

## Freedom of Learning: Lesson Learned from SALAM Community

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### ABSTRACT

The policy of the Freedom of Learning program by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia is currently in the spotlight and special attention of education organizers and the academic community. Philosophically and conceptually, this has been implemented by the non-formal educational institution Sanggar Anak Alam (SALAM) Yogyakarta. The purpose of the study was to analyze the SALAM learning process and the roles of the facilitators concerning the Freedom of Learning policy. This study used a qualitative approach. Research informants were selected by snowball sampling technique. The data collection process was carried out by in-depth interviews, field notes, and documentation studies. Data analysis used the Miles and Huberman model. Triangulation was used to strengthen arguments in explaining research phenomena. Based on data analysis, it is known that SALAM had its learning model. They had a Learning Cycle as the curriculum. It also indicated that the role of teachers in SALAM included; 1) designing the curriculum according to the needs of students; 2) implementing active learning; and 3) encouraging the SALAM learning community. It followed the ideal goals of the Freedom of Learning philosophy.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Industrial Revolution 4.0 had a significant influence on the current education system. Education should be harmonized to answer all the challenges of the times where there is an increasingly rapid change of movement and increasingly complex human needs. The new educational paradigm is driven by Education 4.0 and is founded on the need to improve, requalify, unlearn, relearn, and apply relevant skills. Innovative pedagogies are required to motivate students to actively promote and practice the skills and dispositions required for the learning path (Hong Ed. & Ma Ed., 2022; Katyeudo & de Souza, 2022; Peterson, Hanna, Lafuente, & Law, 2018). Indonesia has a giant projection towards the nation, namely Indonesia Golden Generation 2045. Education is the main instrument of Indonesian human development to achieve and realize these projections. The Ministry of Education and Culture is always leading the National Education sector to issue various initiatives and policies in the field of education, including the "Merdeka Belajar" (Freedom of Learning) program policy.

This program was launched to realize the quality of Indonesian human resources in the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0. *Merdeka Belajar* is a policy program launched by the Minister of Education and Culture. The aim is to restore the essence of the national education system following the law by giving space and freedom to school residents, principals, teachers, and students, free to innovate and learn independently and creatively. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture, there are nine challenges in promoting education in *Merdeka Belajar*, such as; 1) learning becomes a pleasant experience, 2) an open system (cooperation between stakeholders), 3) teachers are facilitators in learning activities, 4) competency-based pedagogy and curriculum values and assessment, 5) individual needs-based and student-centred approach, 6) learning that utilizes technology, 7) industry-relevant programs, 8) freedom to innovate, 9) as an agent for all stakeholders.

21st Century Education has a new solid view of learning that recognizes the uniqueness of learners and the constructive and dynamic nature of knowledge. New approaches have been widely developed to help the student to get a higher level in the class. It also provides access to advanced technology and telecommunications infrastructure that supports the teaching and learning process. There have been advances in our thinking about the nature and use of assessment, and most promising, collaborative partnerships are working to improve education for all students (Talbert, 2003). Wisnujati et al. (2021) reveal that freedom in education must be based on the child's pleasure and acquire a future according to their expectations and desires. Therefore, it implies that each child has their uniqueness and should learn according to their pleasure. It does not have to be dictated by the curriculum, system, and various subjects imposed on students as in conventional classrooms.

The characteristic of this education can be found in one of the alternative schools in Indonesia, that is Sanggar Anak Alam (SALAM). According to Pradewi et al., (2019), alternative education generally has a character; the approach is individualized, it pays excellent attention to learners, parents, or families, and education is developed based on interests and experiences. Thus, alternative education can better accommodate each student's interests, which may differ through cooperation with parents and families. Early in the 20th century, alternative schools were created to give students a different way to learn from their peers in conventional comprehensive schools, including a smaller learning environment, a modified curriculum, and personalized support services (Huerta & Hernandez, 2021).

