Equivalency Education As A Transformative Pathway: Lived Experiences Of Access, Agency, And Social Reintegration In Rural Indonesia

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Abstract

Equivalency education plays a vital role in expanding access to learning for marginalized populations excluded from formal schooling systems. However, little is known about how alumni of such programs interpret their educational journeys, particularly in rural and underserved areas. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of alumni from equivalency education programs in Wonosobo Regency, Indonesia, with a focus on how they navigate access and construct participation within non-formal educational settings. Adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the study involved in-depth interviews with five alumni who had completed equivalency programs and reintegrated into society through work, higher education, or civic roles. The findings reveal that access to education was shaped not only by logistical flexibility but also by emotional safety, social acceptance, and intrinsic motivation. Participation was marked by learner agency, relational support, and a sense of belonging. Moreover, the outcomes of their learning extended beyond individual benefit to community engagement and social mobility. This study addresses a gap in the literature by centering the voices of alumni, offering a learner-centered perspective on educational access and participation. The results underscore the transformative potential of non-formal education when implemented responsively and inclusively. The findings also carry implications for policy, suggesting the need to elevate the status of equivalency education as a legitimate and strategic component of inclusive and lifelong learning, in line with the goals of SDG 4.

Keywords: *equivalency education, educational access, participation, non-formal learning, marginalized learner.*

INTRODUCTION

Despite global commitments to educational equity through initiatives such as Education for All (EFA) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), millions of children and youth in developing countries continue to face exclusion from formal education (Black, 2022). In Indonesia, the persistence of dropout rates and educational disparities across socio-economic and geographical lines poses a serious challenge to achieving inclusive and equitable quality education. According to national statistics, over 1.7 million individuals are currently enrolled in equivalency education programs (Direktorat Jenderal PAUD dan Dikmas, 2022), which serve as a critical alternative pathway for those unable to access formal schooling.

Wonosobo Regency, located in the Central Java highlands, exemplifies the complexity of this issue (Asher Golden & Zacher Pandya, 2019). With high poverty rates, geographical isolation, and limited formal schooling infrastructure, the region has seen a disproportionately high number of school dropouts. In response, non-formal education institutions—particularly Community Learning Centers (PKBM) and the Sanggar Kegiatan Belajar (SKB)—have emerged as pivotal actors in delivering *equivalency education* or equivalency education. These institutions offer flexible, community-based learning models aimed at increasing accessibility and participation for marginalized populations.While previous research has extensively addressed the structural and policy aspects of non-formal education in Indonesia (Avendaño & Angulo-Jiménez, 2023), there is a significant lack of in-depth understanding of how alumni of equivalency education interpret their learning experiences, navigate access barriers, and construct participation within such programs. Most existing studies rely on quantitative metrics, neglecting the lived realities of learners who

have often faced socioeconomic, cultural, and spatial marginalization. The phenomenological dimension—how alumni *make meaning* of their educational journeys—remains largely unexplored.

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of alumni of *equivalency education* in Wonosobo in terms of how they accessed, participated in, and gave meaning to their educational trajectories. Specifically, the research seeks to answer (Mills et al., 2025):

How do alumni of equivalency education programs perceive and navigate accessibility barriers?

What forms of educational participation emerge in the context of non-formal education, and how are they experienced by the learners?

By employing a phenomenological approach, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of educational accessibility and participation beyond structural indicators. It introduces a grounded theoretical lens on how marginalized learners redefine access and participation in education, drawing on their lived narratives (Crawford, 2019). Furthermore, the findings provide policy-relevant insights for strengthening non-formal education systems as legitimate and empowering alternatives, particularly in rural and underserved contexts. In doing so, this study aligns with global efforts to reimagine education systems to be more inclusive, flexible, and responsive to diverse learner needs—a direction increasingly emphasized in post-pandemic educational recovery agendas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational Accessibility: Beyond Physical and Economic Barriers

Educational accessibility is a multidimensional construct involving the ease with which individuals—particularly those in marginalized communities—can engage with learning opportunities (Wiyono et al., 2021). Classic models, such as Aday and Andersen's behavioral model, emphasize that accessibility is not merely about proximity or cost but encompasses a broader set of enabling conditions, including sociocultural acceptability, institutional flexibility, and policy support (Kecici & Aydin, 2019).

