

Communication Styles at Purbaya Elderly School in Salatiga in Sustaining the Potential of Older Adults

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Abstract

The growing elderly population in Indonesia underscores the importance of improving quality of life, particularly in social and psychological aspects. Elderly Schools (Sekolah Lansia) have emerged as a non-formal educational innovation aimed at fostering SMART older adults those who are Healthy, Independent, Active, Productive, and Dignified. This study aims to analyze the communication styles employed at the Purbaya Elderly School in Salatiga in sustaining the potential of elderly students. Using a constructivist qualitative approach, data were collected through observation and interviews with facilitators and elderly participants. The findings indicate that an equalitarian communication style is predominantly applied one that emphasizes equality, openness, and mutual respect. Facilitators position themselves as learning companions rather than authoritative instructors, creating a relaxed, cheerful, and inclusive atmosphere. Polite and familiar language, the use of light humor, and a friendly tone enhance elderly engagement in the classroom. Elderly participants are given space to share experiences, engage in discussions, and remain socially and intellectually active. This equality-based communication style has proven effective in reactivating the potential of older adults, boosting their self-confidence, and challenging stereotypes that portray the elderly as unproductive. Through appropriate communication strategies, elderly schools serve as meaningful spaces for the empowerment of older adults.

Keywords: *Elderly, Communication Style, Elderly School, Equalitarian, Empowerment.*



A. INTRODUCTION

The increase in life expectancy across various countries, including Indonesia, has led to a significant growth in the elderly population. According to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (Badan Pusat Statistik/BPS), the percentage of older adults continues to rise each year, and Indonesia has officially entered the era of an “ageing population,” with older adults comprising 12% of the population in 2024 and an elderly dependency ratio of 17.08%. This condition calls for greater attention to the quality of life among older adults, not only in terms of physical health but also in social and psychological aspects, in order to help them maintain independence in their daily activities.

One of the Indonesian government's efforts to address issues related to the elderly is the establishment of Elderly Schools (*Sekolah Lansia*). These are non-formal educational institutions designed for older adults who remain active and have potential within their families and communities aimed at realizing the concept of SMART older adults (Healthy, Independent, Active, Productive, and Dignified). Elderly Schools are developed through the Elderly Family Development Group (Bina

Keluarga Lansia or BKL) program under the coordination of the National Population and Family Planning Agency (BKKBN). Elderly Schools are expected to help address the challenges faced by older adults in Indonesia (Shanti, 2023). Through these schools, older adults not only gain knowledge about health and life skills but also find spaces for social interaction and the development of healthy relationships, which serve as essential resources for sustaining their well-being.

Currently, there are 757 Elderly Schools across Indonesia. Central Java Province holds the highest number, with 177 schools (Rini, 2024). Located in Central Java, the city of Salatiga is home to the Purbaya Elderly School, which has served as a model school since its establishment in 2022. Since 2023, the Purbaya Elderly School has been independently managed by its elderly students. According to Yuni Ambarwati (2024), the school's supervisor, the decision to adopt self-management was based on the elderly students' active participation and cooperative attitudes during the learning process. Moreover, they have demonstrated the ability to collaborate with facilitators in designing more engaging and enjoyable learning activities. The Purbaya Elderly School has thus proven to be a valuable space for social interaction and collaboration among elderly learners.

In developing Elderly Schools as ideal spaces for social interaction, the communication employed within these schools plays a crucial role in creating a supportive, inclusive, and empowering learning environment. Effective communication depends significantly on the choice of communication style, which serves as a key factor (Dewi, 2019). The appropriate communication style is one that aligns with the specific needs of the learners (Dewi, 2019). Therefore, in this context, the communication style used in Elderly Schools must differ from that of conventional schools, as the needs of elderly learners and the objectives of their teaching and learning processes differ significantly from those of children or younger students.

Communication style refers to a set of specialized interpersonal behaviors employed in specific situations (Pratiwi, 2017). Style denotes particular ways of receiving messages, personal approaches to interpreting messages, and distinctive methods of expressing responses and feedback (Pânișoară et al., 2015). The communication styles in question may involve both verbal expressions and nonverbal elements, such as vocal cues, body gestures, and facial expressions. Each communication style encompasses a series of communicative behaviors utilized to elicit certain responses within particular contexts. There are six types of communication styles (Sendjaya, 2004).

