

## Participatory Evaluation as a Pedagogical Tool for Enhancing Student Agency in Community-Based Islamic Schools

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**Abstract:** This study is grounded in the need to shift educational evaluation from a teacher-centered approach toward a more student-centered and reflective process. In many non-formal Islamic educational settings, evaluation practices remain informal, unstructured, and focused on outcomes rather than learning processes, which limits students' ability to develop independence and metacognitive awareness. Therefore, this study aims to examine the implementation of participatory evaluation as a pedagogical tool to enhance student agency in a community-based Islamic learning environment. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, with thematic analysis to interpret the data. The findings reveal that participatory evaluation, implemented through reflective journals and dialogic feedback, significantly enhances students' metacognitive awareness, learning autonomy, and sense of responsibility. Evaluation is reconceptualized as assessment as learning, where students actively reflect on and regulate their own learning processes. The study contributes theoretically by integrating participatory evaluation with Islamic values, particularly *muhasabah* (self-reflection), and practically by offering an alternative evaluation model for strengthening independent and reflective learning in community-based Islamic education.

**Keywords:** Participatory evaluation; assessment as learning; independent learning; non-formal education.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Education is essentially understood not only as the process of conveying knowledge from educators to students. Furthermore, education plays a strategic role as a systematic effort to foster independent thinking, hone self-reflection skills, and foster students' sense of responsibility for their own learning processes and outcomes (Panadero et al., 2019). This approach underscores the need for a paradigm shift in the learning process, from a teacher-centered approach to one that places students at the center of learning (student-centered). With this shift, students are no longer merely passive recipients of material, but actively participate in formulating questions, conducting analysis, and disseminating their own learning experiences. As a result, the learning process becomes more relevant, meaningful, and sustainable within their real-life context.

In the context of modern education, evaluation serves not only as a measure of academic achievement but also as a crucial tool to support reflective learning and strengthen self-regulated learning (Yan & Brown, 2021). This approach is increasingly relevant when applied in alternative educational institutions such as Learning Communities, study groups, and even communities that prioritize egalitarian relationships and active student participation at every stage of learning.

Initial observations and discussions with several facilitators and students in the Qaryah Thayyibah Learning Community indicate that the learning evaluation process lacks a structured, participatory framework. Evaluations are largely spontaneous, conducted through reflective discussions, and there are no mutually agreed-upon learning success indicator guidelines or documentation of student learning progress. This situation causes the reflection and feedback process to rely heavily on individual initiative, resulting in uneven quality and depth of evaluation among students. Such evaluation practices have the potential to create a number of new problems, including inconsistencies in the quality of student reflection, limited constructive feedback, and students' suboptimal ability to manage their own learning strategies. This finding, in line with research findings (Joughin et al., 2019), results in high-quality reflection and effective use of feedback, which can ultimately hinder students' ability to manage and adjust learning strategies independently. Therefore, this emphasizes the importance of a pedagogical approach that explicitly accommodates an understanding of heuristics and biases in the learning process to improve the quality of self-assessment practices.

More broadly, evaluation practices in many educational institutions, including non-formal settings, are still dominated by administrative and centralized approaches that tend to focus on outcomes, rather than processes (Boud & Molloy, 2021). This evaluation model often fails to fully capture the dynamics of student learning, especially in community contexts that value individual independence and metacognitive awareness. Yet, recent research shows that participatory evaluation, which positions students as active participants, can enhance intrinsic motivation, metacognitive awareness, and self-reflection skills, which are essential for lifelong learning (Panadero et al., 2021).

Furthermore, participatory evaluation is not only a tool for measuring learning outcomes but also a means of reflection that positions students as the primary actors in assessing their own learning processes and strategies (Xu & Brown, 2017). This approach aligns with the concept of assessment as learning, which emphasizes the importance of students' active role in understanding their weaknesses, strengths, and learning needs (Dann, 2014). In the context of Qaryah Thayyibah Salatiga, where teachers play a more dialogical role as facilitators, participatory evaluation can foster a culture of reflection and collaboration that strengthens students' learning independence. Thus, the participatory evaluation model not only improves academic outcomes but also builds students' character as independent, reflective, and critical learners (Yan & Brown, 2021).