Alternative or non-formal schools are educational endeavours that take place outside of the conventional educational system. They can be used as alternatives, supplemental programs, or preparation for official education for learners. Although, organized and regulated in non-formal school does not adhere to the same curriculum or accreditation as formal education (Khasnabis, Heinicke, & Achu, 2010). Sanggar Anak Alam (SALAM) is an alternative school that started its activities in 2000 in Kampung Nitiprayan, Bantul, Yogyakarta Province, Indonesia. SALAM has an operating institution license as a Community Learning Centre (*PKBM/Pusat Kegiatan Belajar Masyarakat*), but they facilitate students as in formal schools. There are several levels of education, ranging from Playgroups, Kindergarten, Elementary Schools (Package A), Junior High Schools (Package B), and high schools (Package C). Elementary school is carried out for six years, like elementary school in formal schools. At the same time, Package B was equivalent to Junior High School, and Package C was equivalent to high school, it is carried out or taken for three years.

SALAM implements a curriculum called the Learning Cycle. It is more directed to the interest of each learner in SALAM. The Learning Cycle consists of the stages of planning, doing, revealing, analyzing, and concluding. From these stages, SALAM emphasized four perspectives: food, health, environment, and socio-culture. The Learning Cycle uses research methods whose theme is determined by the students ranging from planning to the presentation of results by each student. As an alternative school, SALAM has its terms regarding the teacher. They are called facilitators. The term facilitator is based on the educator's task which is not to teach but to facilitate children's learning. Based on the figure of Indonesian National Education, Father Mangun Wijaya's children are teachers for themselves, so the role of teachers is to provide space for children to carry out their learning process. The shift of the teacher's role from expert become facilitator is seen as a reduction in the power and authorization of teachers, but

this should not be the case. Facilitating learning is an empowering effort for both learners and teachers and frees teachers from many burdens as experts (Thiruvengadam, 2014).

*Merdeka Belajar* encourages the formation of a free spirit character in which teachers and students can freely have fun exploring the environment's knowledge, attitudes, and skills. *Merdeka Belajar* can encourage students to learn and develop themselves, form a caring attitude towards the environment in which students learn, encourage students' confidence and skills, and quickly adapt to the community environment (Daga, 2021). *Merdeka Belajar* provides opportunities for students to learn autonomously or independently and be responsible for themselves (Hidayati, Dani, Wati, & Putri, 2022; Susilawati, 2021). In addition, research conducted by Jufriadi, et al. (2022) shows that implementing *Merdeka Belajar* can improve communication skills, creativity, critical thinking, and student collaboration skills, which are relevant to 21st-century skills. Implementing of *Merdeka Belajar* policy starts with the teacher as a stimulus of National Education. Sherly, et al. (2020) stated that freedom of learning is freedom of thinking, where the essence must be in the teacher as an educator. Without it happening to the teacher, it cannot happen to the students. This study concerning the implementation of the SALAM independent curriculum is expected to be a reinforcement and role model for implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum launched by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia.

## 2. METHODS

This research was conducted at Sanggar Anak Alam (SALAM) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. This research approach was qualitative with a descriptive research type. Researchers set up this research by doing an internship at SALAM for two months. During this period, the researcher made observations and collected data related to the role of the facilitator. The entry of researchers as apprentice students has been permitted in advance by the head of SALAM. While carrying out the activities of the internship, the researcher also conducts research at the same time. The data comes from interview observations, field notes, and personal documentation, which are described in descriptive narrative form. This study conducted in-depth interviews with the founder, chairman, facilitator, and parents of SALAM students. The interviews were carried out at the SALAM during and outside the learning process. The subjects of this study were selected based on the snowball sampling technique or rolling like a snowball. The researcher selects certain people who are considered to provide the necessary data; furthermore, based on the data or information obtained from the previous sample, researchers can determine other samples that are considered to provide more complete data. Subjects in this study consisted of 12 people.

Data analysis was carried out based on Miles and Huberman, namely through: 1) data reduction by explaining, selecting necessary things, and focusing on things that are important to the content of data originating from the field; 2) data presentation, namely displaying data in a simple way of words, sentences, narratives, tables, matrices and graphs form; 3) and conclusion/verification. This study uses two credibility standards, including member checks and triangulation. Member checks are carried out at the end of each interview activity. The researcher tries to repeat the outline of the results of the interview based on the notes made by the researcher so that the information obtained can be used in writing reports according to what is meant by the data source. Triangulation in this study uses data checking through sources, data collection techniques and data collection time. This method can be achieved by comparing the observed data with the results of interviews from several different informants, including the SALAM founder, SALAM chairperson, facilitator, and parents; comparing data from interviews with observations and documentation obtained; re-asking the informant the same question at different times.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. SALAM Learning Process

