



The Journey of Self-Discovery: Narrating the Importance of Learning In an Alternative School Context

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Abstract: This study explores how learners in an Indonesian Community Learning Center reconstruct the meaning of education after experiencing educational disruption. Grounded in transformative learning theory (Mezirow) and identity status theory (Marcia), the study employs a qualitative narrative approach to examine the experiences of ten learners at PKBM Darul Ibtida in Serang, Banten. Data were collected through semi-structured narrative interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings identify five major themes shaping learners' journeys: disorienting experiences as the starting point of self-discovery; reframing education from a lost pathway into a meaningful alternative; rebuilding confidence and learner identity; developing autonomy in managing learning and life responsibilities; and expanding social awareness and responsibility. These narratives illustrate how learners reinterpret educational disruption and gradually reconstruct their agency and aspirations. The study highlights alternative education as a space for transformative meaning-making and identity reconstruction.

Keywords: alternative education, self-discovery, transformative learning

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary socio-economic transformations, digital disruptions, and shifting labor market demands have profoundly altered the educational trajectories of both adolescents and adult learners. Despite these changes, formal schooling systems continue to operate within relatively standardized and institutionalized structures, characterized by fixed curricula, rigid scheduling, and normative academic benchmarks. Such institutional rigidity often fails to accommodate learners whose educational pathways are shaped by economic precarity, religious educational backgrounds, family disruption, or pandemic-related exclusion.

As a result, educational disengagement increasingly reflects not merely individual academic insufficiency but a structural misalignment between institutional expectations and learners' lived realities (Santos et al., 2020; Guerrero et al., 2024). When learners are expelled, forced to withdraw, or gradually marginalized, the consequences extend beyond interrupted schooling. These experiences frequently destabilize learners' interpretive frameworks about education itself, generating what transformative learning theory conceptualizes as a crisis of meaning.

Alternative and non-formal education systems have emerged globally as institutional responses to such structural tensions. While these settings are commonly framed as compensatory pathways designed to restore access to certification, their pedagogical significance may extend beyond remediation. Alternative schooling environments, potentially,



where learners renegotiate their relationship with knowledge, reconstruct disrupted self-perceptions, and reinterpret education as personally meaningful rather than externally imposed.

However, extant scholarship on alternative education has predominantly centered on measurable outcomes: academic completion rates, behavioral adjustment, or general socio-emotional indicators. Although these dimensions are important, they risk overlooking a more fundamental question: how do learners reconstruct the meaning of learning after experiencing educational rupture? In particular, limited empirical work has examined how learners themselves narrate processes of perspective transformation within non-formal educational contexts, especially outside Western settings (Guerrero et al., 2024).

Transformative learning theory, initially articulated by Mezirow, provides a conceptual framework for understanding how adults revise their previously held assumptions in response to disorienting dilemmas. Through critical reflection, dialogical engagement, and reflective action, individuals may reconstruct more inclusive and self-authored frames of reference (Illeris, 2018; Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023). Nevertheless, much of the transformative learning literature remains concentrated in higher education, professional development, and healthcare training contexts. The application of this framework within community-based non-formal education, particularly in Southeast Asian settings, remains comparatively underdeveloped. Furthermore, empirical analyses often infer transformation from observable behavioral changes rather than from learners' own narrative constructions of meaning.

Within the Indonesian educational landscape, Pusat Kegiatan Belajar Masyarakat (PKBM) constitutes a central component of the non-formal education system, offering equivalency programs for learners who have disengaged from formal schooling. Policy discourse tends to position PKBM primarily as a mechanism for certification recovery. However, conceptualizing PKBM solely as an administrative substitute risks underestimating its potential as a transformative learning environment. Existing studies on PKBM have largely emphasized program management, community outreach, and access expansion (Shantini et al., 2019), leaving the processes through which learners reconstruct educational meaning relatively unexplored.

In the Indonesian context, Pusat Kegiatan Belajar Masyarakat (PKBM) represents a key institution within the national non-formal education system. PKBM provides equivalency education programs (Paket A, Paket B, and Paket C) for individuals unable to complete formal schooling. These programs offer flexible learning opportunities while enabling learners to obtain educational certificates equivalent to primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary school qualifications.