1. The Controlling Style

One form of dominant communication style is characterized by a desire to control, impose, and regulate the behavior, thoughts, and responses of others. This communication style places greater emphasis on delivering messages unilaterally rather than fostering a balanced exchange of information.

2. The Equalitarian Style

This communication style is grounded in the principle of equality, which is reflected in the bidirectional flow of verbal messages, both spoken and written.

Sendjaya (2004) emphasizes that the equal status of communication participants is a fundamental element of this approach. In practice, this style allows individuals to express ideas or opinions in a relaxed, open, and informal atmosphere. Such conditions create space for the development of mutual understanding and agreement. This approach has proven effective in fostering empathy and collaboration, particularly in decision-making processes involving complex issues.

3. The Structuring Style

This communication style is systematic in nature and utilizes verbal messages, both spoken and written, as a means to convey information, reinforce instructions that need to be followed, and schedule tasks and assignments.

4. The Dynamic Style

This communication style is dynamic and tends to be aggressive, as the communicator operates within a work environment that emphasizes action orientation. Its primary goal is to encourage the communicant to enhance both the speed and quality of performance. In practice, the communicator exhibits dominant and aggressive behavior to provoke action-oriented responses and to achieve objectives in an efficient and targeted manner.

5. The Relinquishing Style

This communication style demonstrates a tendency to be open to input, opinions, or ideas from others, rather than focusing on dominating through instruction despite the communicator's authority to direct and control others.

6. The Withdrawal Style

This communication style reflects a lack of interest in, or a rejection of, engaging in interactions with others, typically resulting from issues or barriers in interpersonal relationships. Such conditions lead to a decrease in communication intensity and indicate a tendency to avoid involvement in the communication process.

An appropriate communication style can encourage active participation among older adults, enhance their self-confidence, and strengthen their ability to make independent decisions. Conversely, an inappropriate communication style may lead to dependency, social withdrawal, and even a decline in mental health. Therefore, it is essential to explore how the communication styles employed in senior schools contribute to efforts in maintaining the potential of older adults, both in the context of peer communication and interactions between older adults and facilitators or educators.

Research on senior schools is essential, as findings from Erwanto (2019) indicate that participation in senior school activities can improve the health status of older adults. Similarly, Wetcha (2020) found that senior school programs in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand, support the quality of life of the elderly by providing recreational activities, social work, sports, and academic learning. Chaedar et al. (2022) also revealed similar findings, highlighting that a humanistic communication style employing lectures and micro-teaching in Islamic boarding schools for seniors can

educate older adults to live peacefully. These studies serve as valuable references for understanding the significance of research on senior schools and for building upon existing findings particularly by exploring communication styles that help maintain the potential of older adults at *Sekolah Lansia Purbaya* in Salatiga. The objective of this study is to analyze the communication style adopted by Sekolah Lansia Purbaya in sustaining the potential of its elderly students.

B. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a constructivist research design. The qualitative approach refers to research procedures that produce descriptive data, including written texts, spoken words, and observed behaviors. Constructivist research views social science as a systematic analysis of "socially meaningful action" through direct observation of individuals or groups in their natural contexts. Its aim is to understand and interpret how these individuals or groups create and maintain social structures (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Constructivist research involves a framework in which the entire process occurs simultaneously, encompassing data collection, processing, interpretation, and application of qualitative data (Koentjaraningrat, 1994).

The units of observation in this study are the facilitators and elderly students at Sekolah Lansia Purbaya Salatiga. Observations were conducted during school activities held at the Multipurpose Building in Perum Purbaya. The researcher participated in the senior school activities without causing disruption and did not join the classroom discussion sessions. Additionally, the researcher conducted individual interviews with six facilitators and four elderly students of Sekolah Lansia Purbaya outside of the school activities.

The data analysis method employed is a cyclical process consisting of data collection, reduction, display, and verification. Sugiyono (2019) explains that in the Miles and Huberman data analysis model, the qualitative data analysis is conducted interactively and continuously until data saturation is reached. In this study, the researcher applies a data validity technique known as data triangulation. Data triangulation is a method used to test the credibility of data by cross-checking information from the same source using different techniques, namely interviews, observations, and documentation (Sugiyono, 2019).

