

## RESEARCH ARTICLE | THEMATIC EDITION

# Shaping Selves: Negotiating Freedom and Discipline in the Alternative Education of Sanggar Kanigara

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## ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyse how power and knowledge operate in the context of alternative education in Indonesia, and how they affect subject formation and practices within it. It also aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how freedom of learning is implemented in the context of alternative education. During a six-month ethnographic case study at an alternative school called Kanigara (a pseudonym) located in Central Java, I engaged as a volunteer facilitator. My approach combined participant observation with in-depth interviews with facilitators and students, along with an analysis of institutional documentation. The “freedom to learn” discourse cultivates a keen sense of individual agency among students. The practical application of an ambiguous disciplinary framework that replaces the traditional rules with “agreement”, however, faces challenges in consistently cultivating communal responsibility. This flexibility results in significant behavioural inconsistencies and a complex process of identity negotiation between individual autonomy and community accountability. Furthermore, student autonomy in individualised research projects is frequently constrained by operational dependence on external factors, primarily parental schedules and resources, revealing the program’s nature as a constrained ‘heterotopia’ subject to external market logic. These dynamics reflect a critical internal tension: with a flexible structure, such models risk becoming what facilitators themselves described as a “fairy tale school” that inadequately prepares students for the competitive and rule-bound complexities of society, underscoring the need for a balance between autonomy and formal framework.

**Keywords:** *alternative education; freedom to learn; discipline; responsibility*

## INTRODUCTION

Education is a social process through which ideas and practices are taught and learnt in a broad spectrum of contexts, both in school and out-of-school settings, through ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ instruction (Levinson & Pollock, 2011). As scholars have noted, children’s education is no longer exclusively shaped by state policy; it has now become an arena where pedagogical models intersect with the ideological orientations of a particular society (Kraftl, 2014). Conceptions of



where children belong, ought to be, or are considered ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas, 1966) are deeply embedded in the cultural context, societal values, and community responses to social changes (Olwig & Gulløv, 2003). In addition to formal education, the Indonesian government also recognises non-formal forms of education, also known as alternative education such as Community Learning Activity Centre (Pusat Kegiatan Belajar Masyarakat or PKBM), as part of its national education framework, as mandated by The National Education System Act No. 20 of 2003 (*Undang-Undang Sistem Pendidikan Nasional Nomor 20 tahun 2003*). PKBM is a platform that provides access to information and lifelong learning activities for all community members, with the goal of increasing their empowerment (Maryati, 2018). According to Basic Education Data (Data Pokok Pendidikan or DAPODIK), there are 10,539 registered PKBMs across the country. This number does not include alternative schools in Indonesia still undergoing data verification or those that choose to operate independently of state classification to be categorised by the state. However, despite being a form of alternative education, PKBMs are still responsible for meeting the Indonesian government’s standards. This paper draws on research conducted in an alternative school in the Central Java region – Sanggar Kanigara – which is formally registered as a PKBM within the Indonesian education system.

The founder’s stance against government-imposed standardisation in formal education is one of the reasons I chose to conduct research at this alternative school. Despite this, Sanggar Kanigara cannot avoid certain aspects being influenced or “compromised” with, the education office. Nevertheless, the school remains committed to its separation from mainstream education and upholding its own learning ideology. Within alternative education, Kanigara is renowned for a learning approach that utilises the surrounding environment as a pedagogical framework and a learning concept that empowers each student to explore their interests. Kanigara’s educational principle is clear: school is a place where students can freely explore their interests.

Alternative education, in its most basic form, constitutes a form of schooling that centres on the learner, with the goal of empowering them in a holistic manner (Carnie, 2017). Unlike conventional education, which frequently emphasises standardised assessments and rote memorisation, alternative methodologies aim to foster creativity and critical thinking. Holistic education itself is a philosophy that posits that individuals discover their identity, meaning, and purpose in life through relationships with society, nature, and spiritual values (Widyastono, 2012). Initially, alternative education was established to address the issues of dropouts and students considered ‘problematic’ (Knutson, 1995). Its scope is wide, ranging from empowering street children (Putri et al., 2023) to educating students facing social, geographical, physical, and mental challenges (Robianti et al., 2024). Concerns over the implementation of formal schools, deemed incapable of encompassing the entire educational ideology of society, have led to the increasing development of alternative education.

Nevertheless, the experimental nature of alternative education presents significant challenges for many (Rahardjo, 2019). These practical difficulties and the resistance to fully democratic or autonomous educational models are not unique to Indonesia. Retalis’ study in Greece, for instance, explores the implementation of a decision-making system that involves students in developing policies through democratic processes (Retalis, 2025). Despite efforts to promote increased democratization, traditional methods of control and discipline persisted within these institutions. Retalis’s research highlights a paradox: the continued presence of control

within systems that aim to foster freedom. This paradox anticipates similar tensions in Kanigara's aspirations to establish a free educational environment, where the potential for excessive liberty may undermine core principles. The ongoing struggle between freedom and discipline remains a systemic challenge, one that extends beyond Kanigara and reflects a broader philosophical and practical issue within education. Recognising this is essential for framing the research as addressing a universal challenge in educational philosophy and practice.

While alternative education curricula have garnered praise and spurred notable innovations, concerns have also been raised. Rachael Floom and Melanie Janzen, through their study in Canada, examined the Manitoba Kindergarten curriculum. Their research expresses concerns that such curricula may inadvertently foster individualistic student who lack social sensitivity (Floom & Janzen, 2020). This critique is significant because it directly addresses the potential negative consequences of prioritising individual freedom in education without adequate emphasis on social responsibility. It provides a theoretical foundation for examining the risks associated with excessive liberty, which can sometimes conflict with societal expectations, and supports my critique of the 'fairy-tale world' depicted in Sanggar Kanigara.