Previous research has highlighted the important role of PKBM and alternative education in supporting marginalized learners to reconnect with education. Studies by Rosmilawati (2017) demonstrate that alternative schooling pathways allow disadvantaged youth who have dropped out of formal education to reconstruct their educational trajectories and pursue future aspirations. Alternative education institutions provide learning environments that are more responsive to learners' social conditions and personal experiences, thereby enabling them to re-engage with education in ways that are meaningful to their lives. Furthermore, research on PKBM learning practices indicates that non-formal educational programs can contribute not only to academic achievement but also to the development of character, self-confidence, and social participation among learners (Darmawan & Rosmilawati, 2020).

These findings suggest that PKBM can function not merely as an administrative alternative to formal schooling but as a community-based learning environment that supports personal and social transformation. However, existing studies on PKBM in Indonesia have predominantly focused on institutional management, program implementation, or character education outcomes. Relatively few studies have explored how learners themselves interpret their educational experiences in PKBM settings, particularly with respect to transformative learning processes.

In particular, limited research has examined how learners who experience educational disruption, such as school expulsion, economic hardship, or limited access to digital learning, reconstruct the meaning of education after entering alternative education environments. Understanding learners' perspectives is crucial because transformative learning is reflected not only in observable behavioral change but also in how individuals reinterpret their experiences, identities, and future aspirations.

Therefore, there remains a need for empirical research that explores transformative learning processes within community-based non-formal education contexts, especially in Indonesia, where PKBM plays an important role in expanding educational inclusion. Examining learners' narratives and lived experiences may provide deeper insights into how educational transformation occurs beyond the attainment of academic certification.

PKBM Darul Ibtida in Serang, Banten, presents a context in which educational discontinuity is commonplace. Its learners include adolescents expelled from formal schooling, individuals affected by pandemic-related digital exclusion, students from religious boarding schools with limited exposure to general education, and adults returning to education for employment mobility. These trajectories suggest that entry into PKBM is frequently preceded by experiences that may constitute disorienting dilemmas in the transformative learning sense. However, participation alone does not guarantee transformation; the depth and direction of change depend on how learners interpret these disruptions and whether reflective engagement is facilitated.

Preliminary observations indicate that learning practices at PKBM Darul Ibtida incorporate dialogical interaction, flexible scheduling, and reflective discussion. Several learners report renewed self-confidence, reframed aspirations, and a redefined understanding of education as an arena for self-development. Others, however, approach learning instrumentally, focusing primarily on credential acquisition. This variation underscores the need to examine transformative processes not as automatic outcomes of alternative schooling but as negotiated and narratively constructed experiences.

Accordingly, this study seeks to investigate how learners in an Indonesian PKBM narrate their educational journeys and how these narratives reveal processes of transformative learning. By foregrounding learners' own accounts of disruption, reflection, and renewed commitment, this research contributes to the theoretical refinement of transformative learning in three ways. First, it situates the theory within a non-formal, community-based educational setting in the Global South. Second, it advances narrative inquiry as a methodological avenue for capturing perspective transformation from the learner's standpoint. Third, it problematizes the assumption that alternative education is inherently transformative, instead demonstrating how transformation emerges through contextually mediated meaning-making processes.

Based on this context, this study aims to explore how learners at PKBM Darul Ibtida experience and interpret their learning processes within a transformative learning framework. By examining learners' narratives of educational disruption, reflection, and personal change, this research seeks to deepen understanding of how transformative learning may emerge in community-based non-formal education settings.

RESEARCH METHOD

Qualitative Narrative Approach

To address how the journey of self-discovery among alternative school students shapes their lives and promotes individual development (such as perspective, self-confidence, and independence) and social development (such as responsibility, social awareness, and innovation), this study used a qualitative narrative approach. Narrative inquiry was used to explore the real-life experiences of alternative school students through their own narratives. Narrative inquiry facilitates the emergence of thematic patterns when investigating the lived experiences of individuals (Greenhalgh et al, 2006). Participants were asked to share their

experience of alternative schooling and reflect on one or more specific changes. Narrative inquiry goes beyond storytelling to understand complexities by creating space for conversation and ongoing contemplation (Wang & Geale, 2015).