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Situation of Students and Facilitators at Sekolah Lansia Purbaya

The elderly students at Sekolah Lansia Purbaya are residents of the Purbaya complex, ranging in age from approximately 65 to 80 years old. Physically, the elderly students at Purbaya are generally in good condition; they are able to walk upright, speak fluently, and hear well, although they sometimes experience memory lapses due to aging (senility). The majority of these elderly students are retired employees from both the public and private sectors, with some having previously worked as educators (lecturers or teachers). Prior to the senior school program, these elderly

students were already involved in other senior activities such as Senam Tera Indonesia Purbaya, Posyandu Lansia, and the Purbaya Elderly Association, which fostered close friendships and social bonds before joining the senior school. The elderly community in Purbaya is known for being active, which is why many government programs related to the elderly are implemented in Purbaya, making the Purbaya complex a pilot project site for various government elderly initiatives.

The facilitators at Sekolah Lansia Purbaya are instructors invited by the school to conduct sessions according to their areas of expertise. They come from diverse backgrounds, including lecturers, doctors, government employees, and entrepreneurs. Most facilitators at Sekolah Lansia Purbaya are between 35 and 60 years old. The selection of facilitators is based on their expertise and aligned with the needs of the elderly students. The total number of facilitators at Sekolah Lansia Purbaya is eight.

2. Open, Cheerful, and Respect-Based Communication Style

Based on an interview with Mrs. Eva, a facilitator at Sekolah Lansia Purbaya Salatiga, she explained that the communication style she employs while teaching is grounded in her observations of the elderly students and her experience as an educator. She noted that the elderly students at Sekolah Purbaya possess emotional and cognitive maturity that is sufficient and even exceeds her expectations. Based on these observations, it was decided that the communication style used tends to be more open, allowing the elderly to share their experiences in front of the class. Mrs. Eva positions herself as a moderator who guides the class and summarizes the core material from the students' presentations along with several student testimonials (Interview, April 29, 2025). She stated that the elderly students at Sekolah Purbaya have high educational and professional backgrounds, so as a facilitator, she must respect their experiences. Rather than adopting a lecturing approach, she guides by creating a cheerful atmosphere without discriminating against the elderly students' knowledge.

The interview with Mrs. Sri, the facilitator, revealed that the communication style she employs in the classroom involves using polite and simple language while avoiding complex vocabulary. She also emphasized the importance of positioning herself not as a teacher, but as a friend. Additionally, she explained that the use of local languages can enhance older adults' understanding of the information being conveyed.

"The majority of elderly students at Purbaya School are Javanese; therefore, when facilitators attempt to communicate using a language familiar to them and choose polite expressions, it helps foster a sense of trust and respect between the students and the facilitators." (interview, 20 April 2025).

Mrs. Sri also stated that the choice of intonation and tone when communicating with elderly students significantly influences their responses to the facilitator. A low, flat, and serious tone does not capture their attention, whereas a higher and more cheerful intonation increases their enthusiasm. She noted that the tone and intonation

typically used when teaching younger students are also effective with elderly learners, although they should not be used excessively, as the elderly students at Purbaya School are former professionals and educators who deserve to be treated with respect.

The interview with Mrs. Hastuti, an elderly student, also confirmed that the facilitator's communication style influences the classroom atmosphere. She stated that facilitators who provide more opportunities for elderly learners to share their experiences and engage in class discussions enable them to express their abilities within the school setting. Moreover, facilitators who position themselves as friends without crossing the boundaries of respect greatly encourage students to participate actively and speak up in class.

This sentiment was also shared by Mrs. X (name anonymized), who expressed that her passion for broadcasting has not been lost through her involvement in the elderly school. She once feared that retirement from broadcasting would leave her feeling abandoned and overlooked. However, by participating in learning activities at the elderly school, she can still channel her skills by speaking in front of the class and guiding her peers. For her, the elderly school serves as a platform to express the potentials she had in her youth, even in her old age. Mrs. X no longer feels like a retiree; instead, she feels she can remain productive through the activities at the elderly school.