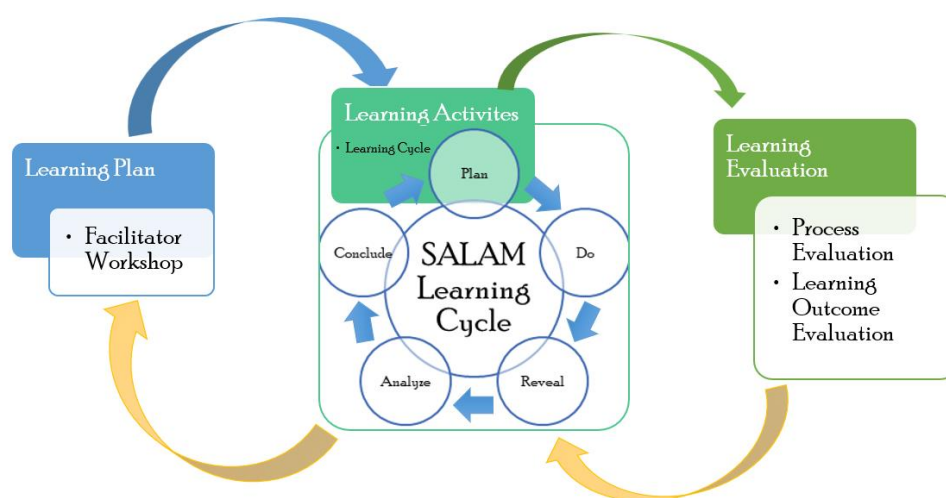
Sanggar Anak Alam (SALAM) is an alternative school that adheres to the freedom school principle and has a unique learning model. Where the learning cycle is arranged by the persons in charge according to their educational goals. The curriculum is an important tool in realizing goals at SALAM.

This school has a curriculum that is jointly developed by all learning residents. In the planning stage, the facilitator and management conduct a workshop at the beginning of the semester which aims to design activities for the next semester. This curriculum design is called the Outline of the Learning and Teaching Process which is carried out through the SALAM-style learning cycle. Formulation of an outline of the learning and teaching process based on 4 perspectives developed at SALAM including food sustainability, health, environment and socio-culture. This curriculum materialized from the process of filtering the national curriculum as a reference, then it is adapted to the learning model at SALAM.

SALAM managers believe that learning by doing will make it easier for students to master the lesson. They also believe that studying and learning something must be relevant to what is around us. Therefore, SALAM chose the research method as a learning method for students. Research is an activity to gain experience from a case. The selection of research is adjusted to the interests of students which are discussed between children, parents and facilitators. The implementation of the research was carried out using a series of processes in the learning cycle. As told by Mr AY, as follows:

*“It will be easier for children to understand a lesson by doing it directly. It is not just in theory in class. Children must see and feel the experiences around them directly as learning materials. That is why there is a research method in SALAM where the children choose the research theme based on their interests, desires and needs.”*

The process of evaluation carried out at SALAM emphasizes the performance of the facilitators related to the learning process which is arranged routinely. Every Friday, there is a weekly evaluation that discusses the progress of learning activities and the development of students at every level. In addition, there is also an evaluation at the end of each semester. The results of this evaluation are used to improve the facilitator's performance and prepare for the coming semester. As for the evaluation of learning outcomes, a presentation of research results is carried out at the end of each semester. In this presentation, each child explained the process and results of their research to their parents and SALAM residents. Evaluation of learning outcomes is also outlined in the student book report at the end of the semester. It presents descriptive narratives about the student's achievement progress and their difficulties. Evaluation of students is based on the development of each child according to the learning achievements per class. Meanwhile, the evaluation of graduation is carried out using an equivalence test.



