

Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Improving the Quality of Education at State Islamic Senior High Schools

Muna Hatija,¹ Akhsanul In'am², Khozin³, Faridi⁴

¹ University of Muhammadiyah Malang dan STISIP Veteran, Palopo; hatijamuna@webmail.umm.ac.id

³ University of Muhammadiyah Malang; akhsanul@umm.ac.id

⁴ University of Muhammadiyah Malang; khozin@umm.ac.id

⁵ University of Muhammadiyah Malang; faridi_umm@umm.ac.id

Abstract	
Keywords: Independent curriculum; Learning strategies; Intensive teacher training; Student digital skills development.	Implementing the Independent Curriculum is increasingly urgent in efforts to improve the quality of education that is more flexible, relevant, and adaptive to students' needs. However, problems are still related to the effective implementation of the independent curriculum in educational institutions, especially at the Islamic-based madrasa level. The purpose of this study is to describe the implementation strategy of the Independent Curriculum at MAN Palopo, as well as to identify the challenges faced and opportunities that can be optimized. Using a qualitative method with a case study type, this study found several main strategies, such as classroom adjustments, digital skills development through technology, interest-based learning, and intensive teacher training. The main findings show that MAN Palopo has demonstrated a high commitment to implementing the Independent Curriculum, including integrating technology and project-based learning, but faces limited facilities, time management, and teacher training that still needs improvement. The implications of this study include the need to improve facilities and infrastructure, fulfil the need for technological devices, ongoing training for teachers, and more efficient time management to ensure that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum runs optimally and sustainably.
Abstrak	
Kata kunci: Kurikulum Merdeka; Strategi pembelajaran; Pelatihan intensif guru; Pengembangan keterampilan digital siswa.	<i>Implementasi Kurikulum Mandiri semakin mendesak dalam upaya peningkatan kualitas pendidikan yang lebih fleksibel, relevan, dan adaptif terhadap kebutuhan peserta didik. Namun demikian, masih terdapat permasalahan terkait implementasi kurikulum mandiri yang efektif di lembaga pendidikan, khususnya di tingkat madrasah. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mendeskripsikan strategi implementasi Kurikulum Mandiri di MAN Palopo, serta mengidentifikasi tantangan yang dihadapi dan peluang yang dapat dioptimalkan. Menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan jenis studi kasus, penelitian ini menemukan beberapa strategi utama, seperti penyesuaian ruang kelas, pengembangan keterampilan digital melalui teknologi, pembelajaran berbasis minat, dan pelatihan guru secara intensif. Temuan utama menunjukkan bahwa MAN Palopo telah menunjukkan komitmen yang tinggi dalam mengimplementasikan Kurikulum Mandiri, termasuk mengintegrasikan teknologi dan pembelajaran berbasis proyek, tetapi menghadapi keterbatasan fasilitas, manajemen waktu, dan pelatihan guru yang masih perlu ditingkatkan. Implikasi dari studi ini antara lain adalah perlunya peningkatan sarana dan prasarana, pemenuhan kebutuhan perangkat teknologi, pelatihan berkelanjutan bagi guru, dan manajemen waktu yang lebih efisien untuk memastikan implementasi Kurikulum Mandiri berjalan optimal dan berkelanjutan.</i>
Article history: Received: 15-06-2024 Revised: 13-11-2024 Accepted: 04-02-2025	
Corresponding Author: Muna Hatija University of Muhammadiyah Malang ; hatijamuna@webmail.umm.ac.id	

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum changes in the world of education in Indonesia are one of the government's efforts to address the challenges of improving the quality of education (Ningrum, Mirza, & Qamariah, 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology is a significant transformation step that aims to provide greater freedom to educational units in designing and implementing a curriculum that suits the needs and characteristics of students (Fauzan, Ansori, Dannur, Pratama, & Hairit, 2023). This approach is expected to encourage students to develop their potential and abilities according to local needs and 21st-century competencies, such as critical, creative, collaborative, and innovative thinking (Mubarok, 2024).