In the Indonesian context, accessibility is deeply influenced by structural inequality. Geographic barriers, such as mountainous terrain and poor transportation infrastructure—as found in Wonosobo—impede access to formal education (Hendrick & Maslowsky, 2019). Moreover, socio-economic factors such as parental education, household income, and family size have been shown to significantly predict children's school enrollment and retention ((Arzadon et al., 2023).

However, less attention has been paid to *perceived* accessibility—how learners themselves interpret opportunities and constraints. Carneiro (Miller-Roenigk et al., 2023) emphasizes that financial and physical accessibility must be complemented by cultural and cognitive access, particularly in settings where formal institutions are not perceived as inclusive or empowering.

Educational Participation: Forms, Drivers, and Meanings

Participation in education has been conceptualized along both quantitative and qualitative axes. Quantitative participation refers to enrollment, attendance, and completion rates, while qualitative participation encompasses learners' engagement, agency, and sense of ownership in the learning process (Almulla & Bawa'aneh, 2024).

Research in adult and non-formal education highlights that participation is shaped by perceived relevance, cultural alignment, and opportunities for social recognition (Gutiérrez, 2023; Martinez et al., 2021). In equivalency education, especially for adult learners, participation often stems from aspirations for personal transformation, social mobility, and community contribution rather than credential attainment alone (Koopal & Vlieghe, 2022).

In Indonesia, the *equivalency education* model—delivered through PKBM and SKB—has been found to foster diverse forms of participation, from academic involvement to community leadership (Kambo et al., 2024). However, the stigma associated with non-formal credentials remains a barrier to deeper engagement and broader recognition (Wright et al., 2021).

Equivalency Education in Developing Countries

Equivalency education, as a subset of non-formal education, plays a pivotal role in advancing lifelong learning and educational justice, particularly in contexts where formal systems fail to reach all citizens (Huntington et al., 2024). Studies in Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia reveal common challenges: underfunding, lack of policy coherence, social stigma, and weak links with labor markets (Mehall, 2021).

Despite these limitations, equivalency programs are increasingly recognized as transformative spaces where learners redefine their educational identities and challenge exclusionary narratives (Zukowski et al., 2021). In this regard, Indonesia's PKBM model offers valuable lessons on how community-based learning institutions can adaptively address localized needs.

Gaps in the Literature

While substantial work has explored the structural and institutional aspects of non-formal and equivalency education, there remains a paucity of empirical studies examining alumni perspectives on accessibility and participation (Rafatbakhsh & Ahmadi, 2023). Specifically, the *meaning-making processes* through which former learners interpret their educational trajectories are under-theorized. Moreover, little is known about how such experiences contribute to social reintegration, empowerment, or lifelong learning motivation.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting a phenomenological lens to capture the lived experiences of alumni of *equivalency education*, thereby contributing to a more holistic and human-centered understanding of accessibility and participation in education.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in the phenomenological approach, with the aim of uncovering the lived experiences of alumni from equivalency education programs (*equivalency education*) in Wonosobo Regency, Indonesia. Phenomenology was chosen as it allows for a deep exploration of how individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences, particularly within social and educational contexts (Pal & Vanijja, 2020).

More specifically, a hermeneutic phenomenological framework was adopted to not only describe but also interpret participants' narratives, thereby illuminating the subjective essence of accessibility and participation in non-formal education. This approach aligns with the study's objective to understand how marginalized learners navigate barriers and construct educational agency in alternative settings.

Research Setting and Context

The study was conducted in Wonosobo Regency, a highland area in Central Java characterized by significant economic hardship, geographical isolation, and limited access to formal educational infrastructure (Asarta et al., 2020). The region has one of the highest dropout rates in the province and relies heavily on non-formal education providers, including Community Learning Centers (*Pusat Kegiatan Belajar Masyarakat*, or PKBM) and the *Sanggar Kegiatan Belajar* (SKB).