Kanigara's educational principles are very clear, school is a place where students can freely explore their interests. For Kanigara, schools should simply facilitate the learning process enabling students to actively develop their potential rather than implementing rigid standards like a company. In its learning process, instead of the conventional curricula, Kanigara carries a principle or curriculum called the "learning cycle" where each student chooses respective interests which will then become research topics for a full semester. Kanigara's educational ideology is to believe that each student is free to choose their interests, and that exams and assessments in numbers are considered obstacles to students' learning and development. Kanigara also rejects the competition systems, which is considered only to shape students' personalities focused on excelling over others. Kanigara also asserts that it does not implement the reward and punishment systems commonly observed in formal settings schools.

The idealism fostered by Kanigara is undoubtedly rooted in the aspiration to cultivate educational environments and students capable of freely selecting their life goals, without being compelled to adhere to government standardisation that is perceived as rigid and unrepresentative of genuine education. How then is the idealism endorsed by Kanigara implemented within its students' learning processes? The principles concerning freedom and discipline, as established by Kanigara, become intriguing subjects for examination. The notion that student in the educational context need not compete with one another, coupled with the idea that schools do not require stringent rules akin to formal education and that students possess the autonomy to choose every aspect of their learning, presents a fascinating contrast to the realities of contemporary community life, which is characterized by competition and a multitude of rules that must be obeyed. The learning philosophy at Kanigara is genuinely aimed at fostering an ecosystem of free learning and behaviour, which undeniably holds the potential to induce further issues, both internal and external.

This research specifically examines how the absence of competition and reward systems at Kanigara shapes student motivation to learn, and how students develop skills and responsibility in a highly flexible learning environment. It also explores the potential challenges arising from the implementation of overly broad learning freedom concepts. This paper analyses how Kanigara,

an alternative school, implements a unique educational philosophy that emphasises student autonomy, experiential learning, and a holistic pedagogical approach. By avoiding traditional structures and prioritising student freedom, Kanigara aims to foster creativity, critical thinking, and social responsibility. However, at the same time, this approach raises questions about the balance between freedom and structure, and about how well such a model prepares students to face real-world complexities. This research seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how freedom of learning is implemented within alternative education and how alternative education reproduce their own educational ideologies based on their core principles.

This study aims to develop a more critical and in-depth understanding of how student autonomy is formed and constrained by power, knowledge, and discourse in the context of alternative education at Sanggar Kanigara. This paper contributes to a broader debate on alternative education, particularly those concerning educational reform, governance, and the role of diverse educational models in meeting the diverse needs of learners.

## **METHODS**

An ethnographic case study approach is used in this research to examine how learning practices and educational ideology are enacted in the daily life of Sanggar Kanigara. This research was conducted at an alternative school in Indonesia, referred to here by the pseudonym, Sanggar Kanigara. The site was selected because it represents a form of alternative education that intentionally departs from rigid formal education curricula and state-defined standards.

Fieldwork was carried out over 6 months (one learning semester). During this period, I served as a volunteer facilitator, spending at least four days a week observing and engaging in classroom activities. At the Junior High School level, classes typically comprised nine to twelve students. This research was conducted in an 8th grade junior high school class where students were in the 13–15-year age range. The class in which I was embedded was attended by 15 students. Each class was commonly facilitated by three individuals (called “facilitator” instead of “teacher”). Facilitators at Kanigara are categorised as either volunteers or ‘permanent’ staff. Based on my observations, their continued involvement is confirmed at the end of each term through a digital renewal process, typically via a Google Form. In terms of compensation, while volunteers receive travel reimbursements and permanent staff receive a monthly salary, the remuneration for all facilitators is ultimately contingent upon their attendance records. Through this role, I was able to have a sustained access to students’ learning process, interactions, and everyday negotiations of autonomy within the school environment.

The research data primarily consisted of ethnographic notes collected during my participant observation as a facilitator. Furthermore, I conducted in-depth interviews with three facilitators, five students from the class I facilitated, and the founder of the learning centre. I also participated in seminars where the founder was an invited speaker. Documentation such as minutes of discussions and student final reports as well as various presentations and student research report documents also provided supporting data. The data obtained through fieldwork were then analysed using the data analysis methods introduced by Spradley, yielding a series of meaningful units of knowledge and cultural systems (Spradley, 1997). The data were selected based on relevant thematic concept sections related to the research topic, ranging from learning philosophy to the

education curriculum, and then classified according to the need to answer the research questions. The obtained data were then continuously classified, analysed, interpreted, and described. This data was subsequently presented through a thick description of ethnographic analysis techniques. This thick description interprets social expressions that are enigmatic on the surface, to understand how people conceptualise and comprehend their world Click or tap here to enter text. (Geertz, 1973).

Positionality is typically identified by situating the researcher's position in relation to three areas: the topic being investigated; the participants; and the research design, context, and process (Holmes, 2020). However, positionality is not only influenced by the position chosen by the researchers themselves but also by the way they are positioned by others (Arber, 2006). In this study, I participated as a volunteer facilitator with the aim of deeply examining the in-class learning process. However, this required me to assume a dual role as a facilitator, which inherently involved a close relationship with my research participants, and a researcher. I was an individual who had pursued education through formal Indonesian educational institutions throughout my life. In this regard, it could be said that I was positioned as an outsider, possessing somewhat differing views from the ideology of Sanggar Kanigara, which is fundamentally an alternative educational institution. This situation naturally introduces the potential for bias during the data analysis process. Moreover, my role as a facilitator somewhat restricted my movement within the field site. This was because my duties required me to facilitate one specific class from the beginning to the end of the learning process. I was only able to conduct broader observations when there were communal activities attended simultaneously by students from the entire school.