Research on participatory evaluation has been growing, particularly in the context of formal education and school-based evaluation. Recent studies have shown that active student involvement in the evaluation process can increase metacognitive awareness and a sense of ownership of learning (Yan et al., 2020; Panadero et al., 2017). However, most of this research still focuses on formal education with its standard curriculum structure and evaluation system, resulting in relatively limited studies on the application of participatory evaluation in the context of community-based non-formal education. This research gap becomes significant when faced with the unique characteristics of community-based non-formal educational institutions, such as the Qaryah Thayyibah Learning Community, which emphasizes a participatory culture, learning autonomy, and the role of educators as facilitators (Sambell & Brown, 2021). Conventional, outcome-oriented evaluation models tend to be less aligned with these characteristics, necessitating a more contextual and adaptive evaluation approach to the dynamics of community learning.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to develop and examine a contextual participatory evaluation model in a community-based non-formal educational environment, designed not only to strengthen students' learning independence, but also to improve the facilitator's pedagogical competence in designing, implementing, and utilizing evaluation as an integral part of the reflective learning process. Thus, the developed evaluation model is expected to function not only as an assessment instrument, but also as a means of empowering students and strengthening the facilitator's pedagogical capacity in building a sustainable reflective culture in the Qaryah Thayyibah Learning Community.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive design, aiming to deeply understand the learning evaluation practices implemented in the Qaryah Thayyibah Learning Community, its impact on community members, and its implications for student learning independence. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the process, meaning, and dynamics of participatory evaluation in the context of non-formal, contextual, community-based learning.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, in an effort to gain a comprehensive

understanding and enable triangulation of sources and methods. In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to explore the experiences, perceptions, and roles of informants in learning evaluation practices. Participatory observation was conducted with the researcher's direct involvement in learning community activities to understand the evaluation practices that occur naturally. Document analysis included a review of internal community documents, such as learning reflection notes, student portfolios, archives of learning discussions, and learning activity planning documents relevant to evaluation practices.

The research participants consisted of three people, consisting of two facilitators/main managers (M.H. and Z) who played a direct role in the design and implementation of learning in the Qaryah Thayyibah Learning Community, and one student who was actively involved in the learning and evaluation process. The selection of participants was done purposively, based on the criteria of involvement, strategic role, and the intensity of their experience in the practice of learning evaluation in the community. Although the number of participants was limited, this study did not aim to generalize the findings, but rather to obtain in-depth information (information-rich cases). Data sufficiency was ensured through a combination of in-depth interviews, repeated observations, and documentary data support, thus enabling an adequate understanding of the participatory evaluation practices studied. The research location, the Qaryah Thayyibah Learning Community, was chosen deliberately because it has unique characteristics as a community-based non-formal educational institution that prioritizes learning autonomy, egalitarian relationships between facilitators and students, and the practice of dialogic reflection in learning. These characteristics make Qaryah Thayyibah a relevant and strategic context for studying the implementation of the participatory evaluation model based on learning independence.

Data obtained from interviews, observations, and documents were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, referring to the Braun and Clarke framework. The analysis process included data familiarization, initial coding, pattern and theme searches, in-depth review and consolidation of themes, and in-depth interpretation of the meaning of the findings. The analysis was conducted iteratively and reflectively, comparing findings from various data sources to enhance the credibility of the research results. Through this methodological approach, the research is expected to produce a rich and contextual understanding of the implementation of participatory evaluation based on independent learning in the Qaryah Thayyibah Learning Community, while also providing a conceptual contribution to the development of a relevant evaluation model for community-based non-formal education.

## **RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Education at the Qaryah Thayyibah Learning Community (QTLC) is provided through the Package B and C Equivalency Education Program, which is equivalent to junior high and senior high school levels. Learning practices at QTLC are based on the principles of liberating education, including a spirit of

liberation, critical-dialogical thinking, joy in learning, participatory facilitation, appreciation for the learning process and outcomes, and a contextual learning approach.

Observations indicate that learning takes place in small classes of approximately 10–12 students. Each class has the autonomy to determine its identity, internal rules, learning schedule, and forms of constructive sanctions through mutual agreement. This autonomy creates a democratic learning environment and fosters a sense of collective responsibility for the learning process.

