



Kindergarten Curriculum Revolution: Aligning the Independent Curriculum with the Needs of the Global Education Industry

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to examine how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented at TK Darussalam Blokagung Banyuwangi and to identify the challenges and strategies in aligning this independent curriculum with global education demands, as well as to propose practical recommendations for enhancing its implementation

Methodology: Employing a descriptive qualitative case study approach, the research involved one principal and six homeroom teachers, with data gathered through structured observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation of classroom activities; a comprehensive literature review informed the analysis, which was conducted using manual transcript analysis

Main Findings: Findings reveal that the Merdeka Curriculum enables flexible lesson planning that fosters religious character, independence, creativity, and collaboration, leading to heightened student enthusiasm and engagement; however, implementation barriers—such as limited teacher proficiency in project-based learning, inadequate facilities, and insufficient parental involvement—were evident, prompting the school to conduct regular professional development and strengthen community partnerships to improve curriculum delivery

Novelty/Originality of this study: Uniquely, this study focuses on a rural P/ setting, offering novel insights into adapting independent curriculum framework to meet global education industry requirements in under-resourced contexts generating context-specific recommendations that advance current understanding of curriculum flexibility and the integration of local and global educational values

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, early childhood education (PAUD), especially at the Kindergarten level, has faced the demands of adapting to major changes in the global world of education. The core of the curriculum is a program designed to achieve educational goals. The curriculum has been known since the classical Islamic period, where at that time it focused more on a collection of subjects. Over time, the [1], [2] has developed with a wider scope, covers various aspects of life, and is known as *minhaj* which means the path of light. One of the significant phenomena that affects the world of education in Indonesia is the implementation of the Independent Curriculum [3]-[5]. This curriculum brings a paradigm shift in the teaching and learning process that is more flexible, focuses on more individualized learning, and prioritizes children's independence and freedom of thought [6]-[10]. The existence of the Independent Curriculum carries the value of freedom that provides space for educators to develop children's creativity and potential optimally, in accordance with local needs and contexts.

Various measurement results related to student learning outcomes, including international-scale assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), indicate that the quality of learning outcomes in Indonesia is still relatively low. In addition, PISA data also shows that the improvement in the quality of education in the last two decades is still very limited. PISA, developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), aims to measure the achievement of 15-year-old students in literacy, numeracy, and science aspects [11]-[13].

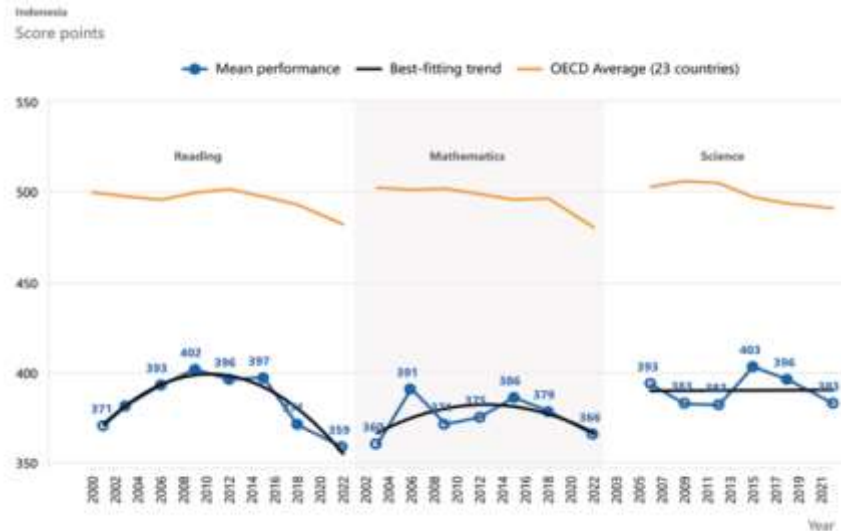


Figure 01: Graph of PISA Results from 2000-2021

Based on the development of PISA results from 2000 to 2022, there are several important things that can be noted. Overall, Indonesia's PISA score is still far below the average of OECD member countries. Literacy, numeracy, and science skills had improved in a few years, but then declined again. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world in early 2020, PISA again held an assessment in 2022. This pandemic has limited educational activities and the learning process, which has resulted in significant learning loss. The results of PISA 2022 show that the literacy, numeracy, and science achievements of Indonesian students have declined globally. However, compared to many other countries, Indonesia's decline in score is relatively smaller, so our international ranking has actually increased [14].