Research Participants

Students from PKBM Darul Ibtida located in Serang, Banten province, Indonesia, who had experience of learning in an alternative school environment were recruited for this study. The recruitment was voluntary, based on purposeful sampling, and relied on informed judgment to select the students as research participants. Tafur-Arciniegas and Contreras (2018) note that this sampling method involves small, targeted samples that were chosen because they are relevant to this study. PKBM Darul Ibtida is a non-formal educational institution that plays an important role in providing access to children and communities who are excluded from traditional schools. Ten students were interviewed individually to gain their stories. Table 1 provides background information on each participant as an initial account of each life journey.

Table 1. Participants

No	Anonymous Name	Age	Transition Background
1	Ihsan	16	A student in a traditional Salafi Islamic boarding school who learns fiqh, tafsir, hadiths, and various religious activities every day that shape his character. He began to feel something was missing from his general education.
2	Raja	18	Had unpleasant experiences while in junior high school. COVID-19 forced schools to close, and students were transferred to home learning. Due to his inability to keep up with online learning, he was dropping out of school.
3	Andis	18	Experienced emotional wounds and expelled from the previous formal school. The family's economic burden made returning to school difficult until he enrolled in an alternative school with flexible learning.
4	Umam	16	Expelled from traditional school due to behavioral problems, then realized the opportunity in an alternative school program.
5	Amrullah	17	Experienced pressure in a traditional school due to strict regulations and a busy schedule. He decided to enroll in an alternative school that offers a flexible approach to learning.
6	Resa	17	Family's circumstances (loss of her father) changed her educational option, in which alternative school fees are more accessible and less burdensome.
7	Indah	17	With a background in traditional Islamic boarding (pesantren) and no formal degree, I chose PKBM to earn a formal diploma.
8	Agnes	17	A less confident student who had difficulty in traditional school and then decided to transfer to an alternative school.
9	Apsah	19	The economic situation prevented her from continuing her education until she feels secure at the alternative school.
10	Kesha	16	Experiencing homeschooling at a young age, then enrolled in PKBM, where he found the ideal combination: the freedom of homeschooling combined with an orderly formal school system.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted with all 10 participants. The narrative interview method was viewed as the best approach for collecting participants' stories (Gregory, 2010) and uncovering the significance of their experiences (Plummer, 2001). The interview questions cover topics such as life and family background; the initial decision to participate in schooling in an alternative school context; the school transition and experiences during learning; and whether these learning experiences promote self- and social development. The data collection procedure begins with obtaining research permits and explaining the

research objectives and the ethics followed during the research. Based on the list of potential informants, the researcher determines the sampling of informants. At the beginning of the interview, the research team took written and verbal consent from each participant. All participants' interviews were face-to-face, one-to-one, and lasted 1 to 1.5 hours each in a relaxing environment. Each interview was conducted in school during break hours and after school throughout October, November, and December, 2025. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the research team. Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and pseudonymized to ensure participants' identities remained anonymous.

Data Analysis

This study used an inductive approach, employing the theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2017) and Marcia's (1996) identity statuses. A qualitative thematic analysis was used to examine the interview data through narrative analysis. There is a distinction between narrative analysis and an analysis of narrative: narrative analysis refers to generating stories from descriptions of events or actions (McCormack, 2004), whereas the analysis of narrative treats stories as data for researchers to analyze for recurring themes. In the analysis of personal narratives, the approach can illuminate both individual and shared meanings, including the social actions and interactions that shape and change human relationships (Riessman, 2008).

Trustworthiness

The validity of the data in this study is assessed using the criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is used to guarantee that the data obtained truly describes the learning experience and transformation of students in alternative schools. Efforts made include member checks, which involve reconfirming interview results or researchers' interpretations with research subjects to prevent misinterpretations. The research team also discussed the findings and cross-checked each piece of data owned by the team members to strengthen the analysis. Dependability is maintained by ensuring consistency in the research process. This test is carried out by examining the entire research process. As for maintaining comprehensiveness, it is done to ensure that the research findings are actually based on empirical evidence rather than on the researchers' assumptions. Based on the results, the research has met the confirmability standard.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Using a qualitative narrative approach, students' journeys of self-discovery at the Community Learning Center (PKBM) appear as a series of stories that begin with loss and disruption, then gradually move toward rebuilding their learner identity, strengthening their sense of self, and expanding their social responsibility.

