

Reconstructing Islamic Religious Education through the Experiential Learning Cycle at Sanggar Anak Alam (SALAM)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the gap between the normative purpose of Islamic Religious Education and its empirical reality in educational practice. Although Islamic Religious Education is intended to shape students' character and encourage the practice of religious values in daily life, moral degradation, violence, and weak value internalization are still found in educational settings, including Islamic-based schools. This study focuses on understanding the process of value internalization in the experiential learning cycle at Sanggar Anak Alam (SALAM) Yogyakarta and its relevance to the reconstruction of Islamic Religious Education methods. Using a qualitative case study approach, this research combines field research and library research. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with two senior SALAM facilitators, direct observation, and document analysis. The findings show that SALAM offers important pedagogical insights through experiential and dialogical learning, reflective and process-based evaluation, and the facilitator's role in guiding students' learning process. Through these aspects, value internalization takes place not only at the level of understanding, but also through experience, reflection, dialogue, and real action in everyday life. This study contributes a pedagogical reflection on how Islamic Religious Education may incorporate more reflective, participatory, and experience-based approaches in supporting value internalization, moving beyond cognitive and one-way learning models.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Normatively, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in Indonesia has a clear mandate. Based on Government Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia Number 55 of 2007, religious education is intended not only to provide religious knowledge, but also to prepare students to understand and practice the values of their religious teachings in daily life. This

shows that religious education is not meant to stop at cognitive understanding alone, but also emphasizes praxis or lived experience. In other words, PAI is expected not only to help students know religious teachings but also to shape their attitudes, character, and conduct as members of society.

From a philosophical perspective, this orientation is also reflected in classical Islamic thought, especially in the educational thought of Imam Al-Ghazali. Al-Ghazali places education as a means of *tazkiyatun nafs* or purification of the soul and moral formation [1]. For him, knowledge is not merely something to be known, but something that must lead to action [2]. Thus, education ideally touches intellectual, spiritual, and moral aspects at the same time. In the Qur'anic perspective as well, faith, knowledge, and righteous deeds consistently appear together [3]. This shows that learning in Islam is not meant to produce understanding only, but to form individuals whose knowledge is reflected in action and noble character.

However, empirical reality shows that these goals have not been achieved optimally. In recent decades, Indonesia has faced serious problems related to character decline and moral degradation among students [4]. This can be seen in the increase of deviant behavior and violence in educational environments, including bullying, sexual violence, and other inhumane practices [5]. Schools, which are supposed to be safe spaces for character building, often become sites of symbolic and physical violence instead. Data on violence in educational institutions also show an alarming trend. JPPI recorded 91 cases of violence in educational institutions in 2020, 142 cases in 2021, 194 cases in 2022, 285 cases in 2023, and 573 cases in 2024. GoodStats, citing JPPI, also notes that around 31% of the 2024 cases were directly related to bullying. This indicates that values such as empathy, respect, and self-control have not been fully internalized in educational life.

This situation becomes even more problematic when similar symptoms are also found in religious-based educational institutions, including madrasas [6]. Several studies at Madrasah Aliyah (MAN) revealed low consistency in students' worship practices, such as irregular performance of the five daily prayers. On the other hand, there were also cases of risky sexual behavior, substance abuse, and violent and emotional harassment by educators [7]. These findings indicate a normative contradiction, namely the gap between the religious identity of educational institutions and the reality within them [8]. In other words, the religious affiliation of a school does not automatically guarantee the internalization of moral and spiritual values in the behavior of students and educators.

From this point, it can be seen that there is a gap between the purpose of religious education and its empirical reality. On the one hand, religious education is intended to form individuals who understand and practice religious values. One of the key issues lies in the method of Islamic Religious Education itself [9]. Two of many methods of religious education that still need to be reconstructed are the dominance of the memorization method and the dogmatic and monological approach.

The memorization method is not entirely wrong because, in classical Islamic tradition, it also has an important position, especially when it comes to Qur'an and hadith memorization. Problems arise when the learning process stops at the aspect of reproducing and recalling information without deepening the meaning and context [6]. According to

Bloom's Taxonomy theory, memorization is the most basic cognitive level, namely remembering [10]. If religious education only stops at this stage, students are not encouraged to move up to the next level, such as understanding and so on, until creating. Consequently, religious teachings are only stored as declarative knowledge, not as values that are internalized and shape the way of thinking and acting [11]. Also, Islam has the terms "Taqlid" and "Ittiba"; the differentiation between these terms is that understanding, and also analyzing, is following the action. When it comes to just memorization without understanding, the action that appears only can produce a taqlid deed.