All research data included in this writing have been obtained with the consent from the participants involved. To protect the privacy of the participants and the school and to prevent potential harms, in accordance with research ethics (Asosiasi Antropologi Indonesia, 2021) I decided not to fully disclose the exact location of the research site. Each interview participant is referred to by their roles in the learning process at Kanigara rather than their real names. I have also obtained permission from the sanggar to conduct research for one semester and periodically explained the purpose of my presence at the research location, especially when the researcher intends to obtain information or research data from participants. Furthermore, every participant has the right to withdraw the information given.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### **A Learning Ecosystem: The Socio-cultural Context of Kanigara**

Kanigara is located in a village on the central part of Java, Indonesia. Although administratively designated as a village, Kanigara is located near the city centre and only takes about 30 minutes to reach. The area also has adequate educational access ranging from public formal schools to private schools. Access to this sanggar is marked by a simple circular sign and can be reached via a one-meter-wide path. This pathway is flanked by residents' grocery stores on the left and rice fields on the right. The learning process at Kanigara is closely linked to the village itself. Kanigara aims to revive nearly lost traditions and cultures, such as harvest festivals. Known as an artist village, the village also enriches the students' learning experience, especially those interested in the arts. Surrounded by rice fields, Kanigara's location brings its residents even closer to the natural environment community.

As a PKBM, Kanigara enrolls students across various educational level, from early childhood

including preschool (Taman Anak or TA), elementary (Sekolah Dasar or SD), junior high (Sekolah Menengah Pertama or SMP), and senior high school (Sekolah Menengah Atas or SMA). Kanigara maintains an open enrolment policy with no specific entry requirements, fostering an inclusive learning environment that welcomes students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and physical conditions. This inclusivity extends to students with special needs. Regarding the accommodation of students with special needs, facilitators noted that admission depends on the availability and willingness of a dedicated facilitator to support the students' specific activities. This inclusive approach to student admission serves as a practical manifestation of the institution's underlying pedagogical philosophy.

Pedagogy is a vital topic when discussing how education influences students' personality and the future envisioned by the educational institution. Stodulka's work on "Pedagogies of hope" demonstrates how practice-oriented sensorial pedagogy in permaculture youth camps cultivates learning grounded in embodied experience and attuned to local environments (Stodulka, 2024). His arguments highlight the importance of appropriate pedagogies that respond to students' lived realities, including their needs and the environmental conditions which they live.

This perspective resonates with Kanigara's educational philosophy, which similarly emphasises learning through direct engagement with the surrounding nature. Nevertheless, the intended emphasis is not on the "nature school" but on "nature children". What is meant by "nature children" in this case is that every student is born original and authentic. Thus, education must not damage the originality and authenticity of any student; conversely, schools should help every student to develop these two attributes. Kanigara strongly encourages students to adapt and learn about their immediate environment. Situated in an agricultural area, for instance, the school integrates ecological and agricultural knowledge into everyday learning activities. Students are expected to learn from their surrounding environment.

The educational ideology at Kanigara is influenced to some extent by three prominent figures in education. The founder of Kanigara, in his book, mentions that Kanigara learns from Rabindranath Tagore who founded a nature school with open spaces integrated with nature and the environment in India. This was then adapted by Ki Hadjar Dewantara at the Taman Siswa school movement, which he built in Yogyakarta. Ki Hadjar Dewantara used the word "*taman*" (garden) to describe the educational process. He also adopted the educational concepts developed by Maria Montessori from Italy. The basic principle of *taman siswa* education is *Patrap Triloka*. This concept was developed by Ki Hadjar Dewantara after he studied the progressive education introduced by Maria Montessori and Tagore. *Patrap Triloka* has elements (in Javanese): *Ing ngarsa sung tulada* (in front giving example), *ing madya mangun karsa* (in the middle building will/initiative), *tut wuri handayani* (from behind supporting). In a similar vein, according to Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania who advocated for an education system that rejected the colonial model imposed by the British, on his writing, argue that Tanzanian society must make their garden or cultivated fields their school so that student can learn from their real experiences, especially regarding the national collective agricultural system (Nyerere, 1968). Together, these diverse intellectual traditions inform Kanigara's educational foundation and shape its unique learning approach.

Unlike traditional formal schools in Indonesia, Kanigara does not implement a subject-based learning system. Instead, Kanigara adopts a "learning cycle" where each student conducts an individual research project for a full semester. Students are given the freedom to choose their

research topics based on their respective interests. Carefully considered and effective pedagogy is crucial to helping students learn more successfully (Novakarti, 2023). According to Foucault (1977), institutions are power “dispositifs,” namely systems that originate from power relations, which aim to preserve, renew, and reproduce dominant dynamics in power relations, discourse, and governance. Schools are one of the first and most important “dispositifs” that emerge through modernity to normalize future citizens. Foucault uses the term “dispositif” to describe complex systems consisting of power relations, discourses, and practices aimed at achieving specific goals. Institutions play a role in producing and disseminating dominant discourses, which in turn affects how individuals think and act. Foucault views schools as one of the most important powers “dispositifs” because they play a role in shaping future citizens. Through curriculum, discipline, and other practices, schools seek to normalise students; that is, to make them conform to prevailing norms in society.

At the beginning of each semester, students attend a pre-research workshop facilitated by a Kanigara “curriculum designer”. Through the workshop, students are introduced to research concepts, their benefits, and various stages involved, from planning to final presentation. After the pre-research workshop, students are given about one week to select their research topics and develop research proposals. During this phase, students also choose a mentor to guide them throughout the research. Mentors are usually facilitators. In the research process, each facilitator guides several students in an assigned class. Students are encouraged to discuss their chosen topics and research plans with their parents.

After completing their research proposals, students present their initial research plans in a workshop attended by students, facilitators, and parents. Each student is given five to ten minutes to present their research plans, followed by a question-and-answer session and a feedback session. Suggestions and feedback may be given by other students, facilitators, and parents present at the workshop. Post-workshop, students are expected to revise their research plans based on the feedback received. Facilitators play a supporting role throughout the research process, providing guidance and advice as needed.