As a learning group, the Qaryah Thayyibah Learning Community (QTLC) bases its educational practices on four main principles that serve as the foundation of its movement. First is the principle of liberation and improvement, which demands a critical, dynamic, and creative attitude in the learning process, so as not to be trapped in rigid learning practices. Second, orientation towards groups who have the right to receive education, especially the poor and underprivileged, as a manifestation of commitment to equal access to education. Third, joy is used as a methodological approach, with teachers acting as facilitators and students being encouraged to be active and participatory in learning. Fourth, the principle of collaborative togetherness that involves all elements, such as mentors (study buddies), school administrators, students, parents, and the surrounding community, so as to create an education system that is contextual, down-to-earth, and sensitive to environmental and social issues.

To support these principles, synergy is required from all involved elements, including teachers, students, supporting infrastructure, and educational institutions as institutions. Mentors are expected to master critical educational methodologies that position students as active subjects, while mentors act as learning partners. Teaching materials are structured to be relevant and tailored to students' needs, utilizing everyday experiences and the surrounding environment as learning resources. The classroom atmosphere is strived to be as democratic as possible, where sanctions and rewards are the result of mutual agreement, and student achievement assessments emphasize creative work, innovation, and attitudes, rather than mere numbers or nominal values.

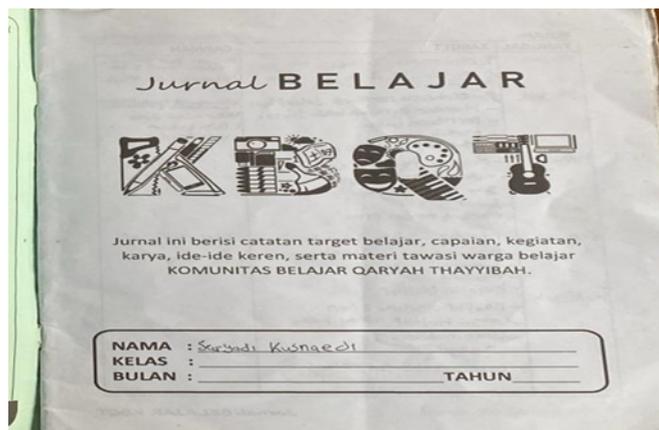
In addition, QTLC utilizes information technology, particularly internet access, as a broad source of knowledge for students. The surrounding environment, such as agricultural land, fish ponds, stalls, plantations, and even home industries, is also utilized as a vibrant learning space. Village community leaders also act as liaisons between the school and various stakeholders, transforming the school into a social laboratory responsive to local conditions. With this approach, the learning process at QTLC becomes more contextual, dynamic, and progressive, thus developing not only cognitive abilities but also critical thinking and social awareness in students.

### **Growing Metacognitive Awareness through Weekly Reflection Journals**

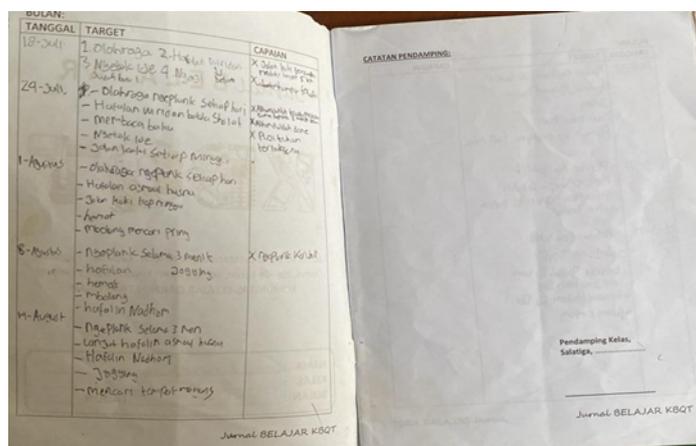
Weekly reflection journals serve as the primary learning evaluation tool in QTLC. Students independently set learning targets, record learning activities,

reflect on their achievements, and evaluate any obstacles they encounter. This practice encourages students to monitor and evaluate their own thinking and learning processes. This finding is supported by interview data with students, as stated below:

*"When reporting my achievements, my mentors and friends listen to what achievements I have achieved, even though sometimes I only work on 1 of the 5 targets, it doesn't matter, the important thing is not to stop learning and to want to catch up on what I have left behind."*



**Figure 1. QTLC Learning Journal**



**Figure 2. Student Learning Targets and Achievements**

This quote demonstrates that evaluation is understood as a process of internal reflection, not external control. Photos of student reflection journals demonstrate how targets, achievements, and reflections were written honestly and personally, thus reinforcing the findings about the development of metacognitive awareness.

The role of the mentor in QTLC differs significantly from that of the teacher in formal schools. While teachers in public schools serve as the primary source of knowledge, directly transferring material, mentors in QTLC serve more as learning partners or companions, assisting students in the process of exploring knowledge and developing skills according to their individual interests and

talents. This approach positions students as active subjects responsible for their own learning, creating a more democratic, contextual, and empowering learning environment.

The mentor will accompany the student's learning process, help guide their passion, prepare their creative work, and periodically evaluate (or rather, appreciate) their achievements. Each student is welcome to choose which subject they wish to study and master. Whether it's general knowledge, science, social studies, religion, art, skills, dexterity, or anything else. Based on their choice, each student is responsible for setting achievement targets, finding learning resources, studying them, then presenting them to their classmates, and then evaluating the results. In essence, students only study materials that interest them, and strive to achieve total mastery of that field and work according to their expertise.

The QTLC learning targets and achievements journal is a form of report that must be filled out and evaluated by students themselves, containing notes on the targets and learning achievements of students, activities that must be carried out, cool ideas that must be poured out and works that must be implemented recorded in a report book whose achievements and learning time are made by students themselves. Every week there will be a joint evaluation of several achievement targets that have been used as indicators of success, how many percent have been in accordance with the previously determined work time and indicators and how many percent still need further improvement and additional time. Other friends will be listeners and discussants as well as provide input, criticism regarding the work or achievements that have been done. The same thing is also done by the learning companion, who will provide criticism regarding the achievements that have been done and provide input, direction regarding future task improvements, especially in some cases of students who are completely unable to complete the previously promised target achievements. The task of the accompanying teacher here is not only as a supervisor, but more to motivate students to be able to increase their interest in learning and be able to complete the learning challenges that have been created themselves.

### **Participatory Evaluation and Self-Regulated Learning**

The concept of liberating education implemented by QTLC is firmly rooted in critical education theory and practice, positioning students as active subjects in the learning process and as agents of empowerment. This approach allows students to set learning goals, monitor progress, and critically reflect on their own learning outcomes and processes (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Thus, participatory evaluation supports the creation of more independent and meaningful learning. Miers et al., (2005) revealed that the learning system initiated by Mr. Baharudin was successful because it viewed students as subjects of learning, empowered them, and focused on learning transfer and group facilitation. Furthermore, the self-reflection that QTLC aims to instill in community-based education conceptually positions self-reflection (muhasabah) as a crucial part of the learning process, encouraging students to develop personal responsibility, moral awareness, and reflective thinking skills on an ongoing basis (Rafi et al., 2025). The primary goals are not only cognitive

competence, but also spiritual and affective competence. The birth of honest individuals, able to assess themselves, improve their quality and increase their values of goodness.

Hatsanmuang & Sanrattana, (2023) revealed that by viewing students as subjects in learning will make students more confident and able to explore their existing abilities, weaknesses, and learning strategies that need to be improved. Viewing students as a whole that certainly has power or potential that will certainly be different from other individuals. The process of self-reflection carried out independently by students is an independent process to know and realize the limitations and successes they have achieved by the process of categorizing a target that failed and succeeded they know the reasons. According to (Rohmer et al., 2022) self-assessment of competence affects academic achievement in students, They are compared to themselves, influencing performance based on the framing of future tasks.

