



**JEELS**

(Journal of English Education and Linguistics Studies)

P-ISSN: 2407-2575 E-ISSN: 2503-2194

<https://jurnalfaktarbiyah.iainkediri.ac.id/index.php/jeels>

## UNDERSTANDING MENTOR'S GROWTH AND IDENTITY THROUGH CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION PRACTICE

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**Abstract:** Mentoring is a way of professional development for educators, teachers, and school leaders. This study aims to discover how mentors conceptualized the value of their practice and its impact on their growth and identity while guiding mentees in teacher-research mentoring activities. This study presents a case study of 4 English educators as mentors to gather a rich depiction of their mentoring phases. Understanding the mentors' pedagogy could help in understanding more about the process of their competence-building. Moreover, this process influences the process of their learning and impacts their identity. The data were obtained through critical self-reflection journals, mentoring conversations, and online focus group interviews. A model based on Mezirow's critical self-reflection practice is used to

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<sup>1</sup>**Citation in APA style:**

Cahyaningrum, D., Drajadi, N. A., Handayani, E. I. P., Tyarakanita, A. (2024). Understanding Mentor's Growth and Identity through Critical Self-Reflection Practice. *JEELS*, 11(1), 497-518. DOI: 10.30762/jeels.v11i1.2626

Submission: February 2024, Revision: May 2024, Publication: May 2024

recognize mentors' growth and identity development. It suggested that three broad mentoring categories exist: self-focused, mentee-focused, and relationship-focused, which support them in achieving mentoring expertise. Moreover, mentors' motive is influenced by the identity development that occurs in the sociocultural environment, demonstrating their values, beliefs, and perspectives. This study's results also suggest that the mentoring program can be the basis for training, deploying expertise and competencies, and boosting personal and professional growth.

**Keywords:** *competence-building, critical self-reflection, mentors' growth and identity*

## INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is used in various educational contexts worldwide for various purposes (e.g., Canipe & Gunckel, 2020; Clark, 2022; Hu & van Veen, 2020), from initial teacher education to senior development (Ellis et al., 2020). Furthermore, mentoring has been acknowledged as a way to achieve high-quality professional and academic development in research for teachers (Dikilitaş & Wyatt, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2010). Engaging in mentoring activities may build mentors' and mentees' relationships, enhancing teachers' areas of need and helping them achieve their goals (Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008). By investing in mentoring programs, mentors and mentees can develop a formative process where they work through dialogue-based curiosity, listening, creating conversation spaces, sharing experience and expertise, and reciprocity to construct the professional knowledge-sharing process (Lofthouse, 2019; Manderstedt et al., 2023). It is worth investigating meaningful developments in building an atmosphere for a collective solution in the relational process of mentoring.

The significant value of mentoring activities is as good as the consequences of the mentor's ability. Thus, understanding mentors' development is an important process in mentoring activities (Nyanjom, 2020). The studies conducted by Nyanjom tend to focus on self-study, which can be beneficial for developing practical solutions and understanding dynamic situations of mentoring activities. However, it is too specific to the individual and restricts the level of detachment. Consequently, this study aimed to provide deep insight by presenting several individuals in a mentoring context to increase the level of neutrality. Moreover, mentoring growth and identity development has become a robust area of study (e.g., Beatiste et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023), it is necessary to understand the dynamic relationship between mentors and mentees by digging into their interactions to identify the most appropriate framework for preparing the ground of future training.

Mentoring and coaching forms sometimes overlap, but they have a basic definition of providing feedback on teachers' functioning (Hu & van Veen, 2020). Irby et al. (2023) state that a mentor might be involved in coaching, but a coach is hardly involved in the mentoring process. Mentoring originated from a relationship between a more experienced mentor and a mentee who was learning about the profession (Hudson, 2016). Thus, this study is concerned with mentoring as earlier studies suggested (e.g., Wang et al., 2009; Wyre et al., 2016) that mentoring process can apply positive development of the teachers as they are concerned with the specific skill through an ongoing process between mentors and mentees. This study uncovered how mentors conceptualized the value of their practice and its impact on their growth and identity while guiding mentees (teachers) in teacher-research mentoring activities in Indonesia) in professional development activities.