At mid-semester, students present their research progress, highlighting achievements and challenges faced. Parents are invited to attend these presentations to obtain updated information about their children’s progress and provide feedback to other students. During the presentations, students are encouraged to evaluate their research and identify solutions to challenges they may encounter. After the presentations, students revise their research reports. At the end of the semester, students deliver their final presentations in an event called “Presentation Month.” Junior high school students present their research findings in groups, and those who have created products or utilised media during the research bring these items to the presentations. Following ‘presentation month’, the final activity is the distribution of report cards or learning outcome reports, for each student. Kanigara report cards differ from traditional school report cards. While traditional schools in Indonesia generally employ a numerical assessment system, Kanigara report cards use a descriptive narrative format.

At Kanigara, daily class schedules are determined by consensus among the students themselves. For example, in the class I observed, the Monday schedule began with morning prayer, followed by morning games involving all junior high school students. Students then returned to their classrooms for mentoring sessions to discuss the progress of their individual research

project progress. After the research mentoring sessions, the next activity was a break for 40-45 minutes. In the next session after the break, students usually engaged in games led by one of their classmates. On Tuesday, there were no morning games with other junior high school students, so class activities began with prayer. Tuesday usually involved literacy activities, followed by a break and games led by classmates in the second session. Wednesday's schedule was similar to Monday's, and Thursday followed the same pattern as Tuesday. Friday was dedicated to whole-class activities. On Fridays, students usually discuss plans for upcoming activities. Examples of Friday activities included cooking, museum visits, and meditation. In addition to weekly class activities, all junior high school students participated in monthly communal activities such as museums and temple visits, as well as morning runs.

Although daily activities are scheduled and agreed upon in advance, this does not guarantee that schedules will be followed consistently. In many cases, scheduled activities are postponed or cancelled due to other events. For example, if mentoring sessions are scheduled on Monday but coincide with festivals, university visits, or workshops taking place at Kanigara that day, the mentoring sessions are cancelled and replaced with other activities. Kanigara's schedule is intentionally designed to be fluid and adaptable, rather than rigid and long-term. This flexible approach allows for a more dynamic learning environment, capitalising on spontaneous opportunities that might otherwise be missed. While formal schools typically plan their syllabi for at least one semester, Kanigara's activity schedules are often designed for one month or even one week. Every week at Kanigara, there is a "*Selasaan*" meeting where junior high school facilitators gather to plan activities for the upcoming week or month.

Most student activities take place inside classrooms, except on Fridays, which are allocated for communal activities mostly carried out outside the sanggar. Individual research projects are generally carried out outside regular Kanigara hours, given the diversity of topics and the fact that many research activities cannot be conducted in the Kanigara environment. Only mentoring sessions and presentations are held at the Sanggar. Parents play a crucial role in supporting their student's research projects, as most of this work is done at home. Activities at Kanigara only last for approximately 4 hours, the rest of the time students spend outside the sanggar. Parental involvement significantly affects student research outcomes. Although the research timeline is flexible, students often struggle to allocate time for their research because of competing commitments, such as parental schedules, extracurricular activities like volleyball or language courses, and other obligations outside Kanigara.

Facilitators play an important role in the learning process at Kanigara. The institution defines facilitators as individuals who provide guidance, advice, and support to students' learning. Facilitators at Kanigara come from diverse backgrounds with approximately 50 facilitators currently participating in sanggar's learning dynamics. There are no specific requirements, such as academic qualifications or teaching experience, to become a facilitator at Kanigara. When I enquired with the administrative staff at Kanigara about the requirements to become a facilitator, their response was straightforward: anyone can become one as long as they are committed to learning and enjoying the learning environment at Kanigara. When I applied to become a facilitator there, I was only asked about my university and educational background. There were no specific document requirements or selection processes to evaluate my competence. I was approved as a volunteer facilitator at Kanigara on the same day.

Parental involvement is deeply integrated into the overall learning process at Kanigara. Beginning with the pre-research phase, parents are encouraged to discuss potential research topics with their children. During presentations, parents are invited to attend, provide feedback, and ask questions about the students' research designs. Throughout the research process, parents are expected to provide significant support, given the substantial amount of time students spend at home. Kanigara periodically holds parent meetings to discuss class agreements, research progress, and other relevant matters. Parents are also encouraged to participate in various school events, such as Independence Day celebrations, performances, and traditional ceremonies. In some cases, parents are even invited to act as guest speakers or facilitate learning activities within the classroom.

Parents are also responsible for covering the students' educational expenses. Kanigara imposes a monthly operational fee of Rp 300,000 for the junior high school level, which differs from public schools in the region that are provided free of charge. This fee excludes individual research costs, which are entirely borne by the students. Student research projects vary, ranging from photography (all 8th-grade students choosing this research area own digital cameras), coding (requiring laptops with specific specifications), YouTube channels (needing supporting props), to writing books. Some students from other junior high classes also pursue interests such as violin, piano, and even horseback riding, which certainly require substantial financial resources. The freedom granted to student to choose their learning interests is not simply obtained without cost. Parents must support these choices both materially and by dedicating significant time to accompany the students. This freedom, coupled with the parents' sufficient economic status, further enhances the students' ability to explore themselves freely. The social relationships built among parents also foster a community where such freedom is not viewed as an issue to be criticized, but rather as something that should inherently be provided to student.

The socio-economic backgrounds of the students' parents at Kanigara are notably diverse. As far as I am aware (particularly within the class I facilitate) the occupations range from creative professionals, such as artists and exhibition curators, to civil servants, sports instructors, and workshop facilitators. Furthermore, the community includes entrepreneurs in the hospitality and leisure sectors, such as a restaurant owner who operates a riverside dining and recreation concept. The values and personality ideals that Kanigara promotes are neither static nor passively accepted; instead, they are continually tested, reinterpreted, and occasionally compromised in daily interactions and in the face of pressures from the larger system. While the "freedom to learn" discourse successfully fosters students with a strong sense of agency, it faces challenges in consistently cultivating a sense of communal responsibility due to the weak disciplinary framework in practice. This results in an ongoing identity formation process that constantly negotiates between being an individual "free" from external constraints and being an individual "responsible" to their community.