Three institutions were selected based on their reputation, accreditation status, and alumni outreach capabilities: PKBM Bhakti Pertiwi, PKBM Harapan Mandiri, and SPNF-SKB Wonosobo (Khurana et al., 2019). These institutions have operated for over a decade and have served diverse learner populations, including early school leavers, adult workers, and women heads of households.

Participants and Sampling

Five alumni (three females and two males), aged between 23 and 40, were purposefully selected using criterion-based sampling (Moiel et al., 2019). The inclusion criteria were:

Having completed at least one level of equivalency education (Package A/B/C).

Having at least two years of post-graduation experience in community, professional, or family roles.

Willingness and ability to articulate personal learning experiences.

Participants were selected to ensure diversity in gender, socio-economic background, and post-program life trajectories (Sage et al., 2023). This diversity facilitated a richer understanding of how various dimensions of access and participation are experienced and interpreted.

Data Collection Methods
Data were collected through (Quintas-Mendes et al., 2022):
In-depth semi-structured interviews. Each participant was interviewed two to three times, with each session lasting 60–90 minutes. Interviews explored personal histories, motivations for joining equivalency education, perceived barriers, learning experiences, and post-educational impacts.
Participant observation. Observations were conducted at each PKBM to contextualize the environment and practices referenced by alumni.
Document analysis. Institutional records, curriculum documents, and alumni profiles were reviewed to triangulate and enrich interview findings.
All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and transcribed verbatim. Member checking was employed to validate participants' intended meanings.
Data Analysis
The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach guided by van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology. The analytical process began with immersion, wherein the transcripts were read repeatedly to gain a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences. This was followed by reduction, which involved identifying significant statements and meaning units related to issues of accessibility and participation (Goñi et al., 2020). These meaning units were then grouped into thematic categories through a clustering process. Finally, the themes were synthesized into structural descriptions that captured the essence of the lived experiences. To facilitate systematic coding and organization of the qualitative data, NVivo 12 software was employed.

RESULTS
The lived experiences of five alumni from equivalency education programs in Wonosobo Regency revealed a complex yet coherent narrative of how access and participation in non-formal education were constructed, negotiated, and ultimately internalized as part of their personal and social development. Their accounts illuminated the deeply situated realities of educational marginalization as well as the transformative potential embedded within community-based learning spaces.
Participants consistently described equivalency education as a second chance to pursue formal recognition of learning that had been interrupted by economic hardship, domestic responsibilities, or early school dropout. Access to these programs was not framed merely as physical proximity or affordability, but as a set of enabling conditions characterized by flexibility, inclusiveness, and empathy. The modular scheduling, tolerance for irregular attendance, and non-hierarchical relationships with facilitators enabled participants to re-enter education with dignity and agency. For most, participation was driven by both pragmatic and aspirational motives—ranging from the need for a diploma to qualify for employment, to the desire to prove personal worth or to serve as a role model for their children. Some participants recalled how social stigma initially accompanied their decision to join a *PKBM*, with comments from neighbors who considered non-formal education inferior. However, these negative perceptions were gradually countered by personal achievements and community recognition following program completion.

Figure 1. Equivalency Education as Second Chance
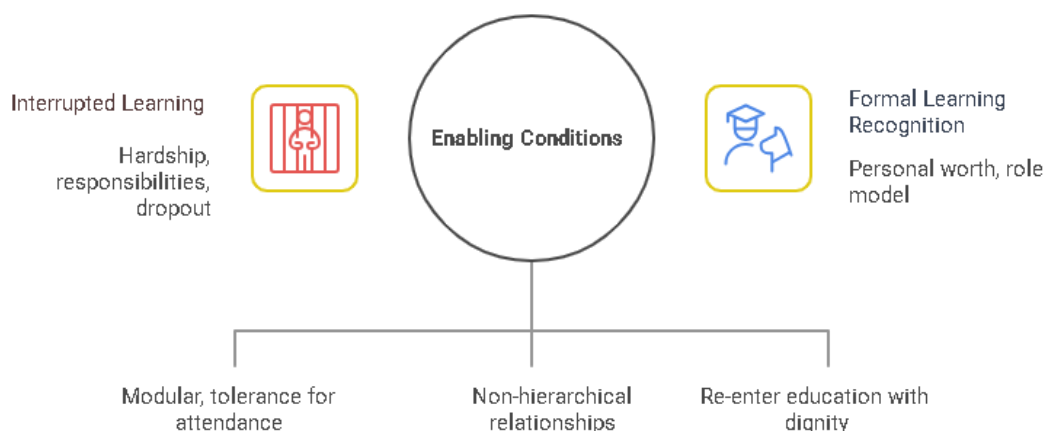
Beyond accessibility, the narratives underscored a redefinition of what it means to participate in education. Unlike their experiences in formal schools—often marked by alienation, rigid expectations, and punitive discipline—participants in the *PKBM* context experienced learning as a collaborative, respectful, and empowering process. They described learning environments where mistakes were tolerated, dialogue was encouraged, and peer support flourished. This sense of emotional safety and ownership over the learning process appeared to catalyze deeper engagement. Some participants began mentoring peers, initiating literacy activities in their neighborhoods, or assisting their own children with schoolwork—indicating a transition from passive recipients of knowledge to active knowledge bearers and community actors.