This study used critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 1991) to analyze the meaning of mentors and mentees negotiating meaning from experiences. Accordingly, this research is focused on how becoming a mentor can affect their growth and identity. This study

method aims to obtain deep knowledge of mentors' conceptualizing value of their practice in guiding mentees in developing writing research papers skills professionally and its impact on their growth and identity. The result of this research can contribute to improving the training grounds for mentoring competencies and personal and professional growth.

The term mentoring refers to a relationship between a person who is more experienced or older, or wiser (mentor) than someone younger or less experienced (mentee) within an organizational or professional context (Irby et al., 2023; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008). In recent years, mentoring should involve a co-construction model between mentor and mentee instead of one-way guidance or a top-down relationship, where learning is constructed through collaboration and social interaction (Allen, 2003; Ellis et al., 2020). Although mentoring focuses on the learning development of mentees, mentors also gain knowledge or development while experiencing mentoring (Nyanjom, 2020). This leads to a new understanding that learning from mentors can be transformative to enhance their practice.

Critical reflection on one's practice is needed to acknowledge their struggle as a form of growth to achieve a successful mentoring process (Ploj Vrtič et al., 2023; Zaffini, 2022). Moreover, this current study tried to look beyond individual and activity systems in a larger picture to understand the actions of the mentors and mentees (Wexler, 2019). In this current study, the mentoring process was also focused on implementing the activity theory, called transformative learning. This theory results from social interaction that encompasses goals, actions, and conditions beneath which goal-directed actions are carried out (Mezirow, 1991). Transformative learning emphasizes the process of critical reflection and rational discourse, which, within this social process of construing and appropriating new or revised interpretations, adults change their experiences and views as they gain results from their experiences (Kabakci et al., 2010; Mezirow, 1994). Thus, it is necessary to understand why mentors would

perform specific attitudes and behavior thus, organizations can reassure or enable the development of relationships.

The development of the relationship between mentor and mentee had the strength of mutual identification and attraction to formalization. The professional development opportunities were preferred as collegial support, such as mentoring and information exchange, rather than working in isolation (e.g., Naylor & Nyanjom, 2021). Hence, this study's mentoring structures were conducted in one-on-one and collaborative mentoring that incorporates Magginson et al. (2018) five phases. The first phase of reaffirmation is when the mentor and mentee spend time, in the beginning, re-establishing personal connectedness. The second phase of identifying the issue is that the mentor and mentee spend energy articulating the issue for discussion, why it is important (and why now), and what outcome the mentee is looking for from the dialogue to come. The third phase of building mutual understanding is the mentor encourages the mentee to explore the issue in depth, by asking questions that stimulate insight to understand more clearly what is involved, how the problem occurs, its dynamics, and so on. The fourth phase of exploring alternative solutions is when the mentor and mentee allow themselves to be creative about possible ways forward, developing a range of options from which the mentee eventually chooses or decides which to take away for reflection. The fifth phase of the final check is when the mentor encourages the mentees to review what they will do, why, and what they have learned about the situation in question and about themselves. This reflective process can assist the mentee to strengthen their learning and provide their identity development.

Identity is dynamic and constructed through live experiences and by communicating those experiences (Beijaard, 2019; Garcia & Badia, 2023). Thus, to unravel the mentors' identity, this study captures mentors' personal and professional identity, the relationship between identity development and competence, and the shared discourse that strengthens their identity and practice. By using the

developed framework (Nyanjom, 2020), this current study was aimed at explaining the mentoring pathways while capturing mentoring pedagogy and culture. To understand personal and professional competence, it is needed to know the mentors' motive that influences their interaction with mentees and the learning that emanates from the practice (Clarke et al., 2023; Malm, 2009). Achieving effective personal learning outcomes was influenced by one's motive (motivation and awareness) in wishing to be a good mentor. Then, this study tries to understand the mentoring relationship between identity development and competence. There is a need to know the type of mentoring style mentors held (what image they held as mentors) that impacted mentees' learning and development. This offers the appropriate training grounds for mentors to investigate their identity and improve their competencies. Last, the shared discourse encourages mentors to strengthen their identity and practice. There is an impact of critical self-reflections (own perspectives) and direct and indirect feedback from mentees to uncover the tension and dimension inherent in the contextual social environment within which mentoring practice occurs.