On the other hand, the conventional method of Islamic education often places students as objects of receiving information, rather than active subjects in the process of knowledge construction [12]. This pedagogical situation often leads to limited dialogue space and a lack of critical questions and personal reflection for students [13]. As a result, religion is understood as a set of rules that must be obeyed, rather than as a value system that is consciously believed internally.

Existing studies on Islamic Religious Education often focus on curriculum development, digitalization, or learning motivation in Islamic educational institutions. Fewer studies have examined how value internalization may occur through lived experience and reflective pedagogy in alternative pedagogical institutions. This indicates a research gap, especially in understanding how educational processes can facilitate deeper internalization of values, not only at the level of knowledge but also through experience, reflection, dialogue, and real action that is implemented in an alternative education institution.

In this context, this study addresses the issue that the methods used in Islamic Religious Education have not been fully able to support the internalization of religious values among students. This study proposes to explore the learning approach at Sanggar Anak Alam (SALAM) Yogyakarta as an alternative pedagogical reflection [4]. As an alternative school, SALAM places learning as an experiential process, where values are developed through experience, reflection, dialogue, and real practice, rather than being limited to conceptual understanding [14].

Based on this background, this study aims to answer the following question: how does value internalization occur through the experiential learning cycle at SALAM, and what relevance does this have for reconstructing Islamic Religious Education methods? This research is also expected to make both theoretical and practical contributions, particularly for teachers, schools, educators, and curriculum developers, in exploring how Islamic Religious Education can be transformed into a more action-oriented and value-internalization-oriented approach, so that it not only produces students who understand religious values, but also those who can live and practice them in their daily lives.

2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative case study focusing on Sanggar Anak Alam (SALAM) Yogyakarta as a critical case of experiential education. The combination of field research and library research is used to understand and examine in depth the mechanism of internalization of values in education in the context of the study [15].

SALAM Yogyakarta was chosen as the context for the study because it is one of the alternative schools in Indonesia that implements an experience-based learning cycle, where the educational process does not stop at the mastery of knowledge, but continues to the practice and reflection of values in the lives of students [16]. SALAM is positioned as a critical case, namely a case that is relevant for an in-depth study of the mechanism of value internalization in education, especially in the context of criticism of the dominant cognitive and one-way approach to religious education [17].

Field data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews and observation through the learning process. Semi-structured in-depth interviews are used in this study because they offer a balance between structure and flexibility, where guiding questions are aligned with the focus and allow for probing further, and explore the perspective of the subject and gain their authentic story [11]. The interviews were conducted in Yogyakarta, took place at SALAM, and lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hours for each participant. The interviews focused on the experiential and dialogical learning process at SALAM, facilitators' experiences in assisting students, and the evaluation approach they use in SALAM.

All interviews were recorded using a microphone, transcribed using Google Docs transcription features, and thematically analyzed. Thematic analysis was conducted by identifying key themes emerging from the interviews based on the research questions, then grouping and elaborating these themes in relation to supporting data from observation and literature.

The main informants for this study are two SALAM facilitators who have more than seven years of experience in assisting students and who play a direct role in the design and implementation of the learning cycle at SALAM. Informants were selected using purposeful sampling, taking into consideration their depth of experience, direct involvement in pedagogical practices, and reflective capacity regarding the ongoing educational process.

Observation was conducted through direct field visits and supporting documentation. Two forms of observation were used. First, real-time observation was conducted during an ongoing learning session, particularly when students were presenting their research. In this setting, the researcher observed how facilitators provided guidance and how students presented and reflected on their learning experiences. Second, observational data were supported by archived materials provided by SALAM, including recorded podcasts, documentation, and facilitators' reflective notes. Field notes were recorded during and after the observation process.

Library research in this study was used as a triangulation and supporting analysis, rather than as the main analytical framework. Literature, including Sekolah Tanpa Jurusan by Gernatatiti and other academic sources related to experiential learning, character education, and Islamic education, was used to cross-check, compare, and strengthen findings obtained from interviews and observations. In this way, the analysis was built primarily from field data, while theoretical and documentary sources were used to ensure consistency and depth of interpretation.

Finally, it is important to note that the use of only two facilitators as primary informants may limit the diversity of perspectives in this study. However, this limitation was partially addressed through direct observation of students' presentations and learning processes, which provided additional insight into how students experience and internalize values in practice.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

3.1.1 Learning Cycle: Educational Approach in Sanggar Anak Alam (SALAM)

SALAM or Sanggar Anak Alam is an alternative school that has an ecosystem that focuses on children's independence in learning [14]. In realizing the independence of every child in learning, SALAM uses a learning method called the learning cycle, which uses experience not only as a goal but also as a source of learning itself [18].