Figure 2. Transforming Education through Empowerment
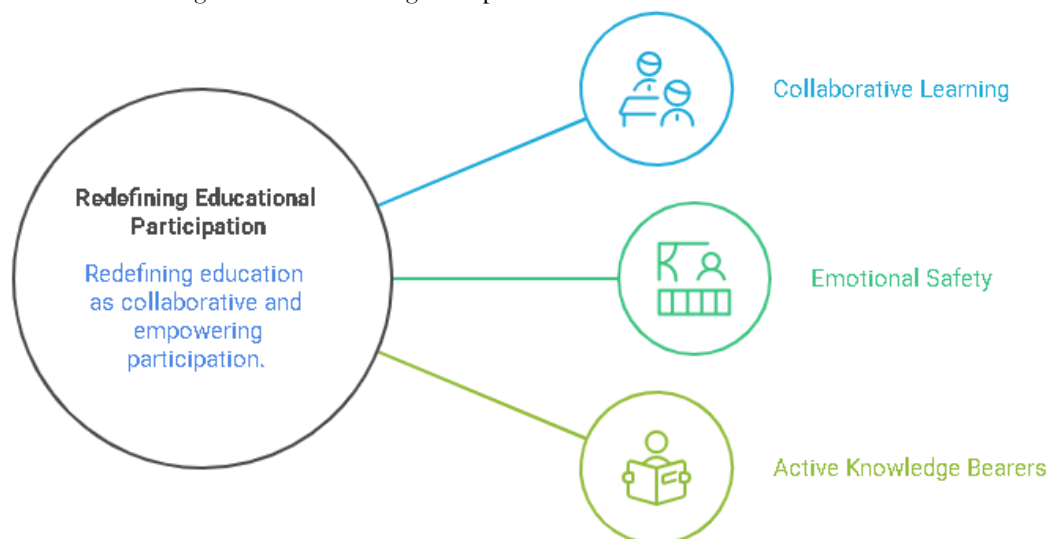
Perhaps most striking were the outcomes reported by participants after completing the programs. Several described how having a certified diploma allowed them to apply for formal jobs, receive promotions, or pursue higher education—opportunities that had previously seemed unattainable. One participant had gone on to enroll in a bachelor's degree program, another had become an administrative staff member after years of working as a manual laborer, and others were involved in local volunteer efforts. These trajectories point not only to economic benefits but also to a broader process of social reintegration and empowerment. Participants emphasized how education had helped them "become visible again" in the eyes of their communities and institutions, regaining self-esteem and forging new roles as contributors to the social fabric.

Taken together, these findings portray equivalency education as more than an alternative credentialing pathway. It functions as a relational and transformative space where learners negotiate access amid structural

barriers, reshape their engagement with knowledge, and activate new forms of agency. The narratives affirm the importance of educational spaces that respect learners' life circumstances, honor experiential knowledge, and facilitate the rebuilding of personal and social identities through learning.