**Figure 1.** SALAM Learning Process

### 3.2. SALAM Teachers' Roles

Based on the SALAM learning process model, facilitators have important roles in each process. This description is the result of data collected from in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. These roles include:

#### 3.2.1 Teachers develop curriculum according to student needs

Limitations of the current curriculum concept have triggered the shackles of creativity in teachers and students. The current curriculum indicates that students obtain the highest score in every lesson at school. At the same time, it is known that each student has expertise in their respective fields. Nadiem Makarim stated in the 2019 National Teacher's Day speech that teachers have duties and responsibilities that are very difficult but noble. This responsibility determines the nation's future, but many administrative rules make teachers' main role in educating students not optimal (Widyanuratikah, 2019). The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum gives students the freedom to develop their talents. It supports student creativity and will manifest itself through teacher guidance. The demand for teachers to be able to develop innovative learning concepts for students will also be realized. In the freedom of learning curriculum, teachers and students will create a more active and productive learning concept for teachers and learners (Manalu et al., 2022).

The learning process in SALAM upholds the child's principle that the master teacher has a different learning method from existing or conventional educational concepts. What the facilitator should not do is teach. Students learn through the Learning Cycle process. The school manager considers learning innovation as an alternative to solving current educational problems. Students have the right to obtain educational services according to their needs and abilities. Because SALAM strengthens the principle that every child is unique and independent, students' needs are facilitated according to their potential and interests. Recognizing and formulating needs is done by the facilitator through the principle of one child, one approach. The facilitator monitors the child's tendency to determine the appropriate treatment or solution for each child during the learning process. As told by Mrs. HS, as follows:

*"We see that the needs of each child are different, so in terms of one child, one approach, like that. For the technique, we have to see what the child's tendency is to determine the right treatment. Usually at the beginning, we determine the database from the parents, for example, the child's likes, dislikes of the child, the child's interests and those are aspects that we must know about the child. Each phase optimizes each child. Every facilitator pays attention to every child, right? If it's one at a time, it's a bit difficult. So, later on, the technique will also have groupings"*

*Merdeka Belajar* requires teachers to carry out differentiated learning, which must be student-oriented. Differentiated learning aims to coordinate learning that emphasizes the aspects of student interest in learning, student readiness in learning, and learning preferences (Faiz & Faridah, 2022). This process also characterizes multicultural education, where teachers must be able to see and identify the learning needs of students based on their level of diversity, gender, culture, aptitude, interests, and expectations of students (Mazid et al., 2021). In small classes or kindergartens, facilitators identify children's needs by extracting information from parents about children, from their preferences and interests. These aspects will be used as guidelines by the facilitator to recognize the needs of the child. Then, identifying that need continues through each learning process that occurs daily. When a need or obstacle arises in the child, the facilitator will try to overcome it through the child's preferences.

Education in the era of independent learning provides many opportunities for implementing critical thinking education for students. Several educational strategies direct critical thinking, including problem-based, project-based, discovery learning dan blended learning (Indarta et al., 2022; Kurniawan et al., 2020). The involvement of teachers in the curriculum development process is essential to align the curriculum content with the needs of students in the classroom (Alsubaie, 2016). In curriculum development, teachers must have qualities such as planners, managers, evaluators, researchers,

decision-makers, and administrators. Teachers can play these roles at any stage of the curriculum development process (Jaghav & Patankar, 2013). The curriculum in SALAM uses a research learning model according to the interests and desires of students. In lower classes, from first grade until third grade, they conduct research together with classmates. Facilitators recognize their learning needs through achievements that must be met during a semester. The achievement is set out in the teaching and learning process outline, designed in the workshop at the beginning of the semester. In addition, the facilitator also identifies complex needs in a class. In upper classes, fourth grade and above, the facilitator identifies the needs of children by observing each child. Based on student interests, they express research ideas which are then explored by the facilitator. The facilitator facilitates each child's further research in large classes according to their interests and potential.

### 3.2.2 Teachers apply active learning

The learning model in SALAM emphasizes active and collaborative learning and also fosters students' independence. Independent learning is used to emphasize independence in the process of learning or attaining knowledge; students take responsibility for their learning. Students' dependence on the teacher is replaced by interdependence and mutual assistance. Students are encouraged to become more independent, more than their teachers, with the ability and motivation to learn when no teacher is present. Teachers act as learning managers and resources, as co-learners, where their experience acquiring the proper knowledge is more important than their knowledge (Belton & Scott, 1998).