MAN Palopo, one of Indonesia's Islamic educational institutions that implements the Independent Curriculum, has an important role in preparing students to face global challenges and local needs. In its implementation, the Independent Curriculum at MAN Palopo not only aims to fulfil academic achievements, but also includes aspects of character, life skills, and religious attitudes that follow the vision of the madrasah. This is done so that the madrasah can become a place that produces a generation that is not only academically intelligent but also has a strong and resilient personality. Although the Independent Curriculum provides flexibility in its implementation, the implementation of the independent curriculum is faced with various challenges that need to be considered. Some of these challenges include the readiness of human resources (Pratikno, Hermawan, & Arifin, 2022), supporting facilities and infrastructure (Abdillah, Asiah, & Suwiyono, 2023), and the ability of teachers to adapt to a more independent curriculum concept (Sakinah & Mukhtar, 2023). In addition, adjustments in learning methods (Ngoasong, 2021) assessment (Rizki & Fahkrunisa, 2022) and student involvement in active learning (Aguillon et al., 2020) are important focuses in the implementation of the independent curriculum? (Zulinto, Lestari, Kristiawan, Yanti, & Danim, 2023).

Research related to the theme of the Independent Curriculum has become an important part in the last two years, so relevant research has certainly been conducted by other studies. There are studies from (Permatasari, Aldi, Nidiatika, & Maja, 2023); (Efendi & Suastra, 2023); (Musthofa & Agus, 2022); (Fitri, Herman, Sa'ud, Suparman, & DS, 2023); (Syah, Wardani, & Suminar, 2023) which focuses on the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. The results of their research show that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum plays an important role in improving the quality of education through innovation and independence, providing flexibility for teachers and students to innovate, and encouraging differentiated learning according to the profile of Pancasila students.

Previous studies generally focused on public schools or elementary madrasahs. Although the gradual implementation that has been carried out offers freedom and potential for quality improvement, there are still challenges in the readiness of human resources and implementation in the field. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in the

focus on MAN which provides new insights into how the characteristics of the independent curriculum adapt, the Independent Curriculum contributes to improving the quality of madrasahs, as well as the readiness and challenges of its implementation in the context of religious education which has characteristics in teaching religious values and student independence in learning. This study highlights aspects that require further attention, such as the planning and implementation process of learning that is tailored to the needs of madrasahs. Thus, this study is unique in the context of Islamic-based educational institutions and provides a comprehensive picture of the adaptation of the Independent Curriculum in improving the quality of education in the madrasah aliyah environment, which has not been widely studied before.

The purpose of this study is to explore in depth the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at MAN Palopo. Specifically, this study aims to: identify the strategies and steps implemented, describe the challenges faced in implementing the Independent Curriculum, and analyze the opportunities that MAN Palopo can utilize to optimize the Independent Curriculum. This study is expected to complement the shortcomings of previous studies by providing insight into strategies for increasing the capacity of educators to face the challenges of the independent curriculum, as well as providing practical recommendations that can help madrasahs in facing obstacles and maximizing the potential of the Independent Curriculum so that it can be used as a reference by other institutions in implementing this curriculum more optimally.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach, which aims to understand the phenomenon in depth in the context of the study. Through a qualitative approach, researchers try to understand and explore how the Independent Curriculum is implemented in MAN Palopo, by considering contextual factors that influence its success and challenges. This type of research is a case study, which focuses specifically on the case of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in MAN Palopo.

The informants in this study included a madrasah principal, a vice principal of the madrasah for curriculum, 6 teachers consisting of 2 teachers from each class, and 12 students consisting of 4 representatives from classes X, XI, and XII. The selection of these informants aims to obtain diverse perspectives on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum from various parties who play a direct role in the learning process at MAN Palopo.