### **Conceptual Framework: Critical Self-Reflection**

In transformative learning, it requires critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 1991). Through transformative learning, adults can recognize developmental gaps in their sociocultural interactions and why they exist. The development process occurs through incidents that show how we make sense of our experience (Bleach, 1997; Fernández-Balboa, 1998; Nyanjom, 2020). In critical self-reflection, we critically assess the content, process, and premise of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience (Mezirow, 1991). The term content refers to the subject matter being reflected upon. It includes experiences, beliefs, values, or assumptions. Then, the term process might lead us to assess the adequacy of our efforts to find relevant and dependable clues to improve our performance in solving similar problems in the future. Last, the term premise is that it might

lead us to question the merit and function of the question. Sometimes, it leads us to assess the validity of norms, roles, codes, common sense, ideology, language games, paradigms, philosophies, or theories we have taken for granted.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study used a case study (Yin, 2018) to discover how mentors conceptualized the value of their practice and its impact on their growth and identity while guiding mentees (future English language educators and teachers) in professional development activities for writing research papers.

### **Context and Participants**

The professional development program of teachers as researchers included 6 meetings for three months via synchronous online Zoom. The mentors engage in mentoring, guiding, and facilitating the mentees known as teachers as researchers program where they participate in a series of meetings on professional development activities for writing research papers. Mentees received materials that can be used to support their learning. Throughout the program, mentors also provided ongoing support through discussions, advice, and guidance through group message exchanges and individual consultations.

There are four mentors known as professional researchers as the participants of this research. The mentors were two lecturers in the English language, and two were secondary English language teachers with teaching experiences of more than two years. In their English education master's program, they were all in the same cohort and progressed through the same courses of writing research papers with the same instructors. Three female and one male mentors were experienced and familiar with writing research papers. Meanwhile, the mentees were 12 beginning teachers undergoing the master's program with the same instructors. All the mentors and mentee were

contacted and agreed to participate in this research. This study used pseudonyms, such as mentor 1, mentor 2, mentor 3 and mentor 4 to keep their personal privacy.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The researchers collected multiple forms of data to gain an in-depth understanding of the research focus. This research focus is closely related to the mentors' growth and identity theory proposed by Nyanjom (2020). This is about personal and professional competence, mentoring relationships for identity development and competence, and shared discourse encourages them to strengthen their identity and practice. This research focus is contextualized into the research instruments covering (1) critical self-reflection journals, (2) mentoring conversations, and (3) focus group interviews.

All four participants filled out critical self-reflection journals in the form of a Google form that they should sign at every mentoring meeting. Critical self-reflection journals became the research's primary data accommodated before and after the mentoring program. Before the meeting, the questions were: What do I intend to do in this meeting? Why? Meanwhile, after the meeting, questions were asked: What problems (if any) did I encounter? What do I want to improve about that meeting? Why? What is my understanding of mentoring sessions?. Besides, mentoring conversations and shared discourse throughout the mentoring program were also collected. However, the researchers used the data from mentoring conversation to know the extent of the mentoring phase and to triangulate what mentors' reflected. Last, focus group interviews (FGI) in the form of a semi-structured guide, which contains questions, are used to explore participants' experiences related to the research focus. The questions for FGI were: Why do you want to participate in this mentoring practice? What can you do to improve your mentoring practice? What mentoring style do you usually use in your practice?

In more detail, the research focus is elaborated into: a) focus on the mentoring phase (concerning mentoring practice and roles of



mentors-mentees) and b) focus on the mentoring experiences (before, during, and after the mentoring practices). After all the needed data are fully collected, they are analyzed using a thematic analysis procedure. Self-reflection journals, mentoring conversations, and interview transcripts were evaluated and coded through open coding based on the components of mentors' growth and identity theory proposed by Nyanjom (2020). The steps of thematic analysis refer to the theory of Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019). The steps are moving from familiarity towards writing up through a rigorous process of arriving at some intersubjective agreement between codes (i.e., the unit or tool for analysis) and themes (i.e., the patterns or combinations of meaning). Moreover, to enhance the quality and credibility of this research, the researchers employed triangulations of technique and data sources. Furthermore, peer debriefing between three researchers was conducted to analyze the data and also with the rest of the research members of the research team (including the discussion and agreement of data condensation).