The learning design in SALAM is through a Learning Cycle using research methods. The Learning Cycle has five stages: Plan, Do, Reveal, Analyze, and Conclude. SALAM emphasized four perspectives: food, health, environment, and socio-culture. SALAM emphasizes the four perspectives of students in daily learning activities. In the future, the teaching system will be mostly done outside the classroom. Such learning will be more comfortable because students can discuss more actively with the teacher, learn with outing classes, and not only listen to the teacher's explanations. This learning builds students' character such brave, independent, clever in getting along, civilized, polite, competent, and not only relying on the ranking system (Baro'ah, 2020; Nasution, 2022). In the SALAM Learning Cycle, the first stage is Plan, the facilitator and the students plan the research they will do. The facilitator triggers the students through questions to come up with ideas about what things the students will do during their research. In addition, equipment, group divisions, and agreements related to the implementation of research are also prepared.

The second stage is Do, the process in which students do their planned research. Students have met a natural environment and a lot to learn at this stage. This experience is considered the starting point for the further process. The third stage is Revealed, in which students reveal everything they got in the field. The facilitator will explore the experiences that students have experienced to share with their friends in the class. In independent learning, teachers encourage students to self-monitor by helping them use internal and external feedback to see if the strategies they use are effective for achieving learning goals (Meyer et al., 2008). The fourth stage is analysis, in which students analyze the things they encounter during research. In this process, the facilitator usually uses it as material to fulfil the achievements designed at the beginning. Everything the child has previously revealed will be used as learning materials together by the facilitator and other friends through the stage of joint analysis. The fifth stage is Concluded, in which students learn to formulate the meaning of reality that has been found as an entirely new understanding or knowledge. This last step aims to take the child to the top step: the child can decide and implement new actions based on understanding and knowledge of the results of analysis and reflection. *Merdeka Belajar* provides flexibility to the school in determining the assessment, which can be through the process portfolio, papers, and other assignments.

At the beginning of the Learning Cycle process in SALAM, the facilitator has a role as a learning designer. This learning is the research that students will conduct. The facilitator explores the child's interests to determine what research will be done. Then the facilitator arranges each stage. The

facilitator must be able to assemble each process into a cycle that follows the sequence to achieve the desired goal. The role of the facilitator is also to accompany or assist students in the process. The facilitator constantly observes each stage passed by the learners. The facilitator also ignites the ideas and thoughts of students by asking questions. Facilitators provide space for students to explore their knowledge. They do not directly become a resource for students but instead directly jointly bring up the students' ideas.

The facilitator also provides supervision in every process by students for research in and outside the classroom. In addition, the facilitator also motivates students by always providing support at every stage of the learning cycle. In the learning process, the facilitator does not deliver the material in front of the class but by giving the most expansive space for students to express, dialogue and discussion. The learning orientation is centred on the child. The facilitator plays a role in stimulating, appreciating, criticizing, and testing the ideas found without blaming or directly breaking the child's findings. When the child has a question, the facilitator does not directly answer but explores the child's knowledge related to his curiosity to bring up his answers from the students. Teachers are facilitators who create more learning opportunities for students to make the learning process happen; students are expected to use all their capacities. At the same time, they will be aware of and able to use their freedom to express themselves in a learning environment (Coskun, 2019).

SALAM believes that the child is the master teacher for himself, who has the assumption that in the child, there are already seeds of curiosity that will lead him to a lifelong learning process. As a master teacher, the child gets extensive freedom to seek and find learning resources independently. In this case, the facilitator is tasked to explore the potential that exists in students to find learning resources on their own. Other learning resources are also needed. Facilitators in SALAM try to direct the search for learning resources from the learners' immediate environment. The closest environment can be parents, peers, reference books, or people around them. The facilitator tries to create an atmosphere so that the child is close to the source of learning. Facilitators are not in a hurry to directly connect students with their learning resources but rather lure them into getting their learning resources first. The facilitator explores for the learners to bring up for themselves the learning resources they need. This statement was expressed by the school manager as follows:

*"The learning resources that children need come from themselves. But if they run out of sources from themselves, they can ask sources from people or books."*

This statement was reinforced by the opinion of the facilitator, as follows:

*"The source of learning is from himself and the people around him, friends who are the same age. And that's what we have done, have we demonstrated that in the learning method? Friends can be tutors for friends. Class B is merged with its A younger siblings because that gives older children the opportunity to help their younger siblings as well. Whatever it is, we don't need to rush, we have to."*

The results of observations in the field show that all facilitators support each other in finding learning resources for learning residents, regardless of the class they teach. One of the kindergarten facilitators, Ms. AY, a learning resource for VM, is a high school student researching the Korean language. Apart from making herself a source of learning, the facilitator, Ms. AY, also connects VM with learning resources, namely people of Korean origin, to be used as another learning resource for VM. Even though Ms. AY has the primary responsibility in Kindergarten, she is also a facilitator who facilitates VM to do her research.