DISCUSSION

This study has revealed how alumni of equivalency education in Wonosobo experience and negotiate access to learning opportunities and construct meaningful participation within a non-formal educational framework (Graham & Massyn, 2019). These findings both affirm and extend existing theories of educational access and participation, while offering new insights into how marginalized individuals reclaim agency and redefine the value of education in peripheral settings.Consistent with Schulz et al (2020) conceptualization of *educational accessibility* as more than physical proximity or cost, the participants' narratives underscore the salience of institutional flexibility, cultural acceptance, and psychological readiness as key enablers. The modular learning structures, relational pedagogies, and tolerant institutional norms of *PKBM* enabled learners to re-enter education with dignity. In this regard, equivalency education disrupts the traditional binary between *formal* and *non-formal* by offering not only structural access but also emotional and cognitive inclusion. These findings echo global perspectives highlighted in UNESCO's *Education 2030 Framework for Action*, which calls for diversified and inclusive pathways to learning that reflect the needs of youth and adults who are excluded from mainstream schooling.Beyond accessibility, the study highlights a reconfiguration of participation that goes beyond attendance or credential completion. Participants actively shaped their learning goals, schedules, and peer interactions—demonstrating the essence of participatory education as envisioned by Stokes & Davis (2022) framework. This form of participation, characterized by agency, confidence, and self-initiative, aligns with Tussupbekova et al (2022) notion of *conscientization*—the process by which marginalized learners become aware of and transform their social realities through education.Moreover, alumni's engagement extended well beyond the classroom. Several described how their educational experiences propelled them into roles of community leadership, volunteerism, and civic action. These post-educational trajectories signal that equivalency education serves as more than a compensatory mechanism; it is a generative space that facilitates empowerment and active citizenship. These findings support international evidence on the social returns of non-formal learning, as documented by Redl et al (2025), who argue that adult education plays a pivotal role in promoting inclusion, equity, and democratic participation.However, the potential of equivalency education remains constrained by systemic limitations within Indonesia's educational landscape. Participants' stories revealed an ongoing social stigma attached to non-formal credentials and a lack of clear articulation between non-formal and formal education systems. Institutional underfunding, limited standardization, and minimal integration into national qualification frameworks continue to hinder the scalability and legitimacy of such programs (Lowe, 2021). These limitations reflect broader structural inequalities in education policy that prioritize formal schooling while relegating alternative pathways to the periphery. As such, the transformative experiences documented in this study represent localized successes rather than systemic reform.Importantly, this study contributes a novel perspective to the literature on non-formal education by centering the lived experiences of *alumni*, rather than administrators or policymakers. While prior research often emphasizes program design, outreach strategies, or policy frameworks, this study foregrounds the subjective meanings that learners attribute to access and participation—meanings rooted in struggle, resilience, and personal transformation (Allen et al., 2021). By applying a phenomenological lens, the study uncovers how educational engagement becomes a site of identity reconstruction, social reintegration, and aspiration-making. This learner-centered approach enriches global discourse on educational justice by amplifying voices that are rarely heard in academic debates.Taken together, the findings of this study illustrate the critical role of equivalency education in realizing the vision of *Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4)*: ensuring inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all (Ainslie et al., 2021). They also invite national policymakers to re-evaluate the marginal status of non-formal education and to consider its strategic role in achieving lifelong learning, especially for populations historically excluded from formal institutions.

CONCLUSION

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by foregrounding the lived experiences of alumni of equivalency education programs—voices often absent in research that typically centers on institutional policy or program design. Through a phenomenological lens, the study reveals how access and participation in non-formal education are interpreted not merely as logistical or structural phenomena, but as deeply personal, context-bound processes shaped by learners' aspirations, constraints, and social realities. The findings demonstrate that flexibility, emotional safety, and relational learning play a decisive role in facilitating re-engagement with education among marginalized individuals, particularly in rural and underserved regions.

By elevating the narratives of former learners, this research contributes a learner-centered framework that enriches the discourse on educational equity and justice. It challenges deficit-based views of non-formal education and repositions *equivalency education* as a transformative space for agency, empowerment, and social reintegration. These insights hold significant implications for policymakers and practitioners seeking to align national education systems with the global mandate of Sustainable Development Goal 4—ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all—especially those historically excluded from formal schooling pathways.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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