## **FINDINGS**

The development of the mentoring stage of this study comprised the five mentoring phases (Magginson et al., 2018). The learning spaces that exist in the program help mentors and mentees enhance their transformative learning and contribute to forming mentor identity. First, this study highlighted the reason why someone wanted to be a mentor. It is followed by the section on learning spaces that encourage the development of mentors' identity and practice.

### **Understanding the Meaning of Becoming a Mentor: Self-focused**

The participants motive for becoming mentors shows the quality of perceived personal and professional competence. They believe that the role of mentees is to provide sources of learning. Mentors believe that the interaction with mentees is part of the construction process of learning. Moreover, the mentors' initial goal is

to see teachers improve in conducting research, which reflects an exchange orientation (see Extract 1).

**Extract 1.**

Teachers in Indonesia now must conduct classroom research and write it into best practice papers. Thus, as both mentor and teacher, **I want to help mentees understand** how to write a research paper. **I feel accomplished when I can guide and support teachers by sharing my knowledge, ideas, and experiences in conducting and writing research papers.** I give them an example of my writing and explain step by step. As they are still beginning teachers, I want to make them realize that conducting research is not just administrative stuff, but we want to improve our teaching and students' language skills. Moreover, the program's interaction process helps them develop their skills, and **I assist them by sharing my insights and experiences.** *(Critical self-reflection of mentor 4)*

There is a relationship between a person-oriented mentoring and professional benefits. These findings (Extract 1) demonstrated that mentors' beliefs of the program context were influenced by critical reflection and increased through work with mentees. The mentors' engagement in the program is also a part of professional development to affect change in personal and professional competence, as they have opportunities to observe, experience, and reflect. Other findings also show that mentors respect mentees who ask for their help. Mentors recognize that mentees need help, and they can act to resolve problems through supportive discussion.

**Extract 2.**

**I want to gain experience from becoming a mentor and help teachers who actively ask questions or share their problems about writing and research.** However, instead of directly answering it, I used this as the discussion issue, and at the end, I concluded all of our findings. **I believe that when I guide and assist mentees, it helps for me and for mentees to reach personal growth.** Community learning is also a way for a never-ending learning process. *(Focus Group Interview of mentor 2)*

Mentors and mentees seem to have an exchange advantage from the interaction in the program. Mentor 2 realized that becoming a mentor is part of the development process of his/her learning. Extract 2 shows the extent to which mentors are aware and engage in self-reflection that aligns with their ideals and practices. Mentors hold beliefs about knowledge, their mentees, and themselves, which contribute to how they address problems. As mentors reflect on the mentoring relationship, they have a greater chance for their competencies to enhance the success of their roles and responsibilities (Wyre et al., 2016).

**Extract 3.**

**I find joy and fulfillment in teaching and interacting with mentees.** I tried to create engaging discussions, foster a supportive environment, and be available for mentees seeking guidance. But sometimes, I fear what I say is unacceptable in their class. Thus, I invited other mentees' perspectives instead of only saying what I knew. (*Critical self-reflection of mentor 4*)

**Extract 4.**

As a mentor, I should not only share some knowledge about how to write a research paper, but I should also guide my mentees to achieve a positive result of their teaching. **I facilitated them by discussing with other mentees how to plan their classroom practices, what issues they faced with the students, and how we overcame this.** (*Focus Group Interview of mentor 4*)

Extracts 3 and 4 show that mentors have aligned their energy, time, and passion to guide the mentees. S/he found fulfillment when able to share what s/he knows. The mentor and mentee spend energy articulating the issue of discussion. Mentors expect the outcome of the dialogue to be beneficial for mentees. However, mentors realized cognitive dissonance existed between mentees' beliefs/knowledge and the program's information. Therefore, mentors must be able to bring mentees' attention to a problem in the observed lesson. In the social learning environment, the best that mentors can do to help the

mentees is to provide concrete answers to their questions. Extract 3 presents the mentors bringing attention to a problem by providing various perspectives from other mentees.