The data collection techniques used participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Researchers conducted direct observations in the madrasah environment, including the learning process in the classroom and curriculum-related activities, to get an idea of how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented daily. Researchers also conducted in-depth interviews with the madrasah principal, vice principal, teachers, and students. These interviews were designed with open interview guidelines that allowed researchers to explore the experiences, views, and obstacles faced by each informant in implementing the Merdeka curriculum. Researchers will also

collect various relevant documents, such as lesson plans, teaching modules, and evaluation reports from the madrasah, to support the data obtained from observations and interviews.

The data analysis technique used is the model (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), which includes three main steps, namely: Data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion. Data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation are selected, summarized, and focused on information relevant to the research objectives. Then the condensed data is arranged in the form of a matrix or narrative to facilitate interpretation. Finally, the researcher concludes the patterns that emerge and re-tests the findings to ensure their accuracy and reliability.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, researchers will use triangulation techniques, namely by comparing data from various sources (observations, interviews, and documentation). This triangulation helps strengthen the validity of research results by ensuring that information obtained from various sources is consistent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Independent Curriculum Implementation Strategy

During the observation conducted at MAN Palopo, the researcher noted that this school had prepared various aspects to support the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Several things observed included the adjustment of classrooms to support more flexible learning activities, such as the use of more intensive technological aids in the teaching and learning process (Obs.1). In addition, there was an increase in the allocation of time for each subject, which provided more opportunities for students to explore the material in more depth. The researcher also observed the seriousness of the madrasah principal and educators in planning and implementing this new curriculum. This can be seen from their readiness to prepare teaching materials, discussing the evaluation methods that will be applied, and their activeness in participating in training related to the Independent Curriculum (Obs.1).

The results of interviews conducted with the head of the madrasah and the deputy head of the curriculum division at MAN Palopo provide a clear picture of the readiness and strategy for implementing the Independent Curriculum at the madrasah. Based on interviews with the head of the madrasah, it is known that the management of the madrasah is very serious in welcoming and implementing the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. The head of the madrasah emphasized that a deep understanding of the Independent Curriculum is an important basis for ensuring the successful implementation of the curriculum (W/Inf.1).

The head of the madrasah stated that the technical policies in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum must follow the guidelines set by the Ministry of Religion, namely the Decree of the Minister of Religion (KMA) No. 347 of 2022 concerning Guidelines for the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum for learning recovery, and the Decree of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research and

Technology No. 56 of 2022. These guidelines are considered important to ensure proper implementation and per applicable national standards so that the goals of recovery and improving the quality of learning can be achieved. In the interview, the head of the madrasah also emphasized the importance of support from various parties, including teachers, in implementing this policy properly in the field (W/Inf.1).

Furthermore, interviews with the deputy head of curriculum provided additional information regarding the structure and significant changes that occurred in the Independent Curriculum compared to the 2013 Curriculum. The deputy head of curriculum explained that one of the main changes in the Independent Curriculum was the elimination of the majoring system that previously limited students' choices in determining subjects according to their interests and talents (W/Inf.2). With the freedom to choose subjects, students are given greater opportunities to explore areas of interest to them, including new subjects that were reintroduced, such as information technology.

In terms of preparation for the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, the deputy head of curriculum said that they had planned comprehensive preparations, which included training for teachers, preparation of facilities and infrastructure, and periodic evaluations to ensure that the curriculum was running according to the desired objectives (W/Inf.2). One important step taken was to integrate a writing-based evaluation method, which is considered effective in measuring students' ability to develop ideas and convey their thoughts in writing.

Documentation obtained from the madrasah includes several materials and policies that have been issued by the madrasah to support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Among them are documents regarding changes to the curriculum structure, which include the elimination of the major system and the addition of new subjects, such as information technology. In addition, there is documentation related to training attended by educators to ensure their understanding and skills in implementing this new curriculum. The researcher also obtained a copy of the Decree of the Minister of Religion (KMA) No. 347 of 2022 concerning the Guidelines for Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, which is the official reference in implementing the curriculum at MAN Palopo (Doc.1) This document shows the madrasah's commitment to following nationally established guidelines to restore post-pandemic learning and improve the quality of education.