Disorienting experiences as the doorway to self-discovery

For almost all students, the first step in their self-discovery does not come through success, but through "failure" in formal schooling. At first, Raja felt his life was going well; he attended junior high school, studied as usual, and interacted with his friends. When Covid-19 hit, however, everything changed. His school switched to online learning, but because Raja did not have a mobile phone, he struggled to follow the lessons. No one could lend him a device, and as a result, he fell further and further behind. This situation became even more stressful because his parents' economic condition made it impossible to buy a phone. As he put it,

"During the COVID-19 period, students were instructed to study from home using mobile phones. However, Raja did not have a phone and was therefore unable to participate in school lessons. This eventually led Raja to drop out of school and enroll in the PKBM, as there were also financial constraints."

Raja shared that the pandemic ultimately forced him to stop attending formal school because he lacked a device to access online learning. After this experience, he decided to enroll in the PKBM.

Andis experienced a similar situation. He had been attending a public junior high school without major problems until, in grade eight, he became involved in a disciplinary incident and was expelled. This made him feel deeply sad and as if he had lost his future. His parents could not afford to enroll him in a private school, which is generally more expensive, so he had no way to return to formal schooling. After being expelled, Andis went through a period of despair, believing that without a junior high school certificate, he would not be able to continue to senior high school and that finding a job in the future would be very difficult for him.

“I attended school until the second year of junior high school, but I was expelled because of a case at school. After that, I joined the PKBM so that I could continue my education and obtain a certificate.”

Resa faced an even more dramatic life change when her father passed away, and the family's economic situation deteriorated. She was only able to attend school up to the first year of junior high. Her mother, who became the sole breadwinner, worked as an itinerant vendor, but her income was not enough to meet their daily needs. From Monday to Saturday, Resa helps her mother sell snacks. Early in the morning, they prepare the goods, then walk around the neighborhood, going through small alleys and sometimes all the way to the market. Resa carries a bag filled with snacks, while her mother pushes a small cart. It is exhausting, especially when the weather is very hot, but Resa keeps helping because she knows her family needs the money for food and other daily necessities. As a result, Resa had to leave formal schooling altogether. This experience left her feeling deeply shaken:

“...I started to feel sad more often, confused, and as if I had lost something important.”

For 17-year-old Agnes, the journey of pursuing education has never been easy. As a child, she was unable to complete primary school. As an adult, she often felt insecure because of her unfinished schooling, especially when she had to speak in front of others or express her opinions. Whenever she was in a situation that required discussion, she usually chose to remain silent because she was afraid of making mistakes and felt her abilities were far behind those of others. As she put it,

“I have been enrolled in the program since Package A, and then continued to Packages B and C, and I have experienced an improvement in my knowledge... I joined the PKBM because I wanted to obtain a certificate so that I could get a better job.”

Meanwhile, for Apsag, who is 19 years old, economic hardship meant she could not complete her schooling. Even so, her desire to obtain a certificate never truly faded. She understands that having a certificate is not just about social status, but about gaining access to better jobs, a more stable income, and a more decent life. As she said,

“Because of financial difficulties, I was unable to continue my schooling. Now, I really want to earn a certificate so that I can get a better job and have a more stable income... Having a certificate would also make me feel more confident when socializing with others.”

There are also experiences of “academic incompleteness”, as felt by Ihsan in the Islamic boarding school. From the moment he first entered the Islamic boarding school, Ihsan felt that his life had changed in many positive ways. The calm environment, structured daily routines, and strong religious atmosphere brought him closer to religious knowledge, and he truly enjoyed that process. However, in the midst of this busy boarding-school life, he began to sense that something was missing. When his peers talked about school subjects such as mathematics, science, or Indonesian, Ihsan often remained quiet. He felt he was not receiving enough general education compared to students in formal schools, as most activities at the *pesantren* focused on deepening religious studies. Over time, he started to worry and repeatedly asked himself whether he would be able to go to university or compete in the world of work later on. As he reflected:

“...since I have been in the *pesantren*, I have not really received regular school lessons; it is more focused on recitation and religious activities. When my friends talk about school subjects, I do not understand.”

These narratives show that students do not enter PKBM from a neutral position. They arrive carrying wounds, losses, and big questions about their futures.

Changing perspectives and rebuilding confidence

As students become more involved in PKBM, their views of education and of themselves begin to shift. For Raja, change is visible in the way he thinks about education. In the past, he felt he had no future in formal school because of his family's economic limitations, but now he sees the PKBM as a realistic space to continue learning. Even though he still does not own a mobile phone, PKBM tutors help him study in other ways, using printed modules, paper-based learning materials, and face-to-face discussions or other methods when possible. At PKBM, the learning materials are adapted so that students with limited access to technology can still learn properly. As Raja put it,

“...now, even without a phone, I can still study, so I feel confident to join discussions.