However, in the midst of the implementation of this ambitious Independent Curriculum, there are major challenges related to how to align this curriculum with the needs of the global education industry [15], [16], [17], [18], [19]. The world of education that continues to change, characterized by the rapid development of information technology, increased global mobility, and increasingly complex social challenges, forces the education system to be more responsive to these needs [20], [21], [22]. In Indonesia, curriculum reform efforts are also the main discussion, especially in early childhood education institutions (TK) which are an important foundation in early childhood development.

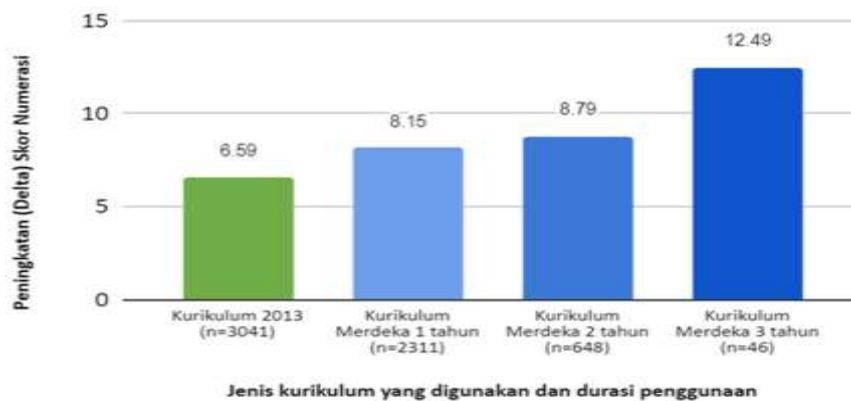


Figure 02: Difference in Increase in Numeracy Score (on a scale of 0-100)

This phenomenon is increasingly relevant considering that many educational institutions are still focusing on a more conventional and centralized curriculum model, which cannot fully accommodate changing global needs

and technological developments [23]-[26]. One of the institutions that is facing this dynamic is Darussalam Blokagung Banyuwangi Kindergarten. In this kindergarten, there are efforts to adapt the Independent Curriculum to the needs of the global education industry that continues to grow. However, the phenomenon on the ground shows that this process does not go smoothly, many challenges must be faced.

The phenomenon at Darussalam Blokagung Banyuwangi Kindergarten Darussalam Blokagung Banyuwangi, as an educational institution committed to providing quality education, faces a big dilemma in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. On the one hand, this curriculum offers freedom in managing learning, allowing educators to be more creative and attentive to each child's individual needs. However, on the other hand, the process of adjusting the Independent Curriculum in kindergarten still faces significant obstacles.

Some of the problems that arise in Darussalam Kindergarten related to the implementation of the Independent Curriculum include difficulties in designing a curriculum that can balance between the freedom provided by the Independent Curriculum and the demands to remain relevant to global developments. Along with the development of technology and digital-based learning approaches, children in Darussalam Kindergarten begin to get to know technology devices early. This requires educators to adapt their approach to suit the future needs of such children without neglecting local values and character education.

On the other hand, educators at Darussalam Kindergarten still need support in terms of developing their competencies, both in pedagogical and technological aspects. Many teachers still have difficulty in translating the concept of the Independent Curriculum based on flexibility into practices that are in accordance with local conditions and children's needs. This is a major challenge for existing curriculum management, because although this curriculum offers freedom, in practice, many institutions feel confused in determining an effective learning model and in accordance with the development of the global education industry.

Some of the main problems that arise in Darussalam Blokagung Kindergarten related to the implementation of the Independent Curriculum are as follows: 1) Difficulties in Technology Integration: Although technological developments greatly affect the world of education, many teachers are not fully ready to integrate technology in learning effectively. 2) Limited Resources: Human resources and facilities at Darussalam Kindergarten are not fully adequate to support the implementation of the ideal Independent Curriculum, especially in terms of teacher training and procurement of digital-based teaching materials. 3) Difficulties in Adapting to the Needs of the Global Education Industry: Although the Merdeka Curriculum offers flexibility, adjustment to evolving global standards and trends, such as project-based learning and 21st century skills development, is still a major challenge for educators in Darussalam Kindergarten.