Challenges faced in implementing the Independent Curriculum

Observations conducted at MAN Palopo showed significant efforts to implement the Independent Curriculum, although there are still several challenges that need to be overcome. One of the main challenges observed is the lack of adequate facilities, such as classrooms that are not flexible enough to support the project-based learning model required by this new curriculum. In addition, the use of technology in learning is still limited, and the allocation of time for deeper learning still feels less than optimal in several subjects. Observations also showed that although teachers and educators at MAN Palopo showed readiness to implement this new curriculum, they still needed

additional training to master learning methods that are more based on developing student creativity and skills. This is a major challenge, especially in dealing with changes in methods and evaluations expected by the Independent Curriculum (Obs.2).

In this study, interviews were conducted with the head of the madrasah, the deputy for curriculum, and several educators at MAN Palopo to explore the challenges faced in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. In an interview with the head of the madrasah, he revealed that teachers' readiness to implement the Merdeka Curriculum does exist, but the main challenge faced is increasing teacher capacity. The head of the madrasah emphasized the importance of further training for teachers, especially in understanding and adapting project-based learning methods which are an integral part of the Merdeka Curriculum. "We are ready, but of course, it takes time to deepen teachers' understanding and skills in implementing this method" said the head of the madrasah (W/Inf.1).

Furthermore, in interviews with several teachers, they stated that although they are aware of the effectiveness of project-based learning, many of them are not yet fully accustomed to the model. "This method gives students more freedom, but we need support in terms of technical implementation. We need more in-depth training," said a teacher. (W/Inf.3,4,5). This shows that despite readiness, limited experience in project-based learning is one of the main obstacles.

The head of the madrasah also conveyed the challenges in terms of infrastructure and supporting facilities for the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. "We are still trying to provide facilities that are per the needs of this new curriculum, such as more flexible spaces and more adequate learning aids" he said. Although there are some existing facilities, there is still an urgent need for more optimal learning technology (W/Inf.1).

Teachers at MAN Palopo also revealed that the implementation of learning technology is still limited. "Although we have some tools and facilities, for project-based learning involving technology, we still need more in-depth and more complete devices," said another teacher (W/Inf.6,7,8). This limitation shows that despite efforts from the school, providing adequate facilities is still a big challenge.

Interviews with the curriculum representative also revealed challenges in terms of time management. With the increased time allocation for learning activities in the Independent Curriculum, the challenge is how to manage that time effectively so that students can explore the material in depth without sacrificing other subjects. "We have to be able to manage our time as best we can, especially with the additional time for learning activities," said the curriculum representative (W. Inf.2).

Adjusting the school's daily schedule is also an obstacle because the change in the allocation of longer time requires the preparation of an efficient schedule so as not to burden students or teachers. "We have to consider all aspects to ensure that the schedule remains efficient and not burdensome," said the deputy for curriculum (W/Inf.4). Although the Independent Curriculum provides freedom in choosing and designing learning materials, it also brings challenges in terms of managing this freedom. "The

freedom to choose materials and develop an appropriate curriculum does provide many benefits, but we must also ensure that this freedom continues to lead to clear and measurable educational goals," explained the head of the madrasah. Another challenge faced is how to align the Independent Curriculum with the existing curriculum in schools. "Although there is freedom, we must ensure that this change does not disrupt the curriculum that is already running and approved by parents and the community," said one teacher (W/Inf.9).

The last challenge expressed in the interview was related to the evaluation of project-based learning. Although teachers at MAN Palopo acknowledged the effectiveness of this evaluation method, they expressed difficulties in implementing it fairly and consistently. "Project-based evaluation does provide a more comprehensive picture of students' abilities, but the challenge is how to set fair criteria for all students, especially those with different levels of ability," said a teacher. (W/Inf.5). In addition, the need for clear evaluation standards is also a challenge because the project-based learning model gives students greater freedom to develop themselves. "We need to have clear guidelines for assessing student learning outcomes so that there is no unfairness in the assessment," explained another teacher.