Mabbe (2018) emphasizes that a supportive communication style fosters students' interest in fulfilling their tasks more effectively than a controlling communication style. Similarly, Garcia (2017) highlights that supportive communication, which allows elderly learners to ask questions and review learning materials, enhances their comprehension. In the context of communication styles at Purbaya Elderly School, providing greater opportunities for elderly students to actively participate in the teaching and learning process and communicating with them as peers can stimulate their motivation to express and develop their potential.

Mrs. Hana, a supervisor at Purbaya Elderly School, explained in her interview that effective communication at the school is not only determined by language choice and communication style but also by the facilitator's demeanor in the classroom. She stated that elderly students are generally less enthusiastic toward facilitators who present themselves in a serious, formal, and tense manner. Instead, they are more engaged with facilitators who teach in a relaxed and cheerful way. Additionally, gestures such as patting on the shoulder, clapping, and shaking hands with elderly students can boost their enthusiasm for learning. According to her, elderly students tend to be more enthusiastic when interacting with facilitators who have extensive experience working with older adults.

The demeanor of elderly students in the classroom also influences the overall classroom atmosphere. Elderly students who are friendly and respectful tend to be more well-liked by their peers. This is because the majority of elderly students at Purbaya School are already familiar with one another through other senior community activities (such as Tera gymnastics, elderly health posts, etc.), where the prevailing atmosphere emphasizes togetherness, warmth, and mutual respect. In her

interview, Mrs. Lis, an elderly student, explained that the seniors at Purbaya share a strong sense of community and mutual respect, as they recognize that one of the keys to thriving in old age is supporting one another. Therefore, when a student is unwilling to help or tends to isolate themselves in class, it becomes difficult for other elderly students to establish effective communication with them.

"We, the elderly at Purbaya, realize that in our old age, what helps us endure is supporting one another. We cannot rely on our children or grandchildren who live far away, which is why we strive to create activities and gatherings to strengthen each other. The goal is to avoid stress, to feel youthful, and to feel valued. If there are elderly individuals who are unfriendly or unwilling to cooperate, we usually choose to let them be, as engaging with them can drain our energy and potentially undermine our resilience." (Interview, 29 Maret 2025)

An interview with Mr. Sugiharto, an elderly student, revealed that cheerfulness and humor are among the reasons why elderly learners are willing to continue studying at the school. He explained that the elderly students at Purbaya School greatly enjoy joking around. Communication delivered with elements of comedy and humor encourages them to remain active and enhances their understanding of the material. He observed that facilitators who are cheerful and friendly in class are always remembered by the students, and the lessons taught are often applied in their daily lives. The friendly demeanor of both facilitators and fellow students motivates the elderly to express their potential in class, as they do not feel pressured or forced by either the facilitators or their peers.

"The elderly students at Purbaya really enjoy joking around many of them come to school primarily for the laughter. In fact, when a class is filled with laughter, we tend to understand and retain the lessons better. I myself love to joke, and I'm grateful that at Purbaya School, I can truly be myself. I feel that my potential to spread joy and laughter is channeled through the school, and I'm especially happy when my peers and even the facilitators laugh along with my remarks". (Interview 6, Mei 2025).

Caris-Verhallen (1999) in her journal on communication between nurses and elderly patients, identified several factors influencing the interaction between nurses and elderly patients. Her experiment involving 181 elderly patients revealed three main factors affecting the quality of nurse-patient communication: nurse-related factors, patient-related factors, and environmental factors. According to her, nurse-related factors such as educational level, communication sensitivity, and the use of nonverbal touch in communicating with elderly patients significantly impact communication quality. Her research found that nurses with higher education levels tend to be more sensitive in positioning themselves appropriately when communicating with elderly patients. These nurses are more likely to greet patients with a smile, listen attentively, show genuine interest in the patients' stories, and build close, friend-like relationships. Such communication skills and sensitivity influence elderly patients' perceptions of the interaction, thereby increasing their trust in the nurses.

In this context, the communication style at the elderly school, which emphasizes friendliness, a relaxed atmosphere, cheerfulness, and is often infused with playful camaraderie, aligns well with the findings of Caris-Verhallen's research. The facilitators at Purbaya Elderly School demonstrate strong communication sensitivity and skills, grounded in their experience and solid educational backgrounds. Most of these facilitators are lecturers or motivators with extensive teaching experience, enabling them to adopt communication styles that are well-suited to elderly learners. Facilitators are able to maintain a relaxed and friendly demeanor while still earning the respect of the elderly through their effective delivery of material. Similarly, among the elderly students themselves, communicating in a friendly, cheerful, and relaxed manner rooted in mutual respect appears to help them feel resilient and empowered to express their potential within the classroom.