Later, I want to find a better job once I have my certificate.”

Raja now feels more optimistic. He has a clear goal to complete the equivalency program at PKBM, obtain his certificate, and plan a future in which the limitations he faced before are no longer his biggest obstacle.

Ihsan has started studying subjects he rarely encountered at the boarding school. He is once again working on exercises, trying to understand formulas, and discussing different natural phenomena. Although at first he felt awkward and left behind, he came to enjoy the process over time. Each time he managed to grasp a new topic, he felt a quiet sense of pride. Beyond academic lessons, PKBM also teaches life skills that can be applied directly in everyday life. Ihsan learns about communication, time management, teamwork, and other practical skills that will be useful for his future. For him, these experiences are very valuable because he could not access them all at the *pesantren*. He feels increasingly independent and confident. As he reflected:

“Since I studied at a Salafi Islamic boarding school, I felt that I did not receive much formal schooling in subjects such as Mathematics, Science, or languages, because the focus was more on Qur'anic study and religious activities... That is why I started thinking about joining the PKBM, because obtaining a certificate equivalent to formal schooling is very important for my future.”

When Resa first joined PKBM, she was very shy. She tended to stay quiet, rarely spoke, and was afraid of giving the wrong answer when the tutor asked a question. Over time, however, she became more comfortable at PKBM. The tutors were friendly and did not create a tense atmosphere, and her classmates were supportive. From there, Resa's confidence slowly grew. She began to raise her hand to ask questions when she did not understand the material, something she had previously been too afraid to do.

“When I first joined the PKBM, I was very shy. I mostly kept quiet and rarely spoke... However, over time, I began to feel more comfortable there... I started raising my hand to ask questions when I did not understand something... During discussions, I tried to share my opinions. When it came to presentations, I also began to come forward and speak in front of the class.”

Resa wants to keep studying so that she can get a better job in the future. Her goal is clear: she wants to help her mother and improve her family's economic situation. She now believes that education can be a pathway to a better future. For Resa, PKBM is not only a place to learn, but also a place to rise again and rebuild her self-confidence. Through these difficult life experiences, she has learned to become stronger and not give up easily.

“...I moved to the PKBM because of financial difficulties, and my father had already passed away... From Monday to Saturday, I helped my mother sell goods from place to place so that we could meet our family’s daily needs.”

Among adult learners, change can be seen in their shifting position in the Classroom. When Agnes first joined the Paket A class, she still carried a lot of doubt and anxiety. She was not yet used to asking questions, reading aloud, or completing assignments that had to be presented to others. As she moved into the Paket B and then Paket C classes, the changes became more visible.

“...now in class I dare to raise my hand when the teacher asks something, share my opinions during group discussions, and even give suggestions to others.”

In addition to growing academically, Agnes also developed personally and socially. She became more open, found it easier to communicate, and actively worked together with other learners. Each group assignment became an opportunity for her to practice sharing her opinions and to take responsibility for the role she was given.

For Apsah, small steps become important turning points. When Apsah finally joined PKBM, she experienced changes that were gradual but very meaningful. At first, she still felt inferior and doubtful because she had been away from education for so long. However, the friendly learning atmosphere, patient tutors, and supportive classmates helped her feel accepted. From there, she began to realize that education could be an opportunity to improve her life and rebuild her confidence.

Apsah started studying subjects that had once felt far beyond her reach. When she managed to understand lessons she had previously thought were too difficult, she felt a sense of pride and satisfaction. Every small step forward—for example, being able to read and then explain the lesson in her own words—strengthened her belief that she was capable of achieving something. Over time, the feelings of inferiority that had once held her back began to fade.

“...there are small improvements, like being able to read and explain the lesson again. Then I think, oh, I can do it. I do not feel inferior in my environment anymore.”

Developing autonomy and life management

Self-discovery also appears in how students manage their lives and learn more independently. Raja consciously designs his own learning strategy, demonstrating growing agency and self-regulation. Despite competing domestic responsibilities, he deliberately allocates time to study, engage with learning modules, document key insights, and reflect on his comprehension. Furthermore, his willingness to seek support from tutors and peers when facing difficulties illustrates an adaptive learning approach that combines autonomy with social support, reinforcing his sense of continuity and belonging in the learning process.