In collecting documentation, researchers obtained documents that included reports of training activities that had been carried out by the madrasah to support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. However, the documentation obtained showed that the training carried out was still limited to introducing the curriculum without an in-depth focus on developing teachers' practical abilities in implementing project-based learning methods. In addition, there was documentation related to facilities and infrastructure that showed limitations in terms of technological devices and learning spaces that better supported active learning models. Researchers also obtained documents regarding the learning time management plan that had been prepared by the school (Doc.2). This document shows efforts to adjust the schedule and allocation of learning time, but time management is still a challenge in its implementation, given the limited time given for more in-depth material, as well as the evaluation process that is more focused on student skills.

Opportunities to Optimize the Independent Curriculum

During the observation at MAN Palopo, the researcher noted several opportunities that could be utilized to optimize the Independent Curriculum, especially those related to flexibility in choosing subjects and using technology. Observations showed that students seemed more enthusiastic about taking the lessons they chose according to their interests and talents, which supported increasing their motivation and involvement in learning. The existence of a more open classroom for discussion and collaboration between students also showed great potential for developing social skills and teamwork. In addition, the use of information technology in learning is increasingly visible at MAN Palopo, with several classes using digital devices and learning applications to support teaching (Obs.3). Although technological infrastructure is still limited, the potential for

utilizing technology to improve students' digital skills is very large, especially in preparing them to face the demands of an era that is increasingly focused on digital capabilities.

Based on the results of interviews with the head of the madrasah, deputy head of curriculum, and educators at MAN Palopo, several opportunities can be utilized to optimize the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and improve the quality of education in madrasahs. One of the main opportunities that emerged from the results of this study is increasing freedom in choosing subjects for students (W/Inf.2). With this freedom, students can focus more on the areas they are interested in, which in turn can increase their motivation and engagement in learning.

In addition, the structure of the Independent Curriculum, which no longer limits students to certain pathways or majors, provides an opportunity for madrasahs to be more flexible in adapting the curriculum to local needs and student interests. This can also be an opportunity to introduce new subjects that are relevant to current developments, such as information technology, which is re-included in the curriculum (W/Inf.7). The use of technology as a learning tool is a great opportunity to improve students' digital skills, which are essential in facing the challenges of the world of work and life that increasingly rely on technology.

Another opportunity that can be optimized is increasing the allocation of time for learning activities. With the additional time given for learning each day, students are given more space to explore the subject matter in-depth, develop their creativity, and improve more applicable and relevant skills (W/Inf.10). This also opens up opportunities for teachers to take a more varied and project-based learning approach, which is considered more effective in honing critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills between students.

In addition, the seriousness of the madrasah in carrying out comprehensive preparations for the implementation, implementation, and evaluation of the Merdeka Curriculum is a great opportunity to ensure that this curriculum is implemented optimally. Educators at MAN Palopo have developed a more dynamic evaluation strategy based on projects and writing, which not only measures students' academic abilities but also their social skills and creativity (Obs.4). This will provide a more comprehensive picture of student's development, not only from an academic aspect but also the life skills they will need in the future.

The documentation collected shows that some plans and efforts have been made by the madrasah to optimize the Merdeka Curriculum. In the documents obtained, there is a more flexible learning plan where students can choose subjects according to their interests without being limited to certain paths or majors. This provides space for the development of student creativity in choosing the fields of study that interest them. The documentation also notes the addition of time allocation for learning, which provides greater opportunities for students to explore the subject matter (Doc.3). In the document, it is also noted that MAN Palopo plans to introduce new subjects that are relevant to current developments, such as information technology, as an effort to improve students'

digital skills. In addition, there is a document explaining the project-based and writing evaluation strategies implemented by educators. This strategy not only measures academic ability but also measures students' social skills, creativity, and life skills, which are considered important to prepare them to face future challenges.