3. Equality That Inspires Resilience in the Elderly

The background of Purbaya's elderly students, who are mostly retired employees and educators, presents challenges and shifts in perspective for the facilitators. The primary challenge is to position themselves in a way that continues to provide valuable information for resilience in old age without coming across as patronizing. As expressed by Mrs. Eva and Mrs. Sri, they strive to act as moderators or peers rather than teachers, recognizing that their students possess greater cognitive and emotional experience and maturity. The facilitators endeavor to establish equality within the classroom between students and themselves, fostering a learning environment where both parties engage in mutual learning rather than a one-sided teaching process.

The background of these elderly students also shifts the facilitators' perspective toward older adults. The common stereotype of the elderly as marginalized, weak, and unproductive is challenged and overturned by the elderly students at Purbaya. Mrs. Eva explained that the elderly students at Purbaya are active and empowered individuals, which has transformed her approach and communication style in teaching. For example, she listens more attentively to the elderly, reduces the use of commanding language, and encourages mutual support among the elderly students. The facilitators' perception of the elderly has evolved to view them as equals capable of learning from one another and from younger generations alike.

The sense of equality fostered by the facilitator in the classroom creates a strong desire among older adults to remain engaged and productive despite their age, as they feel respected, heard, and valued in the learning environment. This is evidenced by interviews with Mr. Sugiharto and Mrs. Lis, senior students at Purbaya Elderly School, who stated that the students have developed a commitment to support one another, understanding that mutual care and solidarity are key to their perseverance. The existence of the Purbaya Elderly School has provided the elderly learners with a new space where they can feel equal and appreciated, particularly through the facilitator's communication style that reinforces and nurtures these feelings.

What occurs at the Purbaya Elderly School challenges the findings of Hummert (Hummert, 1994) which suggest that negative stereotypes of older adults influence the way younger people communicate with them. Such communication is often patronizing, characterized by a higher and slower tone of voice, simplified sentences, and excessive repetition. However, at the Purbaya Elderly School, facilitators do not engage in this form of communication. They recognize that elderly learners possess high levels of cognitive and emotional capacity, and therefore treat them as equals, rather than as children. The facilitators at Purbaya hold different stereotypes about older adults, which is why their communication is respectful and non-patronizing. This respectful communication is also reflected in interactions among the elderly students themselves; they treat each other as equals and avoid patronizing speech, as their perspectives differ from the typical societal view. The elderly students at Purbaya believe that their ability to endure and thrive in old age depends on the companionship and support of their fellow elderly peers.

D. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results and discussion presented, it can be concluded that the communication style applied at the Purbaya Elderly School is open, cheerful, and grounded in mutual respect. This communication style aligns with the equalitarian approach, which emphasizes equality and shared understanding. The use of this style is informed by the backgrounds of the students and facilitators, as well as the educational objectives of the elderly school. Elderly learners, who possess emotional and cognitive maturity, require facilitators who can enable them to remain active, feel appreciated, and continue learning from one another, thereby reactivating their latent potential. The reactivation of this potential contributes to the formation of SMART older adults *Sehat* (healthy), *Mandiri* (independent), *Produktif* (productive), and *Bermartabat* (dignified) in line with the goals of the elderly school program. The effectiveness of the equalitarian communication style in sustaining the potential of older adults is evidenced by interviews with elderly students who reported being able to reapply their earlier-life skills through activities at the school.

The sense of equality established in the classroom both between facilitators and elderly learners, as well as among the elderly learners themselves appears to motivate the elderly to maintain their potential. This is because the elderly students at Purbaya are aware that their survival depends on the presence and support of their peers. When the classroom atmosphere is created without hierarchical gaps and all elderly students are treated as equals, they do not feel pressured or diminished. As a result, the elderly students become more confident and willing to express their potential among their peers, even assisting one another by leveraging their individual strengths. The potential that had previously diminished due to fears of being undervalued or ignored by society re-emerges and is sustained through activities at the elderly school.

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