“I made a study schedule while helping my parents and doing housework, and I read the modules in between. I took notes as well. If there was something I did not understand, I asked my friends or the tutor so that I would not fall behind in the lessons.”

Amrullah redefines education as something that can be negotiated alongside work, rather than something that forces him to choose one and abandon the other. He begins to reflect on and reassess his previous understanding of schooling, realizing that success in education is strongly influenced by one’s ability to self-regulate and by how learning arrangements align with one’s life circumstances.

“Studying at the PKBM is not as exhausting as studying in a formal school. There are not too many rules, and there is more free time, so I chose to study at the PKBM while working to help my parents... I began learning to manage my own time. This change has made me more independent, more responsible, and better prepared to face the future with greater understanding and a more mature attitude.”

Kesha, now a teenager, is taking her future aspirations more seriously. Since childhood, she has preferred learning at her own pace, which has led her to pursue an education tailored to

her needs and learning style. Kesha has built her own curriculum by combining Early Childhood Education (PKBM) lessons with her love of writing, creating a flexible learning environment that allows her to balance formal learning requirements with her creative interests.

“Sometimes I write stories and develop my imagination... for me, this is not just a certificate, but a path toward my dreams.”

Broadening social responsibility, awareness, and innovation

Personal change at PKBM does not stop at the individual level. Raja channels his renewed confidence into concrete social initiatives:

“I have started organizing my friends to study together without using the internet, and I have taken the initiative to save money so that we can buy learning tools. In addition, I am now more active in discussions and think more critically about the challenges in my own life.”

After her father’s passing, Resa experienced a difficult period marked by sadness, confusion, and a deep sense of loss. The economic hardship that forced her to discontinue formal schooling also had a significant emotional impact on her. When she first joined the PKBM, she tended to be very shy and withdrawn, reflecting the psychological challenges she faced during that transition.

“..to help her mother and improve the family’s economic situation.”

Meanwhile, Kesha practices small-scale social and creative innovation. She also demonstrates notable development in her life skills, particularly in managing her time more effectively. Kesha organizes her daily activities by allocating specific periods for academic study and other times for creative writing. She has also begun to share her work more actively by publishing her stories on blogs and participating in writing communities. As reflected in her experience:

“I regularly share my stories on blogs and in writing communities while taking PKBM equivalency exams... this learning process has made me more independent and responsible.”

Apsah also turns internal changes into new ways of positioning herself in society. The supportive learning environment at the PKBM, with friendly tutors and encouraging peers, made her feel accepted. Through this experience, she began to see education not only as a way to obtain a certificate but also as an opportunity to improve her life and rebuild her self-confidence. As reflected in her experience:

“I have become more confident when interacting with others and can express my opinions without hesitation... I now see myself as capable and deserving of better opportunities.”

Discussion

This discussion interprets how students’ narratives of disruption, recovery, and growth in PKBM illustrate a transformative journey of self-discovery that reshapes both their personal and social lives.

Disorienting experiences and opening identity questions

The first stage of self-discovery in this study clearly resonates with Mezirow’s idea of a disorienting dilemma, like sudden events such as dropping out during Covid-19, expulsion, bereavement, or chronic poverty, make previous expectations about schooling “no longer work” and force students to re-question who they are and where they are going. (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018; Van Der Gaag et al., 2025). Recent work on transformative learning emphasizes that such dilemmas are not only cognitive, but deeply emotional and biographical, often linked to marginalization and disrupted life trajectories. (Chad, 2020; Hoggan et al., 2017; Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023). In PKBM, these crises are visible when students like Raja or Andis realize that the problem is not only technical (no device, an expulsion letter) but also existential: “Is

education really for someone like me?” This is the moment when self-discovery begins as painful awareness, not yet as a solution.

Through the lens of Identity Status Theory, these narratives indicate a shift from passive identity diffusion to an active crisis of exploration. Contemporary identity research confirms that periods of instability and “not knowing” can be developmentally productive when they are accompanied by opportunities to explore alternatives and receive support. (Van Der Gaag et al., 2025; Verschueren et al., 2017). When students begin to ask “Who am I as a learner?” and “What is still possible for me?”, it fits what current reviews describe as reflective identity work, where young people begin to evaluate earlier critically, often unexamined, positions about themselves (Weller et al., 2025). In this sense, exclusion from formal school becomes the trigger for deeper identity work rather than the end of their educational story.