This learning cycle process was born from the Experiential Learning Theory developed by David Kolb, which emphasizes experience as a learning experience that can be processed into another experience, and so on [19]. In SALAM, experience, good or bad, is a learning experience that can be learned. The learning cycle at SALAM is divided into 5 learning phases [16], namely:

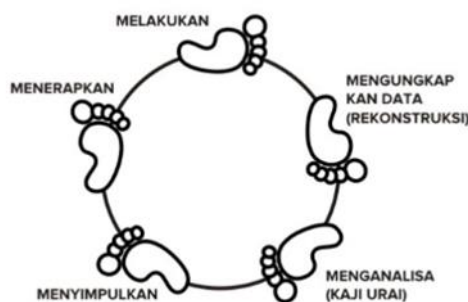


Figure 1. SALAM Learning Cycle

a. Melakukan (Doing/Experiencing)

The learning process starts with real action. Children do or experience an event firsthand, for example, observing the creation of society in the market, having conflicts with friends, or even observing changes in their own development. Concrete experience becomes the starting point for learning.

b. Mengungkapkan (Expressing/Reconstructing)

The child recounts the experiences he or she has experienced in chronological order: what happened, where, when, how, and with whom. At this stage, the role of adults is important to help children consciously reflect and construct narratives of experiences.

c. Menganalisa (Processing / Analyzing)

The child begins to question the causes and consequences of the experience (for example, why the outcome fails or why conflicts occur). The facilitator plays the role

of guiding the thinking process without dominating, so that the child's curiosity and analytical skills develop naturally.

d. Concluding

From the analysis process, children gain new understanding or knowledge either through discussions, re-experiments, or other sources. This knowledge is formulated together because of reflection.

e. Reapplying

The knowledge gained is applied in other situations or subsequent experiments. The learning cycle then repeats, so that new experiences continue to enrich children's understanding [20].

3.1.2 Individual Research-Based Learning as the Implementation of the Learning Cycle

Based on interviews with two informants who have served as SALAM facilitators for more than five years, it was found that the implementation of the learning cycle in SALAM can be seen clearly in the individual research process used as the main learning tool. Unlike many conventional schools, SALAM does not center learning on fixed subjects or standard classroom materials. Instead, students are encouraged to determine the topic they want to explore based on their own curiosity, interests, and surrounding realities.

Regarding the search for research topics, Toto Rahardjo in "School without Majors" emphasizes the importance of understanding reality through curiosity and anxiety toward surrounding conditions. This perspective is also reflected in the interview findings. According to Informant 1, students are encouraged to consider the possible impact of the research they formulate. In this way, students are guided to build inquiries not only from personal interest, but also from real issues around them, so that learning becomes socially connected and meaningful. Additionally, Informant 2 explained that research in SALAM is not limited to conceptual understanding but requires students to directly test, observe, analyze, and create based on the topic they choose. Thus, learning is not oriented merely toward explaining concepts, but toward experiencing and understanding them through real processes.

In this process, dialogue becomes an important tool for students in constructing knowledge. Students are trained to ask questions, discuss findings, clarify assumptions, and reflect on their own progress. This dialogical process helps develop critical thinking and a stronger awareness of what they are learning, because the learning process takes place in a two-way and participatory manner. Communication is therefore central in SALAM. Dialogue does not occur only between facilitator and student, but also between facilitator and parents, students and parents, as well as among facilitators through collaborative reflection and coordination.

The informants also explained that research at SALAM aims to cultivate both learning independence and life independence. During the process, students are expected to find resource persons independently, collect data on their own, and manage their projects responsibly. The facilitator's role is not to control every step, but to encourage,

accompany, and motivate students so that they gain confidence to move forward in their own learning journey.

Furthermore, indicators of achievement and learning targets in SALAM are largely based on each student's research process and developmental needs. This means that learning goals are not applied uniformly, but are adjusted to the pace, readiness, and capacity of each learner. Through this individualized approach, every student is given space to grow according to their own potential while still being challenged to develop responsibility, consistency, and reflective awareness.

3.2. Discussion

In this learning process, the researcher focuses on three important aspects that can be developed as a learning method for Islamic Religious Education. These aspects are the implementation of experiential and dialogical learning, learning evaluation, and the role of facilitators.

3.2.1 The Implementation of Experiential and Dialogical Learning Method

In the learning cycle at SALAM, experiences and events become learning materials that are processed into new understanding and action. Simple or complex events, whether directly experienced by students or found in the wider social environment, can all become part of the learning process. These events are also developed according to the children's educational level. As noted by Gernatititi in *School without a Major*, one event can be interpreted differently depending on each child's context and experience.