### **Navigating the Tensions: National Standardisation Versus the Learning Cycle Curriculum in Sanggar Kanigara**

In contrast to the standardised nature of formal education, Sanggar Kanigara employs a variety of alternative pedagogical approaches that emphasise its commitment to student autonomy and freedom. One key aspect is environment-based learning, where the local surroundings serve as

a fundamental pedagogical framework. This approach represents a significant departure from the classroom-centric model of formal education, suggesting a different epistemology in which knowledge is constructed through direct engagement with the environment rather than primarily through abstract, curriculum-driven instruction. The flexible curriculum at Sanggar Kanigara further highlights its alternative nature, empowering each student to explore their interests. This student-centered approach prioritizes the learner's intrinsic motivation and self-direction, contrasting sharply with the often-prescribed content of national curricula.

The fact that Sanggar Kanigara is registered as a PKBM creates direct tension with its stance against standardisation. As a PKBM, Sanggar Kanigara is responsible for meeting various government standards, including providing educational equivalency programmes such as Paket A, B, and C, defining graduate competencies, and adhering to specific curriculum content guidelines. This requirement appears to conflict with the school's stated opposition to government-imposed standards, raising questions about how Sanggar Kanigara navigates these obligations while maintaining its distinct alternative educational philosophy

As part of the PKBM (Pusat Kegiatan Belajar Masyarakat), Kanigara is required to participate in ANBK (*Asesmen Nasional Berbasis Komputer*) or the National Computer-Based Assessment. According to the official website of the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud), the National Assessment is a program for evaluating the quality of every school, madrasah, and equivalency program at the elementary and secondary levels. The quality of educational units is assessed based on fundamental student learning outcomes (literacy, numeracy, and character), as well as the quality of the teaching and learning process, and the supportive learning climate within the educational unit. This information is obtained from three main instruments: the Minimum Competency Assessment (AKM), the Character Survey, and the Learning Environment Survey.

During my research, I had the opportunity to observe the implementation process of the ANBK from the dry run to the actual execution. Kanigara did not engage in extensive preparations; facilitators instructed students to submit recent photographs, informed each student of their exam dates, and repeatedly reminded them to arrive punctually in neat attire. The ANBK process unfolded within a relatively short time; some students even completed the assessment in half the allotted time. In addition to serving as material for evaluating the quality of education for students pursuing their studies at a PKBM, participating in this assessment is a graduation requirement. However, the ANBK test results are not included in the final report cards distributed to students at the end of the learning period. Neither students nor parents receive any further information about the students' assessment results. Once again, this illustrates Kanigara's rejection of the government-initiated standardisation system. Consistent with its initial principles, Kanigara remains indifferent to the figures produced at the conclusion of the ANBK examination session. Instead, the institution prefers to utilise the descriptive final reports written by each facilitator at the end of every semester as the primary means of gauging the extent of students' learning.

## The Dilemma of Learning Freedom

*"This is a fairy tale school, all the things seen here are only good and pleasant things. Very far different from the reality of life"*

(Personal communication with Facilitator A, October 7, 2024)

A conversation with a Kanigara facilitator revealed a critical perspective on the school's approach. The facilitator described the school as a "fairy tale school," and during the discussion, they said, "This is a fairy tale school, all the things seen here are only good and pleasant things. Very far different from the reality of life," emphasising their opinion that Kanigara focuses more on enjoyable activities and has not yet been able to prepare student to face the real world. This led the facilitator who is also a parent to one of the students to decide to move their child to a formal school.

The concept of freedom of learning advocated by Kanigara, although built on commendable ideals and aimed at facilitating individualised learning tailored to each students' needs and environmental context, must also be considered to bring about the possibility of disciplinary leniency. As aforementioned, this research was conducted in an 8<sup>th</sup>-grade junior high school class where students were in the 13 and 15 years. Human cognitive capacity typically reaches psychosocial maturity around the age of 18, providing individuals with a solid foundation to design their own lives (Sukamto et al., 2024).

A conversation that emerged from an 8<sup>th</sup>-grade student I mentored, who has been at Kanigara since early childhood, revealed that activities were perceived as more structured during early childhood education and elementary school because at that time they were still fully guided by parents and facilitators, whereas this was no longer found when they reached junior high school level. They mentioned: "When in kindergarten and elementary school, activities were still clear because they were truly guided by parents and facilitators, while now they are told to do it themselves, mostly confused and it becomes complicated". (Interview, 26 November 2024)

Furthermore, the limits of freedom given to students also need to be explored considering Kanigara students are still categorized as minors who usually must receive parental assistance. The ideological idea of "doing it themselves" became a functional burden. This suggests that for a complex semester-long research management the principle of freedom must be accompanied by pedagogical scaffolding appropriate for early adolescence. Without this structure, the lack of guidance leads to functional complexity that might reduce students' effective agency rather than fostering it.

The thin line of freedom created and "weakened" rules turned into "agreements" given to minors becomes an interesting topic for discussion, given its application in the reality of a complex society with various rules and competitions in daily life. This, in turn, can cause discrepancies between the designed curriculum and its actual implementation in the classroom. Although the idea of allowing students to pursue their individual interests and learning goals is appealing, there is a risk that excessive freedom may undermine the learning process. This raises concerns about whether Kanigara's approach, despite its noble intentions, may have unintended consequences.

Education is everything that affects the growth, changes and conditions of every human. The changes that occur are the development of students' potential, both knowledge, skills, and attitudes in their lives (Pristiwanti et al., 2022). In formal education, these three aspects are included in student assessment indicators, which serve as reference points for report card evaluations at the end of the semester. Kanigara also generally applies the same concept, but its implementation is embedded in each student's research, from planning to the final results. This principle is also reflected in the report cards, but more through descriptive explanations rather than numerical assessments.