What is distinctive in PKBM is that these disorienting experiences are brought into dialogue rather than kept as private shame. Recent transformative learning literature stresses that critical reflection is often social and relational, occurring in safe spaces where people can “story” their lives and have those stories recognized. (Kuismala et al., 2026; Robinson & Sharma, 2025). When Ratu talks openly about stopping school to support her mother, she is not only reporting hardship but also repositioning herself as a responsible daughter and working student whose sacrifice carries moral value. Current situated identity perspectives argue that identity emerges in interaction with context; for example, a setting that names someone as “dropout” produces very different selves than a setting that names them “caregiver”, “worker”, or “student with potential”.

From a self-discovery standpoint, PKBM thus acts as what recent identity research calls an enabling context that is a space that invites young people to re-read their own biographies in more agentic terms. In Indonesia, community learning centers (PKBM) are increasingly recognized as environments where those excluded from formal schooling can re-enter learning on flexible terms and reconstruct their learner identity. (Arbarini et al., 2025). The narratives in this study show that once students are allowed to speak about failure, loss, and stigma, these experiences become raw material for new self-definitions, such as “family supporter”, “worker-learner”, “comeback student”, rather than final labels. Self-discovery here is not the discovery of a hidden “true self”, but a process of re-narrating who they are in light of disruptive events.

Reframing education and reconstructing learner identity

The second theme, reframing education from a “lost route” to a meaningful alternative, illustrates how transformative learning is not about erasing the past, but about reinterpreting it within a new frame. Recent studies argue that transformation often involves continuity and layering; people carry forward religious, familial, or cultural identities while adding new learning-related meanings. (Kuismala et al., 2026; Robinson & Sharma, 2025). Ihsan’s narrative shows a layered self-discovery: he does not abandon his religious identity when entering PKBM; instead, he discovers that learning many things and contributing to others can be integrated into his religious values. His self-image shifts from “religious youth who can get enough general knowledge” to “religious learner who can compete and serve”.

Identity Status Theory offers a language for this process. Contemporary longitudinal work shows that many young people move through a moratorium phase in which they actively explore different educational routes, vocational options, and life roles before making a firmer commitment. (Meeus, 2018). Keshu’s combination of homeschooling, PKBM, and serious writing fits this pattern of productive moratorium. She experiments with multiple learning spaces while testing how each supports her dream of becoming a writer. Recent identity reviews emphasize that such flexible pathways can foster more coherent, personally owned commitments by allowing youth to see how institutional demands (e.g., certificates, exams) can be aligned with their personal passions. (Verschueren et al., 2017).

At the same time, research on non-formal and community-based education in Southeast Asia highlights that centers like PKBM play a crucial role in re-legitimizing alternative routes. (Yorozu, 2017). They offer equivalency programs, life skills courses, and flexible schedules that enable students who are workers, caregivers, or freelancers to continue learning without abandoning their responsibilities. When students in this study begin to see PKBM certificates as a bright step toward their future, they are engaging in what transformative learning scholars call perspective transformation: a shift in how they interpret the value and status of non-formal education in their life project.

From the angle of self-discovery, this reframing is central. Recent identity-in-context work argues that young people discover “who they can become” when they encounter institutions that recognize their multiple roles and give them room to experiment with alternative trajectories (Skirbekk et al., 2025; Van Der Gaag et al., 2025). The PKBM context allows Ihsan and Kesha to test new learner identities as students who can manage time and as writers who also pursue a certificate without erasing prior commitments to family, faith, or creative work. Their stories show that self-discovery is not a one-time insight but an ongoing negotiation among past identities, present options, and imagined futures.

Growing personal agency and moving toward identity achievement

A third theme is the growth of personal agency, students’ increasing ability to act, decide, and organize their own learning, which recent transformative learning literature sees as a core outcome of deep learning (Kuismala et al., 2026; Robinson & Sharma, 2025). New models of transformative agency underline that emotions, confidence, and access to supportive relationships are as important as cognition for enabling change. (McClain, 2024). Agnes’s movement from silence to “daring to give opinions” and “giving input” illustrates how self-discovery involves finding one’s voice and testing it in a real learning community. Apsah’s statement, “I can do it,” marks a critical inner shift; she begins to see herself not as someone always “left behind” but as a capable learner.