Students are not only invited to experience events, but also to find appropriate responses to them and to formulate possible solutions [21]. In this way, learning does not stop at the transfer of material, but allows students to experience the social dynamics, responsibilities, and consequences of their actions [22]. These Findings show that what happens in SALAM is pedagogically distinct from mainstream Islamic Religious Education, which commonly begins with the transmission of concepts, doctrines, or normative rules that are expected to apply to students in life.

One example can be seen in moral learning. At SALAM, there is no formal religious subject, and moral values are not taught only as abstract instructions, such as "students must be honest." Instead, they are developed through concrete situations. Based on informant 2, this process can take place intentionally through planned learning activities, but it can also emerge from everyday events that occur organically.

Planned learning activities are usually arranged through research, which becomes one of the main forms of learning at SALAM. In each semester, students are encouraged to conduct research based on their own interests. The topics vary, ranging from photography and plastic waste processing to more complex issues such as mental health. Through this process, students encounter both dialogue and direct experience as part of their learning.

In this process, dialogue becomes a key part of learning. The process of understanding and internalization cannot be separated from dialogue between individuals in exploring reality [19]. Through dialogue, students are not only encouraged to build confidence but also to ask questions, reflect, and think critically [23].

This learning process places students as active subjects throughout the whole cycle. If viewed through Edgar Dale's Cone of Experience, the higher the level of student involvement, the greater the possibility that knowledge will be remembered and internalized in life [23]. Through experience and dialogue, students become more familiar with the knowledge they gain, so that it is not only understood textually, but also connected to their daily context.

For Islamic Religious Education, this offers an important implication. Moral and religious values may be internalized more deeply when students are not only told what is right, but are also guided to encounter moral situations, reflect on consequences, and formulate responsible action [24]. PAI may therefore benefit from incorporating project-based inquiry, reflective discussion, and contextual problem-solving into existing classroom practice. For that reason, Islamic Religious Education can adapt experiential and dialogical learning so that students are not only taught religious values but are also guided to understand and live those values more consciously in everyday life.

3.2.2 Learning Evaluation

The findings also show that SALAM differs significantly from mainstream educational assessment practices, including the PAI evaluation method. The evaluation process in contemporary Islamic religious learning still tends to focus on written examinations and knowledge-oriented assessment [9]. Evaluation still tends to prioritize written examinations and the measurement of cognitive mastery [6]. While such assessments may capture factual understanding, they are less able to measure responsibility, consistency, moral reflection, or the gradual internalization of values.

In this regard, SALAM offers a form of evaluation that can be adapted for Islamic Religious Education. At SALAM, evaluation does not only involve facilitators as evaluators, but also includes students and their peers in the reflective process. According to informant 2 in the interview, evaluation is not conducted only at the end of the semester, but also takes place periodically during the learning process through what is often called a "review." These reviews are used to trace the progress of students' learning, while the final evaluation focuses more on reflecting on the goals that were set at the beginning and the outcomes that were eventually achieved.

At SALAM, evaluation is approached as an ongoing reflective process rather than a single terminal judgment; there are no written exams for evaluation. At the beginning of the learning period, students are guided by facilitators to formulate indicators of achievement based on the goals of their learning or research. In this process, facilitators help students through reflective questions, so that the indicators developed are adjusted to each student's goals and current abilities. Because the learning process is individualized, each child may have different indicators and different forms of progress.

These indicators then become the basis for review and evaluation throughout the learning process. Facilitators periodically observe the extent to which students are progressing toward the goals they have formulated. Interestingly, in SALAM, the failure to achieve the indicators that were set at the beginning does not automatically mean that the learning process has failed. Instead, it becomes part of further reflection, allowing students

to reconsider why a target was not achieved and what can be learned from that process. In this way, evaluation is not only used to measure results, but also to deepen students' self-understanding and awareness of their own learning process [25].

As expressed by informar 1 in the interview, the impact of this kind of learning and evaluation may not be as immediately visible as numerical grades on an exam sheet, but it tends to be deeper and more long-term. This is what makes SALAM's evaluation model important to consider in the reconstruction of Islamic Religious Education. This model is relevant because value-oriented learning cannot be fully captured through scores alone. If the aim of PAI includes akhlaq formation, sincerity, discipline, and social responsibility, then assessment should include evidence of behavior, reflection, participation, and consistency over time. Portfolio assessment, reflective journals, peer feedback, and project evaluation may therefore complement conventional testing.