Discussion

Strategy for Implementing Independent Curriculum in Improving the Quality of Education

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at MAN Palopo has shown strong readiness and commitment from the madrasah management and educators to realize education that is more flexible, relevant, and responsive to the needs of students. Based on the results of observations and interviews, researchers found several important aspects that are strategies for implementing the Independent Curriculum at MAN Palopo.

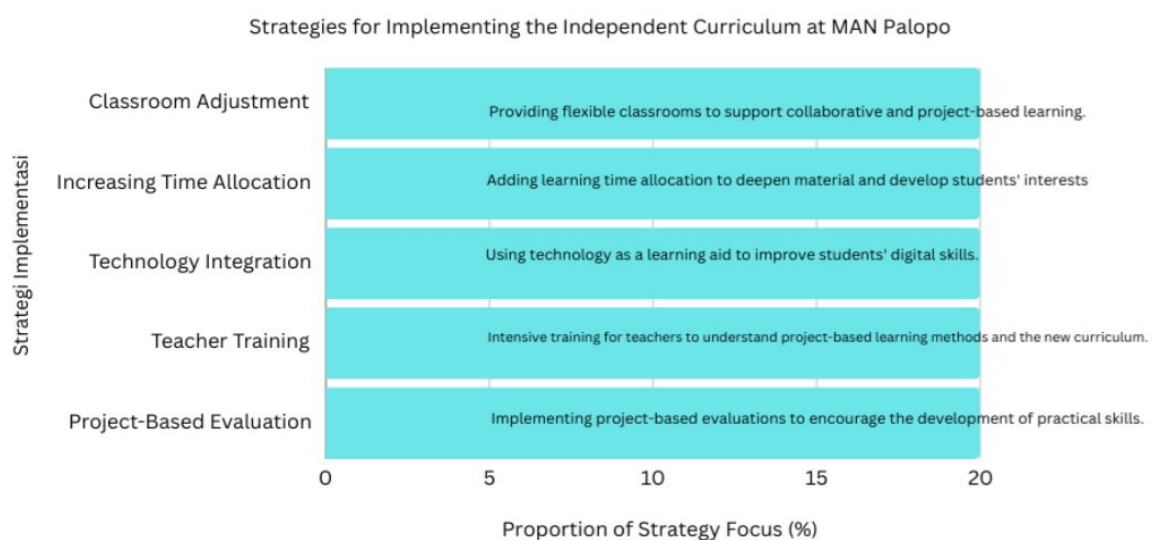


Figure 1: Strategy for Implementing the Independent Curriculum at MAN Palopo

One aspect that is highlighted is the adjustment of classrooms that support more flexible learning. The addition of time allocation for each subject provides more space for students to explore the material, and this shows great attention to the development of student potential. Researchers observed that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum allows for the use of technology as a more intensive learning tool, a relevant step in the context of 21st-century education (Peña-Ayala, 2021). The information technology introduced in the curriculum provides students with digital skills that are essential in a world of work that increasingly relies on technological capabilities (Haleem, Javaid, Qadri, & Suman, 2022).

The interview results showed that one of the main changes in the Independent Curriculum was the elimination of the majoring system, which previously limited students' freedom to choose subjects according to their interests and talents. This interest-based learning concept is in line with the constructivism theory put forward by Piaget and Vygotsky (Kulkarni, Chu, Sharma, & Sathe, 2022) where students are given the freedom to develop their knowledge based on their interests and experiences. With this freedom, students have greater opportunities to develop their creativity and interests, which in turn can increase learning motivation (Mazid, Futaqi, & Farikah, 2021)

The implementation strategy of the Merdeka Curriculum at MAN Palopo also includes systematic training for teachers. According to an interview with the head of the madrasah, the madrasah management is very serious about preparing teachers to understand and implement this curriculum. This is important because, according to it (Sa'diyah, Nurhayati, Endri, Supriadi, & Afrianto, 2022) the quality of teaching is highly dependent on the competence of teachers in understanding the curriculum being implemented. In addition, educators at MAN Palopo have been given training to integrate writing-based evaluation methods, which, as stated by, (William, 2020) can be more effective in measuring students' ability to think critically and express their thoughts in writing.

