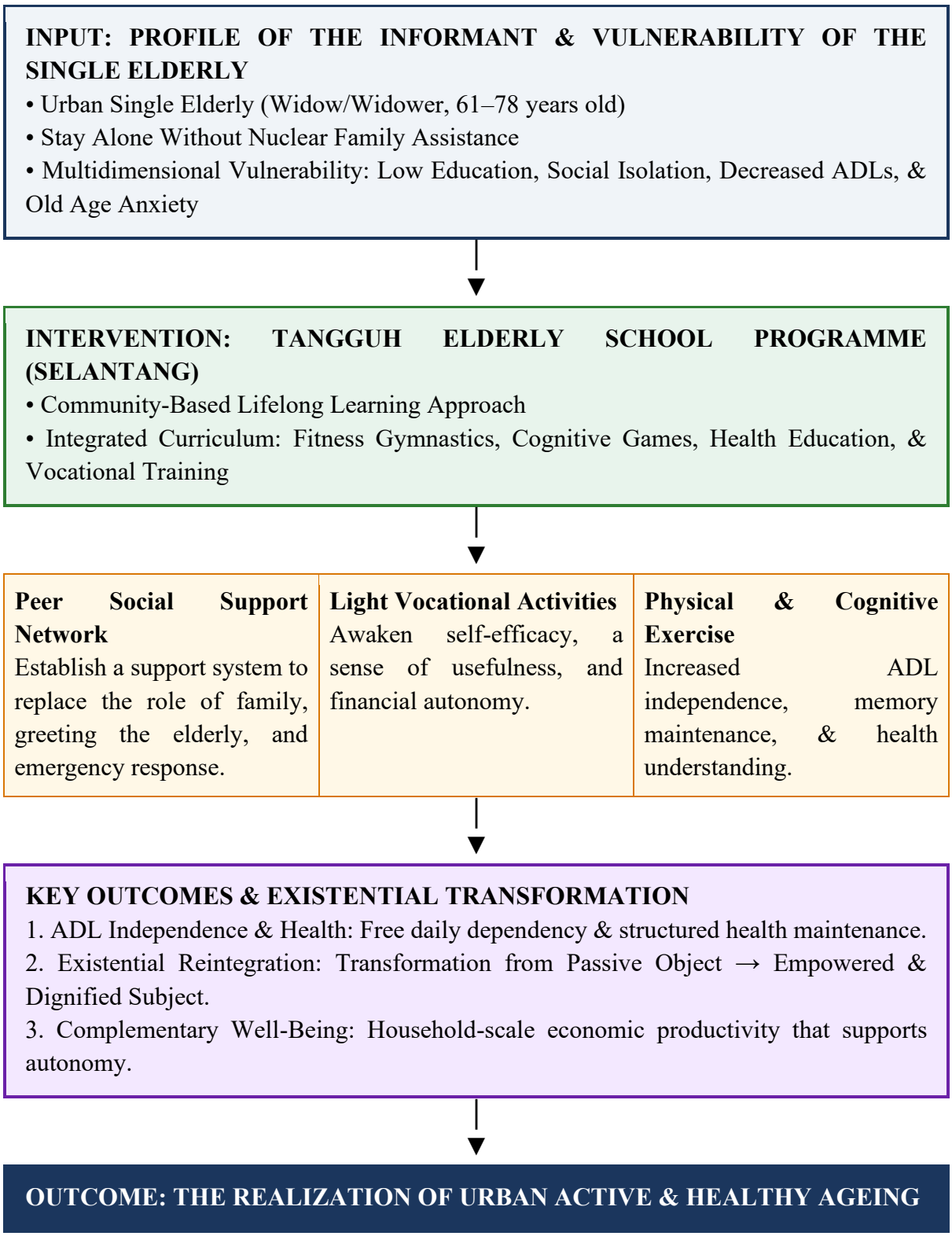


Figure 1. Flow Diagram of the Conceptual Framework for the Effectiveness of Resilient Elderly Schools (SELANTANG) in Wiyung District