3.2.3 The Role of Facilitator

At SALAM, the term facilitator is not merely a replacement for the word teacher. It reflects a different understanding of the learning process [15]. Unlike teachers in conventional schools, who are often positioned as the main source of knowledge and instruction, facilitators at SALAM are placed as companions who support children in the process of learning [26]. This means that children are positioned as active subjects in seeking knowledge, while facilitators assist and guide the process rather than dominate it.

Based on interviews with two senior facilitators at SALAM, there are at least two important points regarding the role of the facilitator in supporting the learning process. First, the facilitator functions as a guardian of the learning process rather than as the sole determinant of learning goals. Instead of deciding from the beginning what children must learn or how their research should be conducted, facilitators ensure that the learning cycle actually takes place. This includes accompanying children in choosing research topics, trying things out, reviewing their progress, reflecting on setbacks, and repeating the process when needed. In this sense, facilitation is expressed more through observation, review, and guidance than through direct instruction.

Second, in the process of value formation, SALAM does not rely mainly on lectures or direct moral intervention. Instead, facilitators encourage awareness through dialogue and reflective questions. Through this process, children are invited to reread their own experiences, recognize mistakes and achievements, and draw lessons from what they do [27]. SALAM believes that dialogue and reflection on lived experience can deepen children's awareness of the values being developed.

Facilitators at SALAM also do not position themselves as authorities who are always right. Rather, they place themselves as learning partners and thinking partners. This position makes children more open in expressing confusion, failure, or uncertainty, so that reflection can emerge more honestly from within the child, rather than simply as a response to please the teacher or gain approval [28].

Such findings resonate with broader Islamic pedagogical traditions. Concepts such as tarbiyah, ta'dib, and tazkiyah all imply that education concerns the cultivation of character, discipline, and ethical consciousness, not merely the transfer of information. In

this sense, facilitation does not weaken the educator's moral responsibility [29]. Rather, it may enrich that responsibility by combining guidance with empathy, listening, and developmental support [26]. For Islamic Religious Education, this implies that teachers need not be limited to the role of doctrinal transmitters. They may also act as mentors who accompany students in relating religious teachings to emotional life, peer relationships, digital behavior, and contemporary social realities. Such a role may increase the relevance of religious learning in students' everyday lives.

However, these findings should be interpreted cautiously when applied to formal Islamic Religious Education settings, since SALAM's approach depends on institutional flexibility, smaller learning communities, and a culture that supports student autonomy. In formal schools with rigid timetables, large class sizes, examination pressures, and administrative demands, full implementation may be difficult, while individualized assessment and continuous reflective evaluation require substantial time, pedagogical competence, and manageable student numbers. Likewise, the facilitator model demands patience, emotional maturity, communication skills, and institutional trust, which may not always be present in every context, and in some situations, clearer teacher authority may still be necessary for classroom management and foundational instruction.

Therefore, SALAM should not be viewed as a universal model to be replicated wholesale, but as a critical pedagogical case that offers alternative insights for value internalization in education. Its main contribution lies in showing that values may be cultivated through lived experience, reflective dialogue, participatory assessment, and relational guidance, so that Islamic Religious Education may be enriched through more humanistic, experiential, and reflective pedagogical practices without abandoning its formal structures.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that experiential learning in an alternative Islamic school can enrich the process of value internalization in Islamic Religious Education. Through close guidance between facilitators and students, Islamic values are not only understood cognitively, but are also lived through activities and reflections that are closely connected to everyday life. In this way, this study contributes a case-based pedagogical reflection showing how experiential learning may enrich value internalization in Islamic Religious Education.

The implications of this study for educational practice highlight the importance of facilitators who not only deliver material but also design meaningful, dialogic learning experiences that are relevant to students' real-life contexts. For the development of Islamic Religious Education, these findings emphasize the need to shift from one-way, memorization-centered teaching toward more participatory and reflective learning. Practically, the results of this research can be a reference for educators, alternative education institutions, and policymakers who wish to develop a more dynamic and grounded model of religious education in the midst of contemporary challenges.

However, this study has its boundaries. Because the study focuses on one alternative school and two facilitators, the findings should be interpreted as context-bound

rather than broadly generalizable. The perspectives presented are also mainly based on observation of the facilitators' practices, so they do not yet fully capture the experiences of all parties involved in the educational process.

Based on these limitations, future studies should include students, parents, and teachers from formal Islamic schools to explore how similar approaches may be adapted in broader contexts. Further research can also examine variations of experiential learning in different types of schools and levels of education to gain a more comprehensive understanding of its effectiveness and challenges. In this way, a series of studies in this area is expected not only to enrich the scholarship on Islamic Religious Education but also to offer concrete benefits for the wider public through educational practices that are more humane, relevant, and transformative.

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