The implementation uses project-based learning and Pancasila student profile strengthening projects to form students who are competent, characterful, and in accordance with Pancasila values. Evaluation is carried out through meetings that discuss implementation, future plans, teacher welfare, and student learning outcomes. Another study by [27] examines the Analysis of the Independent Curriculum of Independent Learning in Early Childhood Education Units. The results of the study revealed that the concept of independent learning carried out by the Ministry of Education and Culture is in line with the principles of the independent curriculum. The preparation and structure of the curriculum must be based on a basic framework that is carefully considered to produce an effective independent curriculum. The profile of Pancasila students in the independent curriculum includes: a) piety to God Almighty; b) independence; c) the ability to work together; d) global diversity; e) critical reasoning skills; and f) innovation and creativity.

The advantage of this research lies in its more specific focus on Darussalam Blokagung Kindergarten Banyuwangi, which will provide a more in-depth picture of how the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at this institution is adjusted to local and global needs. In contrast to previous research that was more general, this study will provide practical recommendations for educational institutions that focus on early childhood education in specific areas. This research is important because it focuses on curriculum management at the kindergarten level that faces challenges in aligning national education policies with the needs of the global education world. In the context of Darussalam Blokagung Banyuwangi Kindergarten, it is important to explore how the Independent Curriculum can be well adapted, while considering the needs of children's development and global demands in education.

The main focus of this research is to delve deeper into the challenges faced by educators and management of Darussalam Kindergarten in implementing the Independent Curriculum, as well as to find solutions that can help these educational institutions adapt to global trends, without losing local identity and important character education values at an early age.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a case study approach that aims to understand the application of the independent curriculum. The qualitative research method is a process of collecting data through the identification, description, and elaboration of phenomena that occur. In this study, the data obtained was not statistically analyzed, but explained based on the observed phenomenon [28].

The subject of the study is the educator and education staff of Darussalam Blokagung Kindergarten, Banyuwangi. The number of subjects is 7 people, namely, 1 principal and 6 homeroom teachers/teachers of Kindergarten A and Kindergarten B. Data collection techniques are carried out through observation, interviews, and documentation of curriculum implementation activities in the learning process in the classroom. The literature review used includes books and journals that are relevant to the research topic. The data analysis was focused on the implementation of the independent curriculum at Darussalam Blokagung Banyuwangi Kindergarten, by conducting observations, interviews, and documentation, which was then followed by the process of drawing conclusions and the analysis stage.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Kindergarten as an Innovative Step in Basic Education

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in schools faces various challenges. To overcome these challenges, various steps have been taken, such as improving teacher competence, improving facilities, and strengthening collaboration between stakeholders [29]-[31]. At the kindergarten level, this curriculum combines elements of the 2013 Curriculum with the Independent Learning approach, which has shown progress in supporting various aspects of child development, although there are still obstacles in understanding the material. Some strategies to support implementation include creative literacy programs, introduction of Pancasila student profiles through songs, and the integration of Pancasila values and religious elements in learning activities. Continuous efforts are needed to adjust and improve the implementation of the curriculum at various levels of education.

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Darussalam Blokagung Kindergarten in Banyuwangi is one example of the implementation of early childhood education that prioritizes flexibility and innovation in learning. This curriculum provides freedom for schools to adapt the teaching and learning process to the needs of students holistically, while supporting the development of Pancasila Student profiles. Its main focus includes aspects of religion, independence, creativity, and cooperation, which are important cornerstones for preparing students for future global challenges. One of the advantages of implementing the Independent Curriculum in Darussalam Kindergarten is the flexibility in arranging learning activities that are in accordance with the characteristics and potential of students. As an Islamic-based educational institution, Darussalam Kindergarten integrates religious values in every aspect of learning. Activities such as memorizing daily prayers, telling Islamic stories, and practicing simple worship are part of the curriculum implemented. This supports the formation of religious character in students from an early age, in line with one of the elements of the Pancasila Student Profile, namely fearing God Almighty.



Figure 3. Profile of Pancasila Students of the Independent Curriculum at Darussalam Blokagung Kindergarten
Source: Processed Researcher

In addition, the Independent Curriculum at Darussalam Kindergarten also emphasizes the development of student independence through an experiential learning approach. For example, in role-playing activities, students are invited to learn to take on simple responsibilities, such as keeping the classroom clean or sharing toys with friends. This approach helps students build the confidence and independence that are essential for their development at the next level of education. Creativity and cooperation are also the main focus in learning at Darussalam Kindergarten. Activities such as making crafts from recycled materials, free-drawing or playing group games encourage students to think creatively and learn to work together with their peers. Teachers act as facilitators who provide direction, but still provide space for students to explore and develop their ideas. This approach not only improves children's fine motor skills, but also trains them to think critically and innovate.