Documentation obtained from the madrasah, such as the Decree of the Minister of Religious Affairs (KMA) No. 347 of 2022 and the Decree of the Minister of Education and Culture, Research and Technology No. 56 of 2022, shows that the policies taken by MAN Palopo strongly support the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. This underlines the importance of synchronization between national policies and implementation at the local level. By following the established guidelines, the madrasah ensures that the implementation of this curriculum is by the national standards expected to improve the quality of education in Indonesia post-pandemic.

Project-based evaluation implemented at MAN Palopo is also a strategic step towards developing more holistic student skills. Education should prioritize practical experiences that are relevant to students' real lives, and project-based evaluation allows students to demonstrate their abilities in more applicable and relevant contexts. Research (Mandouit & Hattie, 2023) (Wisniewski, Zierer, & Hattie, 2020) also shows that feedback obtained from project-based evaluation can increase student motivation and engagement in the learning process.

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at MAN Palopo shows a significant step in efforts to improve the quality of education. The implementation of a more flexible curriculum, interest-based learning, the use of technology, and structured teacher training are strategic steps taken to optimize learning. Adjustments made per national policies and more dynamic evaluations are expected to help achieve the goals of learning recovery and improving the quality of education as a whole. Although there are still challenges related to facilities and time management, there are still great opportunities to improve the quality of education as long as support continues to be provided.

Challenges faced in implementing the Independent Curriculum in Improving the Quality of Education

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at MAN Palopo shows several challenges that need to be overcome so that the implementation of this curriculum can run optimally. Based on the results of observations, interviews, and documentation collected, several main challenges faced include inadequate facilities, limitations in the application of technology, the need for additional training for teachers, and challenges in managing learning time. To understand more deeply about these challenges, this analysis will link them to relevant theories regarding curriculum implementation and challenges in project-based education.