Source: Primary Data Processing and Conceptual Analysis (2026)

Reconstruction of the Peer Social Support System

In densely populated urban areas, the erosion of traditional kinship ties often leaves the elderly alone without a safety net in times of crisis. The findings of the study prove that SELANTANG effectively reconstructs local social capital through the formation of peer support networks. The interactions built in the classroom develop into informal bonds of brotherhood outside of school. The elderly form independent communication groups, deliver food to each other, and organize a 'greeting the elderly' movement to visit participants who are absent due to illness.

In the perspective of Human Services Organizations (Hasenfeld, 2009; Lendriyono, 2022), SELANTANG companion cadres act as street-level bureaucrats who are very crucial. Cadres conduct active outreach to single elderly homes, provide emotional attention, and facilitate quick referrals to the Wiyung Health Center in the event of a medical emergency. The synergy between peer emotional support and cadre instrumental support succeeded in creating a highly responsive community-based social safety net. These findings strengthen the Social Support System Theory (House, 1981) and supporting the findings (Trisna & Hodriani, 2025) and (Hastuti et al., 2019)

Vocational Empowerment, Micro-Scale Financial Autonomy, and Social Dignity

Financial vulnerability is a systemic issue for single elderly people in Indonesia, considering the lack of formal pension guarantees for informal sector workers. SELANTANG responds to this challenge through vocational empowerment modules at the S2 and S3 levels. The elderly are equipped with practical skills that do not require high physical power, such as making processed herbal foods (instant herbs), making recycled handicraft products, and simple hydroponic techniques. The work of the elderly is then marketed at the sub-district MSME bazaar and the Kelurahan exhibition event. Although nominally the accumulated income from these vocational activities is complementary, the psychosocial impact is very profound. Single seniors regain micro-scale financial autonomy to buy personal medicines, pay electricity dues, and give alms without having to beg their neighbors. This productive activity stimulates a sense of usefulness, erodes the stigma of ageism that views the elderly as a burden, and strengthens the social dignity of the elderly in the eyes of the community (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Sari & Mustofa, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The qualitative case study indicates that participation in SELANTANG in Wiyung District was associated, in informants' accounts and observed activities, with greater confidence in everyday self-care, health awareness, emotional connection, mutual assistance among peers, and engagement in manageable vocational activities. These findings illustrate the programme's potential role as a community-based lifelong-learning and social-support setting for 15 participating urban single older adults. Nevertheless, the study documents perceived and observed experiences rather than standardized before-and-after improvements in ADL or a statistically tested programme effect; its single-site design does not establish causation or generalizability to all older urban residents.

Future implementation should strengthen coordination among community cadres, primary health services, social protection, and non-formal education while sustaining follow-up and

practical support for isolated participants. Subsequent studies should include several sites, longer observation, transparent participant-selection procedures, standardized functional and psychosocial measures where appropriate, and systematic documentation of programme attendance and outcomes. Comparative or mixed-method designs could help distinguish changes associated with SELANTANG from other influences while retaining older participants' perspectives on autonomy, dignity, and social participation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare that this study was conducted without any commercial or financial relationships that could be interpreted as a potential conflict of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS
Nurkamid[1]: research conceptualization, methodology design, experiment execution, data collection, data analysis, manuscript drafting, and manuscript revision. Hutri Agustino[1], Zaenal Abidin[2]: research supervision, validation of research results, provision of scientific input, and manuscript review and revision. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE
The authors declare that generative artificial intelligence (AI) was used in the preparation of this manuscript to help improve linguistic clarity, correct grammar, and refine the writing structure. Generative AI was not used to generate, manipulate, or analyze research data. The entire content of the manuscript has been reviewed and verified by the author(s). The author(s) are fully responsible for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the manuscript.

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