**Extract 5.**

I am a mentor who always prepares anything. Before I started my mentoring, I always made sure to translate the practices that I wanted from my mind into **my lesson planning** and **make sure that all materials were ready**. I need to prepare for it because I easily get panicked. Even though I can still be flexible, I don't enjoy unpreparedness. (*Critical self-reflection of mentor 1*)

**Extract 6.**

We work with mentees as partners and friends, exchanging ideas, exploring possibilities, and jointly setting goals for a mentoring program. I prepare a learning environment that fosters meaningful learning. **Mentees were engaged in several sessions of discussion, work-based projects, and reflecting on the learning process.** (*Focus Group Interview of mentor 3*)

The mentoring program provides an opportunity for meaningful learning both for mentors and mentees (see Extract 5 and 6). Some learning strategies are adapted, such as incorporating discussion after each input session, small room meetings, reflective journals, projects, and hands-on group work to encourage learning for mentors and mentees. These learning strategies in the program provided learning environments that encourage purposeful and personally significant experiences for mentors and mentees. Mentors are adjusted his/her roles to achieve the optimal goals for the mentees, and it also includes enhancing their own development as they know the benefits s/he can gain from this role. Mentors believe that providing encouragement and establishing interpersonal relationships with mentees could help the success process of learning. Mentors' personal variables of belief about practice are other motives influencing their personal and professional competence as mentors.

Moreover, the mentors' readiness and willingness to mentor affect their improvement of mentoring competencies.

### **Learning Space for Strengthening Mentors' Identity and Practice: Mentee-focused and Relationship-focused**

Mentors held several types of mentoring styles that showed what image they held as mentors that impacted mentees' learning and development. Mentors present what kind of relationship they have with the mentees. It could be the appropriate training ground for understanding their identity and improving their competencies. By understanding mentoring styles, it is necessary to know to what extent the mentor's image is depicted as a good mentor.

#### **Extract 7.**

This is my third time becoming a mentor in a PD program, but if I could say it was my first time becoming a mentor who shares about writing research papers. **At first, I was afraid I lacked adequate knowledge and only had plentiful academic papers.** Then I realized that writing papers for me is not easy as a teacher. But then, why don't I help my mentees and colleagues understand and start doing their research? Then, I have the courage to help them. **Instead of only transferring knowledge, I want to learn and practice together.** (*Focus Group Interview of mentor 2*)

#### **Extract 8.**

It was a good experience to guide teachers in writing research papers. I realized that we go through a long journey. But everything paid off. Looking at the improvement of their writing and research confidence make me want to push my capability as a mentor. **I tried to make sure that I was available through this process.** (*Critical self-reflection of mentor 3*)

The mentors in this study were teachers and educators. They possessed a wide range of beliefs about teaching approaches. Extract 7 shows that mentors held various beliefs instead of focusing on transmission learning. They knew that theory is a necessary basis for conducting and writing research. However, mentors also emphasized

the critical point of mentees to practice writing and conducting research through the task given. Moreover, mentors understood what they wanted to do about their mentoring belief and their relationships to practice. Cultivating their mentors could develop opportunities for the mentees to have professional development. Thus, to strengthen their identity and practice, extract 7 and 8 show that mentors have reflection, critical awareness, and dialogue within themselves. It helps to capture the mentoring moments about transition, change, and transformation. During the program, mentors conducted several mentoring strategies, including sharing reflections which helped them cultivate their characteristics as a mentor. Sometimes mentors' past beliefs could bring obstacles to their growth. Thus, to facilitate personal and professional growth, they need to articulate their belief as tools for reflection.

**Extract 9.**

Mentees think it was helpful to **get the classroom solutions**; moreover, it can be written in their best practice paper. Mentees want to create papers based on the classroom problems they face.  
*(Critical self-reflection of mentor 1)*

The social environment strongly influences activating or hindering mentors' development. If mentors' values do not match with mentees, it seems to become a significant obstacle to their development. Extracts 8 and 9 showed that mentors valued what the mentees valued. To understand the value held by their mentees, mentors understand the value of conducting research for mentees, which in this case is for solving classroom problems. Mentors guide the mentees in reflecting on their classroom practice (e.g., Extract 6), which is transformed later to improve the quality of classroom practice and can be written down into their best practice paper (see Extract 9). Moreover, when mentors can make innovative approaches and conduct reflection space with the mentees, it helps them develop professionally (e.g., Extract 4).