Apart from knowledge and skills aspects, students should receive guidance regarding attitudes. Students at Kanigara generally enjoy a causal relationship with facilitators. However, there have been instances of students making inappropriate or hurtful comments, often without seeming to understand the consequences of their words. I was chatting with a mentee about doodling animals and manga characters on the whiteboard when a student from my class joined us. Initially, I did not mind, but then he drew something disturbing: a sketch of female breasts. He denied it, calling them “mountains,” and laughed loudly. I reported it to the senior facilitator present. Their response surprised me: “Why did you draw that? What were you thinking? Now, fill this paper with what you drew on the board.” They handed him an A4 paper and a pen. The boy just laughed and drew the same images, showing no remorse. The facilitator offered no explanation or warning.

The drawing of female breasts, even if dismissed as “mountains,” undeniably touches on issues of sexualization, appropriate content, and respect within a school environment. The facilitator’s ambiguous response illustrates the radical boundaries of Kanigara’s non-interventionist approach, highlighting a tension where the preservation of individual expression inadvertently supersedes the enforcement of conventional social boundaries. This directly contradicts the ideal of self-care by failing to equip students with an understanding of respectful social boundaries and appropriate expression.

Another unique scene that unfolded while I was visiting the administration office of Kanigara School is a scene of a group of children smoking casually. I froze, surprised. Are smoking activities allowed here, especially for children? I approached a student from my class. “What are you doing? Smoking is no good, you know”, I just said that word out of spontaneity. He laughed and continued smoking without saying a word. I observed that no facilitator intervened. Everyone seemed to regard smoking as a normal habit. I once inquired about this with one of the facilitators during a weekly meeting. The response I received was, “Smoking is not prohibited, but it is not recommended.” The boundaries established by Kanigara regarding this matter are quite unconventional, considering the students I observed smoking were 13 years old and fell into the underage category.

There is a specific encounter when a student from my class had been “scolded” by a facilitator for uttering the word “anjir,” Rena had spontaneously used the word “anjir” towards one of her friends while they were chatting in the class, and the word was subsequently overheard by the class facilitator. “Do you even know what ‘anjir’ means?” The facilitator’s statement successfully silenced the classroom, which had previously been lively, with each student engrossed in their own activities. Upon hearing the question, Rena paused momentarily. The facilitator repeated the same question up to two times. The facilitator then continued, “As far as I know, ‘anjir’ is a vulgar language. Do you often speak like that at home?” This time Rena answered the question, “Yes.” The facilitator continued, “You say that in front of your mother?” Rena replied with the same answer, “Yes.” “I don’t know about your home, but for me, the word ‘anjir’ is not something appropriate to say; it’s vulgar, it means ‘dog.’” The classroom became quiet for several minutes. Rena remained silent throughout the class activities until it was time to go home. In the eighth grade, I often heard the word “anjir” being used, not just by Rena; other students also frequently used the same term, even when I, as the facilitator, was in the classroom. Initially, I thought this was happening because the students still saw me more as a friend than a facilitator, but I still heard the word “anjir” even when another facilitator and the junior high school coordinator, was

in class. Indeed, that day Rena did a case study, perhaps to reprimand other students. However, the reprimand didn't seem to have any effect. The next day, I still heard "anjir" everywhere. In the end, the very casual relationship between facilitators and students makes the boundaries of politeness become blurred.

Through his work on geographies of alternative education in the UK, Kraftl (2014) reveals that alternative education spaces oppose and/or negotiate values associated with neoliberalism and promote alternative "visions and versions of life-itself". Some schools work toward these ideals by cultivating dispositions such as being "open, welcoming, generous and responsible to strangers near and far" Kraftl (2014). This indicates that education is not merely about acquiring skills and knowledge, but also about shaping values and dispositions. Alternative educational spaces can be places where students can develop a more critical understanding of the world and learn to act as responsible citizens.

Regardless of the educational and learning idealism instilled at Kanigara, we certainly also need to see how the existing idealism is implemented and the various field reality problems faced in the present time. Strong vision and mission, very different from mainstream education, makes the effort to realize it very complex. There are many factors that need to be considered considering that Kanigara is currently quite radical in viewing formal education, ranging from rejecting standardization, numerical assessments, rankings, to refusing to follow government-prepared curricula. Nevertheless, Kanigara is not entirely free from the influence of mainstream education; Kanigara itself also realises that there are still so many weaknesses in realising education based on their ideology. One of them is the fact that the application of alternative education principles at Kanigara is still ambiguous, considering their teachers are still products of mainstream education.

The pedagogical approach adopted by Kanigara, centred on the principle of learning freedom, is commendable in its aspirations to cater to the diverse needs of learners. However, this approach also raises concerns about potential disciplinary challenges, which could disrupt the alignment between curriculum and classroom practices. The provision of boundless freedom to adolescents needs to be balanced with appropriate guidance and support. While it is important to foster independent thinking and decision-making, the absence of comprehensive structure can hinder the development of essential life skills and habits that impact their own well-being.

Kanigara's experiment in alternative education, while driven by noble ideals of fostering autonomy and individualized learning, reveals the inherent tensions between utopian aspirations and the pragmatic realities of preparing students for a complex world. The school's emphasis on freedom and self-directed learning, though intended to nurture intrinsic motivation and critical thinking, poses challenges for maintaining consistent discipline and ensuring that students develop essential life skills. The reliance on "agreements" over traditional rules, while promoting collaboration, blurs the boundaries of appropriate behaviour, particularly among adolescents. Furthermore, the school's navigation of governmental standards and the influence of mainstream educational practices highlight the difficulty of creating a truly autonomous learning environment. Ultimately, Kanigara's journey underscores the need for a nuanced approach to alternative education, one that balances the pursuit of individual growth with the necessity of structured guidance and the development of responsible citizenship, ensuring that students are not only free to explore their passions but also equipped to navigate the practicalities of life beyond the "fairy tale school".