The description above depicts the facilitator's efforts to connect learning citizens with learning resources by locating and connecting learning resources closest to students, eliciting student demand for learning resources and becoming a learning resource for learning residents in need. Students, parents, peers, other facilitators, reference books, and the surrounding environment can all be used to locate the nearest learning resources. The facilitator elicits the students' need for these learning

resources and then assists them in locating or connecting to these resources. Each facilitator can also serve as a learning resource for all SALAM students. They can also help these students even if they are not assigned to them in class. According to Salnikova et al., (2020), the teacher's main task in independent learning is to help students organize, rationally plan and implement the results of their independent work outside the classroom.

### 3.2.3 Teachers encourage learning communities

SALAM is an alternative education institution that applies the concept of Family School. Input in SALAM is children, facilitators, and parents so that not only children get an education but also facilitators and parents who learn together. Facilitators as educators have an active role in moving parents to follow the activities and learning methods in SALAM. Facilitators always coordinate with parents starting with planning, implementation of activities, and evaluation.

As conveyed by the chairman of SALAM, Mr. YA, as follows:

*"The facilitator facilitates the learning process. Starting from planning with children, accompanying the process until later recording their learning progress. Because the input is children, parents and facilitators, he must be able to synergize with parents. Planning is with children and parents. The process is the same way."*

The process of learning assistance at SALAM is not only for children but also for parents. Because the main principle in SALAM that becomes learning citizens is all components, starting from the facilitator, students, and parents, this was expressed by Ms. RC, the class 6 facilitator, as follows:

*"If we have looked further at SALAM, actually our desire is not to accompany the child, but to accompany the parents."*

Facilitator coordination with parents during classroom learning is carried out through class discussion forums. Facilitators usually convey the processes that occur to children through the communication media of discussion forums. As stated by Mr YA follows:

*"There is a class forum, this can be a communication between parents and facilitators."*

Discussion forums that are often used as facilitator media to coordinate with parents are online discussion forums. Following technological developments, facilitators and parents agreed to use technology as their communication medium. This statement was expressed by the class 5 facilitator, Mr. AH, as follows:

*"Every day we convey the results of the learning process. Now, this is an advanced technology, forming a group. Yes, there is a WA (Whatsapp) group that contains parents and facilitators."*

Another activity that shows facilitators' coordination with parents is presenting children's research results. This presentation is done at the end of the semester after the entire learning process of children through research is complete. The child himself can do the presentation, or the child can collaborate with the parents. Because during the research process, some are done at school, and some are done at home. At school, the research process is facilitated by the facilitator, while at home facilitated by parents. So when the presentation is possible to carry out children with parents, the facilitator has a role in coordinating the course of the presentation. After each child presented their research results, the facilitator allowed parents to do questions and answers related to the research process conducted by the children. The learning process in SALAM is not only in classroom learning. However, also various other activities that involve all SALAM citizens learning. For example, performing arts activities on the

SALAM's birthday, harvest parties known as *Wiwitan*, and Expression Markets initiated by parents. Facilitators and parents encourage each other in these activities and work together from planning to evaluation.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The independent curriculum concept applied at SALAM is reflected in the learning process, which involves all learning citizens starting from planning, implementing and evaluating. The learning process is based on fulfilling learning needs according to children's interests with learning resources from anywhere. SALAM teachers are curriculum developers according to children's needs, active learning and learning community agents. The management of SALAM learning can be used as lesson learning and a role model in realizing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum launched by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia. However, further studies are needed regarding how SALAM can maintain the curriculum concept it implements and be accepted by the learning community so that it can be comprehensively adapted to the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum.

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