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to discover how mentors conceptualized the value of their practice and its impact on their growth and identity while guiding mentees in teacher-research mentoring activities. Specifically, the study focused on helping mentors recognize the moments and motifs that allow them to develop their personal and professional competencies in the program through reflection space. Moreover, the findings reveal several mentors' motifs to engage in the mentoring program. The broad categories of motives are self-focused, mentee-focused and relationship-focused. In line with Janssen et al. (2014), first, it can be seen that the mentors' motivation is performed as identification and integration. Identification refers to the motive of becoming mentors is regarded as the beneficial outcome for mentors. Mentors can enhance their own personal and professional competency. Then, in the integration aspects, mentors' behavior in the program was influenced by their values, beliefs, needs, and identity. They are not only realizing the importance of helping the mentees. They want to become mentors as they have the self-identity and personal values to help others.

Second, mentee-focused is that the mentors have positive attitudes toward benefiting others. Mentors are concerned about the welfare of the mentees. They agreed with mentees to help as they asked for help. Previous studies found (Gormley, 2008; Larose et al., 2019) that there is little empirical evidence to show that insecure attachment could affect mentoring relationships. However, this study shows that even if the mentors provide help or feedback, mentees try what knowledge/skill they knew and received during the mentoring and are more dependent. In this case, such mentor experience increased their confidence and competencies in teaching (Wexler, 2019).

The third is relationship-focused. Mentors want to maintain a constructive relationship with mentees. As mentors and mentees spend their time together, they support each other. They valued the chance to spend their energy and time clarifying specific issues

through discussion. Mentors expect the engagement will be beneficial for mentees.

Several factors influence the success of a mentoring program. Thus, the experience and expertise of mentors become one of the factors. This study also found that one of the mentors' motives for participating in this program is that they want to become mentors who are able to provide more support for achieving mentoring expertise. Mentors purposely know and identify the areas of competencies they need to improve and develop (Nyanjom, 2020).

Then, mentors' identity occurs in the sociocultural environment, demonstrating their values, beliefs, and perspectives. When focusing on constructing mentors' identities, those identities contribute to mentors' motives (Nyanjom, 2020). Moreover, identity also influences mentors' personal and professional development. As the relationship evolves between mentors and mentees in the program, it could support them in exploring their values and beliefs. Moreover, developing a good relationship between mentors and mentees gives a greater chance for the mentees to gain a better insight into ideas or knowledge (Ellis et al., 2020). However, mentoring relationships require time to develop. Thus, mentor competencies influenced the mentoring relationship's success (Bozionelos, 2004; Hudson, 2013; Wyre et al., 2016). Wyre et al. emphasized that there is a need for mentors to be responsible and effective. They need to be prepared and trained to achieve effective mentoring relationships significantly.

## CONCLUSION

This analysis directed to discover how mentors perceived the value of their practice and its influence on their growth and identity while guiding mentees in teacher-research mentoring activities. Several key findings emerged through an investigation of mentors' motives and experiences. Firstly, mentors' motivations were motivated by an integration of self-focused, mentee-focused, and relationship-focused factors. Secondly, mentors' identities played a



meaningful role to initiate their motivations and guide their interactions with mentees. Furthermore, the success of mentoring programs emerged from factors of mentors' experience and expertise.

By understanding these findings, the mentors' quality influences the mentoring program's success (Kuhn et al., 2024). These include their competencies, such as personal and professional, and their identity, including values, beliefs, and perspectives. The effectiveness of the mentoring program depended on the mentors' competency and motive of becoming mentors. Therefore, developers of professional development program must expose, scaffold, and unpack the contextual systems to help mentors develop competence and identity. Regarding the implication for further research, this study looked at the mentoring program for writing a research paper, and many potential paths ahead would be longitudinal studies to explore the program development over a more extended period. Similar research can be conducted in various contexts and incorporate different mentoring steps. Moreover, data collection that includes content analysis to determine engagement frequency and in-depth interviews could be employed in future studies.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

The authors would like to thank all the participants of this study. This research was supported by Universitas Sebelas Maret.

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