Identity research over the past decade confirms that such experiences of competence and recognition often accompany movement toward more mature identity statuses. When students begin designing their own schedules, balancing work and study, and seeking help strategically, they demonstrate identity achievement, make commitments after active exploration, and feel that these choices are personal. (Maehler & Hernández-Torrano, 2025; Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018; Verschuere et al., 2017). Raja’s careful time-planning and Amrullah’s negotiation of work and study schedules exemplify this pattern. They no longer react to circumstances, but they author their own learning paths within those constraints.

Recent work on community learning centers and non-traditional adult learners in Indonesia supports this interpretation. Studies show that PKBM that provide flexible programs, mentoring, and opportunities to apply learning in everyday life can significantly enhance adult learners’ sense of agency, self-efficacy, and readiness for work. (Arbarini et al., 2025; Kuismala et al., 2026). These environments create what new agency models call “transformative resources” such as personal (confidence, skills), relational (supportive tutors and peers), and participatory (opportunities to speak, decide, and contribute) resources that together make self-directed action possible. (Kuismala et al., 2026; NurSeki, M., 2025). The PKBM in this study offers such resources through flexible scheduling, dialogic classes, and recognition of students’ multiple roles.

From a self-discovery perspective, it is not only about doing more but about discovering oneself as a person who can choose, persist, and influence conditions. Recent psychological and neuroscientific work on adolescence and emerging adulthood notes that identity development is tightly linked to motivated decision-making, in which young people increasingly evaluate which actions align with their values and long-term goals and adjust their behavior accordingly. In PKBM, the small schedule in a notebook, the decision to keep attending when tired, or the courage to ask questions are micro-acts through which students come to know themselves as

capable agents. These everyday practices gradually consolidate into a more stable self-definition, becoming someone who can study, work, and plan their future. (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018).

From self-recovery to social responsibility and relational identity

Finally, the shift from self-recovery to social responsibility and small-scale innovation shows how self-discovery extends beyond the individual, encompassing new ways of relating to others. Recent readings of transformative learning argue that genuine transformation often results in emancipatory praxis, in which learners not only reinterpret their experiences but also take action to change conditions in their families, communities, or workplaces. (Kuismala et al., 2026; Robinson & Sharma, 2025). When Raja organizes friends to study without internet, becomes more active in discussions, and develops a clear vision for his future, he is practicing exactly this kind of small-scale social innovation. His new identity as a learner includes helping others learn.

Contemporary identity scholarship also highlights that identity development is inherently relational and intersubjective. Young people “test” new identities in front of significant others such as family, peers, teachers, and adjust their self-views based on recognition or resistance (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018; Van Der Gaag et al., 2025). Resa’s motivation to study for her mother’s sake and to improve the family’s finances illustrates how self-discovery is intertwined with becoming a responsible child and potential provider. Kesha’s blogging, participation in writing communities, and careful time management show her trying out the identity of “writer” in public spaces while still fulfilling institutional demands like exams.

From the standpoint of recent identity theories, the PKBM narratives illustrate a shift from seeing identity as purely internal to understanding it as co-constructed with circumstances (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018; Van Der Gaag et al., 2025). Self-discovery here means discovering “who I can be for others” in concrete social settings, such as a reliable child, a competent worker, a supportive friend, or a writer whose stories matter. When students speak in class, help friends, share their writing online, or plan to lift their families out of economic hardship, they are not only applying what they have learned; they are consolidating new identity positions in interaction with their social world. In this way, PKBM becomes a site where disruption evolves into self-recovery, and self-recovery grows into socially oriented, circumstances-responsive self-discovery.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that self-discovery among PKBM participants emerges when disruptive experiences in formal schooling are brought into a safe alternative space and reinterpreted as starting points rather than endpoints. Through narrative reflection, participants gradually move from seeing themselves as “drop-outs” or “left behind” to recognizing themselves as capable, legitimate learners with meaningful educational futures. This inner shift appears in new ways of viewing education, greater confidence to speak and participate, and growing autonomy in managing learning alongside work and family demands, which then expands into a stronger sense of responsibility toward family, peers, and the wider community. The study also shows that transformative learning theory (Mezirow) and identity status theory (Marcia) can be integrated to explain self-discovery processes in an Indonesian community learning center, a context that is still seldom represented in the international literature.

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