
Literature Review on the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Elementary Schools: Opportunities and Challenges for Classroom Teachers

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Abstract

The Independent Curriculum is a form of educational reform that aims to address the challenges of 21st-century learning through a flexible approach, differentiated learning, and strengthening student character. This study aims to in-depth examine the opportunities and challenges of implementing the Independent Curriculum in elementary schools through a qualitative literature review. Data sources were obtained from various scientific publications and relevant policy documents spanning the past five years. The study results indicate that the Independent Curriculum provides space for classroom teachers to develop contextual and participatory learning. However, several challenges remain in its implementation, including teachers' limited understanding of curriculum principles, gaps in pedagogical capacity, and a lack of ongoing technical assistance. This literature review also found that successful implementation is largely determined by the synergy between teacher capacity, principal leadership, and local context-based policy support. Therefore, strategies are needed to strengthen the elementary education ecosystem that supports the transformation of teachers' roles as facilitators of independent and reflective learning. This research provides conceptual and practical contributions to the development of educational policies and the improvement of the quality of pedagogical practices at the elementary school level.

Keywords :Class Teacher; Independent Curriculum; Elementary School

Introduction

The transformation of the national education paradigm over the past decade has demonstrated a strong push to respond to the challenges of the times through curriculum reformulation. Amidst the flow of technological disruption and increasing social complexity, the Indonesian education system is expected to produce a generation that is adaptive, collaborative, and critical. The Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) exists as a structural intervention to address this

urgent need, prioritizing student-centered learning, flexibility in the learning process, and character building through the Pancasila student profile project. However, implementing this curriculum at the elementary school level requires systemic readiness that encompasses not only policy but also the pedagogical capacity and professionalism of classroom teachers as the spearhead of its implementation.

In the elementary school context, the role of classroom teachers is highly strategic because they manage nearly all subjects and student learning activities. Therefore, curriculum changes directly impact how teachers design lessons, develop assessments, and respond to diverse learning needs. The Independent Curriculum emphasizes differentiated learning and the development of contextual teaching modules, which, of course, require high curriculum literacy and continuous pedagogical innovation. Problems arise when not all teachers have sufficient experience and training to understand and implement these new principles in daily learning. This presents significant challenges, especially in schools with limited access to resources and technical support.

Nevertheless, the Independent Curriculum also opens up significant opportunities for more authentic and meaningful learning. Granting greater autonomy to educational units and teachers encourages contextual learning processes tailored to the characteristics and local needs of students. Furthermore, the project-based learning approach to strengthening the Pancasila student profile provides students with the opportunity to develop collaborative, empathetic, and reflective skills in real-life settings. Teachers can design cross-subject learning with values and concrete experiences that bridge theory and practice.

However, the autonomy afforded by this curriculum implicitly assumes that all teachers possess the same competence, readiness, and motivation to design learning. In reality, significant disparities exist in teacher capacity, both in terms of curriculum knowledge, digital skills, and reflective ability to evaluate their practice. Furthermore, massive and uniform training policies often fail to address the specific needs of teachers in each school. The lack of ongoing technical assistance and limited peer learning forums also hamper the substantial internalization of the Independent Curriculum.

Based on this reality, literature review is a crucial approach for identifying and mapping the dynamics of the Independent Curriculum implementation in elementary schools. Through a review of various recent research and scientific publications, we can identify general patterns, best

practices, and systemic and cultural barriers experienced by teachers during the implementation process. Literature reviews also allow for critical reflection on the direction of curriculum policy and its suitability to conditions on the ground. Literature synthesis provides a bridge between normative curriculum theory and the empirical reality of its implementation in the classroom.

Furthermore, a literature review is crucial as a basis for formulating more contextual and sustainable strategies for strengthening teacher capacity. Previous studies have shown that successful curriculum implementation relies heavily on the quality of training, which is practical, reflective, and based on learning communities. Therefore, mapping teacher needs and evaluating the effectiveness of existing training models should be included in the literature review to ensure that curriculum reform is not merely administrative but also substantively transforms the learning ecosystem.