The self-evaluation process plays a key role in supporting independent learning and strengthening students' metacognitive awareness. According to Kramarski & Michalsky (2019), self-evaluation helps students develop a critical understanding of the learning process, evaluate weaknesses, and formulate strategic steps for future improvement. This aligns with the self-regulated learning approach, which emphasizes the importance of self-control and evaluation in increasing learning effectiveness (Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009). While the learning targets written by each student will certainly differ, so will their achievements. However, in QTLC institutions, true achievement is a secondary concern, with greater emphasis on their independence in the process and honesty in evaluating target achievement. This approach aligns with the research findings of Cho & Cho (2019) which show that journal-based reflective practice increases metacognitive awareness and student learning motivation. Furthermore, self-reflection in QTLC focuses not only on outcomes but also on the learning process itself. This reflects a formative assessment approach that is constructive and adaptive, supporting students to learn from their experiences (Andrade & Brookhart, 2020). In practice, accompanying teachers, also known as learning buddies, act as reflection partners, helping students interpret learning experiences and providing Constructive feedback. Furthermore, evaluations of community-based learning programs show that the active involvement of educators and students in the evaluation process contributes significantly to improving pedagogical competence and learning effectiveness (Apriani et al., 2025).

Based on the results of an interview with one of the students, it was stated that *"during the assessment, Mr. A and B Z were not angry if the target was not achieved, but we ourselves were embarrassed about not being able to complete the problem because we set the learning target ourselves, which made us embarrassed."* Self-reflection has also been proven to be able to increase student independence and learning creativity. Recent findings from Teng & Zhang (2020) confirm that reflection encourages students to be more confident in exploring ideas, linking theory to practice, and developing personal learning strategies. Thus, self-reflection is not only an evaluation tool, but also an important instrument in contextual and

empowering participatory learning. With the reflective and participatory approach implemented in QTLC, the evaluation process is no longer just a measurement of achievement, but becomes a continuous learning process that fosters critical awareness, independent thinking, and student responsibility for their own learning process.

This opinion is in stark contrast to the opinion expressed by (Biesta, 2020) who stated that modern educational practices tend to be trapped in learnification and accountability based on academic achievement, thus neglecting the development of student independence, agency, and responsibility in the learning process. Based on the first principle of learning in QTLC, namely liberation and improvement, which means that students are freed from their incompetence, ignorance, so that they will later become independent and competitive individuals, not in numbers on report cards but in their work and expertise. Students are required to be able and have skills according to what is their interest, there is no coercion at all. These skills are inseparable from the liberating learning intended to further foster the interest of students because it is in accordance with their will and interests. However, the accompanying teacher also plays an important role here, namely in terms of validating the learning targets and skills that students want to have, whether they will become skills that can later become their future employment or just something that is an interest due to following trends, and in no way can become a future employment. (Ben Shahr, 2022) also shares the same opinion that abilities and skills must be in line with student interests, because interests correlate with skills that lead to higher achievement. (Jordan & Badley, 2022; Reid, 2023) expressed the same thing that autonomy should be given to students to determine what achievements to achieve based on the goals that have been set at the beginning of learning. In addition, the improvement process is also constantly carried out to develop the abilities of students as conveyed by informants during interviews "*we must provide what they want according to their times, because the concept of learning for children in 2010 is not necessarily the same as the concept of learning for children in 2023*". Improvements are made to be able to do various things, both from improving the skills and knowledge of learning companions, as well as improvements to the learning process, all adjusted to trends and job market share.

## CONCLUSION

A participatory evaluation model implemented through the use of self-reflective journals and dialogic feedback mechanisms has proven effective in fostering students' ongoing learning independence. The findings indicate that students' active involvement in setting targets, reflecting on achievements, and receiving and responding to feedback from peers and learning facilitators makes evaluation no longer merely a tool for measuring outcomes, but rather a learning process itself (assessment as learning). Theoretically, this study enriches the body of Islamic education by offering an evaluation framework aligned with the values of self-reflection (*muhasabah*), personal responsibility, and meaningful learning, while also emphasizing a paradigm shift from authoritative assessment to dialogic and participatory evaluation. Practically, these findings provide

recommendations that educational institutions, particularly Islamic education institutions, can adopt a participatory evaluation model as an alternative evaluation strategy to enhance students' autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and self-regulation abilities in the learning process.

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