## **Navigating Freedom: Challenges in Cultivating Students' Autonomous Responsibility**

When a norm is successfully internalized, it becomes something “embedded” and develops into a person’s personality trait (Eriksen, 2015). On one occasion, a founder of Kanigara, while serving as a speaker, stated: “School is a movement to realize a condition where individuals are aware of their respective roles, their identities, connect students with their environment, and act as mentors to influence the wider community.” (May 9, 2024)

Kanigara strives to establish itself as an exemplar of how education should be managed. Consequently, its orientation is primarily focused on building fundamental aspects: ways of thinking and acting. As for the ability to read, write, and calculate, the management implicitly assumes that these will develop organically. This is because such abilities are considered necessities, thus the learning process occurs automatically. At Sanggar Kanigara, the concept of ‘rules’ is replaced by a more collaborative approach, with facilitators emphasizing ‘agreements’ to foster a sense of shared responsibility among the students. The concept of ‘rules’ is notably absent from Kanigara’s lexicon. While this aligns with the school’s philosophy of individual liberty, closer scrutiny reveals a more nuanced approach to student behaviour. The term ‘agreements’ is frequently employed as a substitute for ‘rules,’ indicating that while students are encouraged to make their own choices, their behaviour is still guided by implicit expectations set by facilitators or parents.

Kanigara eschews the implementation of competition, rewards, or punishments. Through extensive observation, it is evident that Kanigara entirely avoids such practices. Kanigara has eliminated punitive actions, relying solely on verbal reminders and guidance from facilitators and parents. Minor infractions, such as tardiness or late assignment submissions, are addressed through gentle counselling rather than formal disciplinary measures like point deductions or written warnings. Similarly, the attendance policy is streamlined, with students simply notifying their class via text message when they are unable to attend. The rhetorical shift to ‘agreements’ presents distinct operational challenges in maintaining behavioural consistency. Foucault analysed the historical shift from physical punishment to contemporary discipline aimed at producing compliant, ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault, 1977). While Kanigara succeeds in avoiding these mechanisms, the absence of formalized behavioural resolution mechanisms meant that the ideological rejection of external control did not translate into the internalization of communal norms (Eriksen, 2015). The ambiguity of the disciplinary framework ultimately hinders the consistent development of social and communal accountability.

During class gatherings to celebrate Indonesian Independence Day in 2024, various sporting activities were organized, including traditional games, futsal, and e-sports (Mobile Legends and Free Fire). While conventional schools typically implement an elimination system and identify winning teams, at Kanigara, all students and teams were free to participate without the pressure to win. The student-led organizing committee simply scheduled the games without recording winners or losers. Even when there was remaining time, students who had previously ‘lost’ were still allowed to continue playing or replay. In contrast to traditional class gatherings where students often vociferously cheer for their respective classes, at Kanigara, everyone is encouraged to support each other without any intention of demeaning others or harbouring ill will. These activities are purely for enjoyment, devoid of rewards or a competitive spirit. The extent to which students

maintain this perspective when participating in activities outside of Kanigara is a point of inquiry. Interviews conducted with students reveal that they continue to engage in various competitions. A significant finding from these interviews is the disproportionate emotional impact of failure on students accustomed to Kanigara's less competitive learning environment. One student articulated this sentiment by stating, "I am not used to competing, so losing feels much heavier for me." This is notably similar to research findings conducted in the student's explanation appears to both agree with and disagree with Kanigara founder's assertion that losing a competition would lead to feelings of inferiority. While the students acknowledged that defeat caused sadness, they also expressed that it was not the loss itself that induced this sadness, but rather a perceived lack of experience and opportunities to understand the concept of competition. They emphasized that, indeed, in any competition, there will be winners and losers. However, defeat is not a permanent state; valuable lessons can also be learned from it.

What is termed freedom from the academy project, articulated within policy discourse, promising self-determination, or 'the freedom to act,' is, in fact, a mechanism of neoliberal governance (Gane, 2008). In his writing, Foucault elucidates that by granting autonomy to institutions, neoliberal governments can displace responsibility and risk, while still influencing behaviour through market mechanisms and incentives. A fundamental agreement at Kanigara is the principle of 'self-care, care for friends, care for the environment.' This overarching principle is subsequently elaborated into more specific agreements that regulate classroom learning.

The learning process at Kanigara is highly dependent on parental involvement. Given the individualized nature of each student's research project, consistent real-time monitoring for every student is challenging. Consequently, parents, who spend significant time with their children, play a crucial role in supporting the student research endeavours. At a parent meeting on October 4, 2024, one parent explained why their child, who had planned to visit three research locations, had only managed to visit one after three months. The parent attributed this to their child's intensive involvement in sports competitions, which required daily practice. As the student must attend classes at the sanggar and practise for sports competition, the student can only carry out the research at the weekend. The students' research initially focused on tourists' exploration of various tourist destinations; it was decided during discussions that it would be better for the student to visit tourist destinations at the weekend when visitor numbers are high. However, this is difficult since the parents still must work at the weekends. This example highlights how students' research activities often need to accommodate parental schedules. Another parent shared a similar challenge. One parent described their difficulty in getting the student to attend Kanigara regularly, citing the students' refusal to wake up early for school. Another parent expressed limitations in supporting their child's coding-based research due to a lack of technical expertise. Conversely, one parent actively participated the students' research, attending meetings with facilitators and taking detailed notes. Of the 15 students, only eight parents attended the meeting. This underscores the importance of parental engagement in the Kanigara program and the need for strategies to encourage greater participation.