The literature review also allows for the identification of alternative pedagogical approaches that have been successfully implemented in various regions with varying contexts. Empirical experiences from teachers in 3T (disadvantaged regions), inclusive schools, and non-formal education communities can enrich the discourse on the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in elementary schools. Thus, this study not only reflects current conditions but also opens up possibilities for designing educational policies and interventions that are more adaptive and responsive to local diversity.

By establishing a strong conceptual foundation through a literature review, this journal aims to provide theoretical and practical contributions to strengthening the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. A critical review of relevant literature not only explains the phenomena occurring but also maps out evidence-based strategies and solutions. It is hoped that elementary school teachers, as the primary agents of educational transformation, will gain comprehensive, contextual, and applicable scientific references to address the challenges and capitalize on the opportunities presented by the new curriculum.

Method

This research employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical literature review. This method was chosen because it allowed the researcher to thoroughly examine and analyze various research findings, scientific articles, policy documents, and other academic sources relevant to the

implementation of the Independent Curriculum in elementary schools, particularly in examining the opportunities and challenges from the classroom teacher's perspective.

The data sources in this study are secondary literature obtained from various national and international scientific publications over the past five years (2019–2024), including indexed journals, proceedings, institutional research reports, academic books, and official policy documents from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. Inclusion criteria include literature that discusses: (1) the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, (2) pedagogical practices in elementary schools, (3) the role of teachers in differentiated learning and the Pancasila student profile project, and (4) the challenges of curriculum implementation in the context of elementary education in Indonesia.

Data collection was conducted through a systematic search using digital databases such as Google Scholar, DOAJ, SINTA, and Garuda. The search used the following keywords: "Independent Curriculum," "elementary school," "classroom teacher," "curriculum implementation," "learning differentiation," and "Pancasila student profile." All obtained literature was then selected through a screening process based on relevance, originality, and contribution to the study's focus.

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively using content analysis techniques. Researchers grouped the literature into key themes, such as forms of curriculum implementation, teacher perceptions and readiness, implementation constraints, and best practices. Each theme was analyzed interpretively to determine the alignment between the theory promoted in the Independent Curriculum and the empirical realities found in various literature. Furthermore, researchers conducted a critical synthesis to identify research gaps and offer practical implications for strengthening teachers' roles in curriculum implementation.

The validity of the data in this study was ensured through source and theory triangulation techniques, which involve comparing various literatures from different perspectives to gain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding. This approach supports the interpretive validity of the study results and also enriches conceptual insights into the dynamics of Independent Curriculum implementation at the elementary school level.

Thus, this method provides a strong scientific framework to answer research problem formulations systematically and in-depth, and produces evidence-based recommendations for the development of more contextual and transformative basic education policies and practices.

Results and Discussion

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the elementary school level represents a paradigm shift in national education, focusing more on developing student competencies and character. This curriculum emphasizes the principles of differentiated learning, strengthening the Pancasila student profile, and providing autonomy in teacher learning management. A literature review consistently argues that the Independent Curriculum is a response to the challenges of globalization and digitalization, which require the younger generation to possess comprehensive 21st-century skills, encompassing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects.

One of the key points discussed in the literature is the flexibility of the curriculum structure, which allows teachers to design learning according to the context and characteristics of students. This provides opportunities for classroom teachers to develop more relevant and participatory pedagogical approaches. A study by Wulandari et al. (2022) showed that this flexibility increases teachers' motivation to design creative learning, particularly in developing teaching modules and projects to strengthen the Pancasila student profile. This is considered capable of strengthening active student engagement and expanding the space for exploration of interdisciplinary learning.

However, the implementation of this curriculum is not without challenges, particularly regarding teachers' conceptual understanding of the philosophy and principles of the Independent Curriculum. Much literature indicates that teachers' understanding is still limited to the administrative aspects of the curriculum, rather than its transformational dimensions. Research by Maulida (2023) emphasized that most elementary school classroom teachers lack the skills to effectively develop differentiated learning, particularly in managing the learning needs of students with varying ability levels.

Another challenge lies in teachers' ability to independently develop teaching modules. Although the Independent Curriculum policy allows teachers the freedom to choose and develop teaching modules, many teachers are unfamiliar with a learning planning approach based on diagnostic assessments and students' actual needs. A literature review by Hidayat et al. (2021) shows that some teachers still rely on pre-built modules without adapting them to their class characteristics, resulting in a generic and non-contextual learning approach.