Competency-based curriculum, such as the Independent Curriculum, is able to improve the quality of learning at the early childhood education level [32]. At Darussalam Kindergarten, the implementation of this curriculum has a positive impact, especially in increasing student involvement during the learning process. Teachers reported that students became more enthusiastic in participating in activities, because the learning methods applied were more varied and fun.

However, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Darussalam Kindergarten also faces challenges. One of the obstacles faced is the need to improve teachers' understanding of project-based learning approaches and differentiated learning. Some teachers need further training in order to maximize the potential of this curriculum. In addition, the limitation of facilities such as teaching aids and interactive learning media is also an obstacle in the implementation of learning activities.



Figure 4. Socialization Activities of 7 Great Indonesian Children's Habits from School Principals to Parents
Source: Darussalam Kindergarten Documentation

To overcome these challenges, Darussalam Kindergarten has taken strategic steps, such as organizing regular teacher training and involving the school community, including parents, in supporting learning activities. Support from the government and related parties is also very necessary, especially in the provision of adequate facilities and infrastructure. Overall, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Darussalam Blokagung Banyuwangi Kindergarten has brought positive changes in the early childhood education process. With a flexible and innovative approach, this curriculum not only helps students develop basic skills, but also forms strong character and is ready to face the challenges of the global era. Although there are still obstacles that must be overcome, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Darussalam Kindergarten is an important step towards a better educational transformation.

3.2. Harmonization of Local Values and Challenges in the Independent Curriculum in Kindergarten (TK)

Early childhood education (PAUD) has an important role in shaping the foundation of children's character, morals, and knowledge [27], [33], [34]. In the era of globalization, the challenges faced by educational institutions are increasingly complex, especially in maintaining a balance between distinctive local values and rapidly growing global values. At Darussalam Kindergarten, Blokagung, Banyuwangi, efforts to harmonize local and global values have become the focus in the preparation of the curriculum to produce a generation with strong character, competitiveness, while still upholding local wisdom.



Figure 05: One of the outdoor learning activities on Saturday

From the picture above, it can be seen that the learning activities carried out at Darussalam Blokagung Kindergarten are not just indoor activities, there are also outdoor activities to be one of the refreshing activities for students so that they do not feel bored with activities carried out for one week if they are always indoors. These outdoor activities are often filled with activities that are useful in physical exercise, such as light exercise, healthy walking, or community service activities together cleaning the school area to foster a sense of concern for the environment.

The alignment of the Independent Curriculum at Darussalam Blokagung Kindergarten, Banyuwangi, faces various challenges, ranging from limited teacher understanding, obstacles in making descriptive report cards, to limited facilities and infrastructure. In addition, the challenge of adapting learning to global education standards and the lack of support from parents are also obstacles in the implementation of this curriculum. Therefore, a joint effort is needed between schools, teachers, parents, and related parties to overcome these challenges and ensure that the Independent Curriculum can be implemented effectively to create a more quality and globally competitive education.

The results of the data analysis in this article directly address the research problem, which is how the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at TK Darussalam Blokagung Banyuwangi faces global demands and technological developments. The findings show that the Merdeka Curriculum successfully enhances students religious character, independence, creativity, and cooperation, despite challenges such as limited facilities, teachers' understanding of project-based learning, and insufficient parental involvement. Thus, the analysis results convincingly answer the research problem without doubt. The data shows that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at TK Darussalam encourages flexible learning based on the children's potential, although the main barriers are teachers' competencies and limited facilities. This research aligns with [27], [35] who also emphasize the importance of curriculum flexibility and the integration of local values through the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) Project. However, this study focuses more on adaptation in rural-based institutions. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the Early Childhood Education (PAUD) level must consider local factors and ongoing support from the educational community to ensure long-term success, particularly in areas with limited resources. The novelty of this research lies in the specific study of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in rural PAUD institutions, which has not been widely explored in previous studies. This research also highlights the practical adaptation of the curriculum in facing global challenges. This study is limited to only one kindergarten in Banyuwangi, with a descriptive qualitative approach during a specific period. Therefore, it does not encompass the long-term effects of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation.

4. CONCLUSION

The conclusion in this article answers the main research problem, which is the effectiveness and challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in region-based kindergartens. This research also generates a new concept about the importance of harmonizing local values and global demands in the implementation of the PAUD curriculum. The implications are that curriculum flexibility must be accompanied by strengthening teacher capacity, supporting infrastructure, and active community involvement to create high-quality, globally competitive early childhood education.

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