While ideally student possess autonomy in selecting their own research topics, in practice, many students' research choices are frequently influenced by parental involvement, such as parental schedules or suggestions. Even when student successfully choose personally interesting topics, the execution of their research projects often hinges on parental availability. One of the

students from the class that I facilitate, who has been educated at Kanigara since the preschool (TA) level, explained how parents played a significant role during their early childhood and primary years, making them feel guided in their learning process. This contrasts with their experience entering junior high, where they felt both parents and facilitators, in their view, were too hands-off regarding their research projects. The students simply described their situation as “losing direction,” which sometimes led to a lack of motivation for their research, as they felt alone and without guidance. This indicates that, despite intentions to promote student autonomy, students’ research experiences are often constrained by parental factors. This phenomenon aligns with the term ‘heterotopia,’ conceptualized by philosopher Michel Foucault (as cited on Johnson, 2006). This refers to spaces where rules and modes of operation diverge from societal norms. In this context, facilitators and parents function as ‘heterotopias’ within the Sanggar, where students have a greater degree of voice, yet remain subject to the overarching control of the school system. Kanigara’s research projects typically span a semester, providing students ample time to delve into their chosen topics. Eighth-grade students, for instance, explore diverse interests, ranging from culinary activities like baking pastries and cakes to creative endeavours such as novel writing and photography, as well as entrepreneurial ventures like selling local snacks.

Standardised and measurable learning outcomes are considered the most relevant indicators of educational quality. Many policymakers and academics equate educational quality with the more specific concept of student achievement. This is not solely for ideological reasons, but because learning outcomes are more concrete, comparable, and measurable than other, more context-sensitive indicators of educational quality (Verger et al., 2018). Kanigara disagrees with testing, viewing diplomas, examinations, grades, and rankings as a form of superstition, capable of causing psychological distress for both students and parents.

Indonesia’s National Education Standards (*Standar Nasional Pendidikan* or SNP) are regulated by Law No. 20 of 2003 and Government Regulation (Permen) No. 19 of 2005, where the SNP constitutes the minimum criteria for the education system throughout Indonesia and ensures national educational quality. Subsequently, the Government issued Government Regulation (PP) No. 4 of 2022 to amend PP No. 57 of 2021 concerning the SNP. This amendment emphasises Pancasila values, alignment with higher education, and synchronisation with accreditation mechanisms. The SNP encompasses 9 principles, including inclusivity, essentiality, and holism, as key components toward a quality education system (Badrudin et al., 2024). Community Learning Activity Centres (PKBM), as recognized educational institutions in Indonesia, are inevitably subject to these provisions and regulations. Kraftl (2014) emphasizes that alternative education spaces in the UK do not function as separate entities and reveals how their spatiality’s both connect and disconnect from mainstream education, society, and life trajectories. Based on the findings from participant observations, Kanigara established workshops<sup>1)</sup>, the administration of the ANBK equivalency examination to provide students with options to continue their education in formal schools, and the adoption of report card formats that align with those of the education department., the administration of the ANBK equivalency examination to provide students with options to continue their education in formal schools, and the adoption of report card formats that align with those of the education department.

Alternative educational spaces defy straightforward definitions due to the complexities of how they both align with and deviate from state-funded mainstream educational spaces, as

well as how local contexts shape understandings of what constitutes alternative education (De Silva et al., 2020). Kanigara continues to negotiate by fundamentally prioritizing report cards compiled directly by Kanigara, ensuring parents receive only these reports. The school adopts a minimal approach to ANBK preparation, while formal schools prepare students with question grids, in-class question discussions, and multiple tryouts, Kanigara students only participate in one mandatory rehearsal required by the education department, followed by the actual ANBK examination. The results of the ANBK are never discussed and do not factor into students' final report card evaluations. However, parents can request this 'formal' report card if necessary. For example, when a student chooses to continue their education at a formal educational institution. During my participant observation as a facilitator, at least two students from Year 9 of junior high school were planning to move on to a formal senior high school, for which a formal report card was a requirement.

Kanigara aims to cultivate autonomous, socially aware individuals through a collaborative, agreement-based approach, rejecting traditional disciplinary and competitive models in favour of intrinsic motivation and community responsibility. While prioritizing fundamental thinking and acting skills over standardized testing, Kanigara navigates the complexities of neoliberal governance and national education standards by balancing its unique philosophy with necessary governmental requirements, often relying heavily on parental involvement and negotiation to maintain its distinct educational environment. Ultimately, Kanigara's approach demonstrates the challenges and nuances of fostering student autonomy within a system that necessitates both alignment and deviation from mainstream educational practices.

## CONCLUSION

Within the context of Sanggar Kanigara, the concepts of "freedom" and "discipline" are understood and experienced differently across the institution, facilitators, and students, creating a complex dialectic between philosophical idealism and practical reality. Philosophically, Kanigara radically rejects traditional disciplinary frameworks. The top-down, judgmental concept of "rules" is replaced by collectively established "agreements". Kanigara explicitly rejects systems of reward and punishment, deeming them ineffective and believing they only lead to negative emotions such as humiliation or defiance. The discourse of "freedom to learn" directly shapes student identity within a spectrum stretching between "free" and "responsible" individuals. While the "freedom to learn" discourse successfully fosters students with a strong sense of agency, it struggles to consistently cultivate a sense of communal responsibility, which is often attributed to the flexible disciplinary framework in practice. This results in an ongoing identity formation process that constantly negotiates between being an individual "free" from external constraints and being an individual "responsible" to their community.

Finally, this study suggests a critical avenue for future research regarding the long-term impact of the Kanigara educational model on alumni from this alternative school. Specifically, further studies are needed to assess how Kanigara's pedagogical approach shapes the adult life trajectories and personal values of its graduates as they navigate the complexities of mainstream society.

## ENDNOTES

- 1) The Ministry conducted a two-day workshop to socialise and introduce the use of belajar.id as a learning medium for the school curriculum

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