Furthermore, the limited availability of ongoing training and technical assistance is also a central issue. Teachers' pedagogical and digital literacy varies widely, especially in areas with limited resources. Several studies, such as that by Ramadhani and Nuraini (2022), highlight that the training provided is still one-way and does not provide reflective space for teachers to develop in-depth understanding. The absence of an active teacher learning community also weakens collective support for the implementation of this new curriculum.

On the other hand, the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) has positively contributed to the development of students' character and social skills. This project is considered capable of facilitating meaningful cross-subject learning and strengthening the integration of noble values into daily life. A study by Santosa (2023) showed that teachers active in P5 are able to create collaborative, contextual, and challenging learning spaces, despite challenges in time planning and content integration.

The literature also shows that the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum is heavily influenced by school managerial capacity. Principals who are visionary and supportive of teacher professional development tend to foster a healthy climate of innovation within the learning community. Conversely, in a bureaucratic and instructive managerial context, teachers struggle to take the initiative in designing transformative learning because they are trapped in administrative routines.

From a policy perspective, the literature review highlights the importance of adapting curriculum implementation strategies based on the geographic, cultural, and socio-economic conditions of schools. A top-down, homogenous approach is no longer relevant to the principle of curriculum autonomy. Therefore, the literature recommends decentralizing training and evaluation policies to be more responsive to local needs. Learning innovations in elementary schools should emerge from local understanding, not simply replication of national examples.

Furthermore, the literature also demonstrates the need for a transformation in the role of teachers as learning facilitators and community motivators. The role of teachers is no longer limited to delivering material, but rather as agents of change capable of designing learning environments that humanize and liberate students. A study by Yuliani (2022) found that teachers who internalize the spirit of "independent learning" tend to be more reflective, adaptive, and collaborative in their teaching practices.

However, this role transformation cannot occur naturally without adequate structural and cultural support. Curriculum literacy, reflective skills, and technological skills must be part of teachers' ongoing professional development. This literature review emphasizes that teacher capacity building must be holistic, based on real needs, and integrated with an active learning community. True learning can only occur if teachers are positioned as lifelong learners.

Another finding from the literature study indicates that the uneven distribution of education quality in Indonesia has the potential to hinder the standardization of the Independent Curriculum. Geographical challenges, unequal digital infrastructure, and disparities in human resources contribute to disparities in the quality of curriculum implementation across regions. This reinforces the urgency of affirmative and context-based policy interventions.

Therefore, this literature review critically recommends strengthening the basic education ecosystem collaboratively, where teachers, principals, supervisors, and local governments must form a mutually supportive network. Curriculum reform will not succeed if it is viewed as a technical burden, but rather as a transformative opportunity to shape a generation of reflective, creative, and character-driven learners. Therefore, alignment between curriculum vision, field practices, and ongoing policy support is necessary.

By synthesizing various literature findings, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in elementary schools holds great potential for creating more meaningful and contextual learning. However, its success depends heavily on teacher readiness, policy flexibility, and the commitment of the education ecosystem to creating liberating learning spaces. This literature review provides the initial foundation for formulating strategies to strengthen teacher capacity and support the implementation of a more contextual, adaptive, and participatory curriculum.

Conclusion

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in elementary schools is a strategic effort to respond to the demands of 21st-century education, which emphasizes flexibility, differentiated learning, and strengthening student character through the Pancasila student profile. Based on the results of a literature review, this curriculum provides significant opportunities for classroom teachers to design more contextual, participatory, and meaningful learning. However, successful implementation is highly influenced by teachers' pedagogical readiness, school managerial support,

and the continuity of adaptive training. Key challenges include limited conceptual understanding, the ability to independently develop teaching modules, and structural barriers such as disparities in resources and infrastructure. This literature review also emphasizes the importance of a decentralized and locally based policy approach, as well as strengthening learning communities that encourage pedagogical reflection and innovation. Therefore, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum cannot be viewed solely as an administrative reform, but rather as a transformative process that requires collaboration between teachers, schools, and other stakeholders. This study recommends more contextualized teacher training planning, practice-based evaluation, and strengthening the educational ecosystem that substantially supports independent learning at the elementary school level.

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