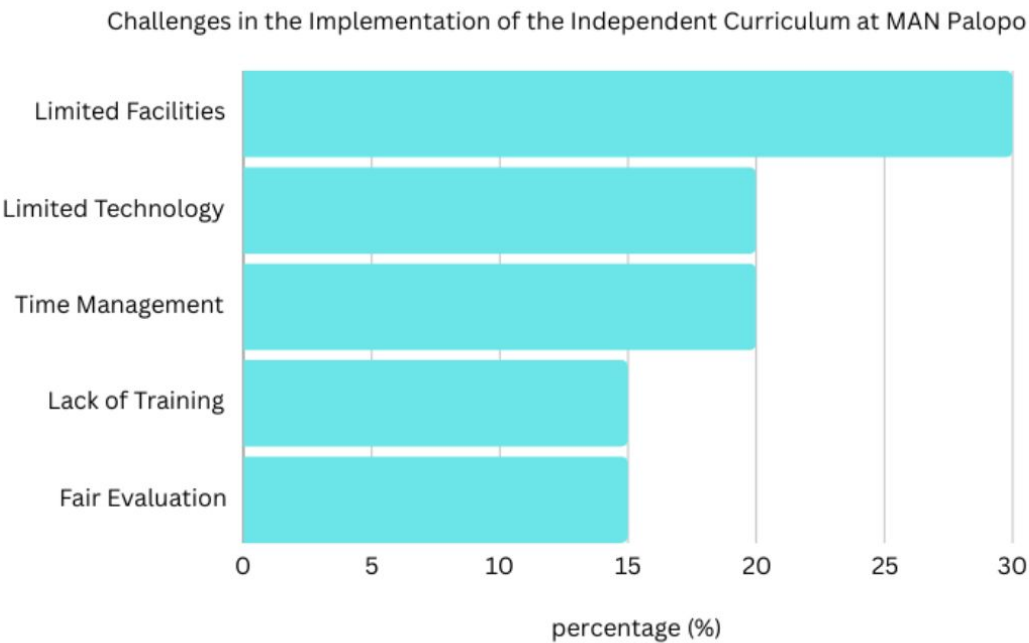


Figure 2: Challenges faced in implementing the Independent Curriculum

One of the main challenges faced by MAN Palopo is the limited facilities that support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, especially classrooms that are less flexible for project-based learning. As a curriculum that emphasizes more active and collaborative learning, static classrooms that do not support group discussions or project work are significant obstacles. According to Tanner & Tanner, adequate educational facilities are one of the important factors in supporting the effectiveness of curriculum implementation. The mismatch between learning spaces and project-based learning needs can hinder student creativity and in-depth learning (Trye Jr, 2020)

The lack of technological infrastructure is another challenge in implementing the Independent Curriculum at MAN Palopo. Information technology-based learning expected in this curriculum cannot be fully implemented due to limited devices and technological accessibility. According to (Laurillard, 2024) technology must be an integral part of learning that can connect students with information more broadly and

deeply. Technology in education not only improves students' digital skills but also gives them access to more and more varied resources. In this context, improving technological facilities is very important so that the Independent Curriculum can be implemented optimally (Agus, Juliadharma, & Djamaluddin, 2023; Fidayani & Ammar, 2023).

Although there is readiness from teachers at MAN Palopo to implement the Independent Curriculum, many of them still feel unfamiliar with the project-based learning method. As expressed by the principal of the madrasah, despite the readiness, the main challenge faced is increasing the capacity of teachers to master this new method (Fullan, 2020) emphasizing that the success of the implementation of the new curriculum is highly dependent on the pedagogical competence of teachers. Therefore, more in-depth and continuous training is needed so that teachers can master and adapt learning methods based on the development of student creativity and skills. This is also in line with Anderson's theory (Arifmiboy, Iltavia, & Iswandi, 2024; VanTassel-Baska, 2021) which emphasizes the importance of training to improve teaching effectiveness in the implementation of the new curriculum.

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum also requires more flexible time management so that students can explore the subject matter in more depth. However, the challenge that arises is how to manage limited time to ensure that students can participate in learning optimally without sacrificing other subjects. The results of the study (Santoso, Primandiri, Zubaidah, & Amin, 2021) show that effective time management is the main key to the successful implementation of a project-based curriculum, where each element of learning needs to receive balanced attention. In addition, adjusting a longer daily schedule to support in-depth learning adds to the complexity of time management, as expressed by the deputy head of curriculum. In this case, (Gouëdard, Pont, Hyttinen, & Huang, 2020) reminded that changes in the structure of learning time must be balanced with a comprehensive evaluation and adaptation of all components involved.

One of the main challenges expressed by teachers is how to implement project-based evaluation fairly and consistently. Project-based evaluation can provide a comprehensive picture of student development, but the biggest challenge is how to develop objective and fair evaluation criteria for all students with different ability levels (Pan, Shankararaman, Koh, & Gan, 2021). This requires clear guidelines and assessment standards that can be adapted by all educators. According to (Goss, 2022) effective evaluation must be able to reflect the process and learning outcomes of students holistically, which includes assessing students' social and cognitive skills.

Thus, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at MAN Palopo faces significant challenges in terms of facilities, technology, time management, and teacher training. Therefore, to ensure the successful implementation of the independent curriculum, it is necessary to: 1) Improve facilities and infrastructure, especially those that support project-based learning. 2) Provision of adequate technological devices to support the digital learning process. 3) More intensive and ongoing training for teachers

to improve their competence in project-based learning methods. 4) More efficient time management, with schedule adjustments that take into account in-depth learning needs.

Opportunities to Optimize the Independent Curriculum in Improving the Quality of Education

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at MAN Palopo opens up great opportunities to improve the quality of education, especially in the context of curriculum flexibility and the use of technology. Based on the results of observations and interviews with the head of the madrasah, deputy head of curriculum, and educators, several important aspects were found that have the potential to improve the quality of education, such as freedom in choosing subjects, the use of technology, and a project-based learning approach.

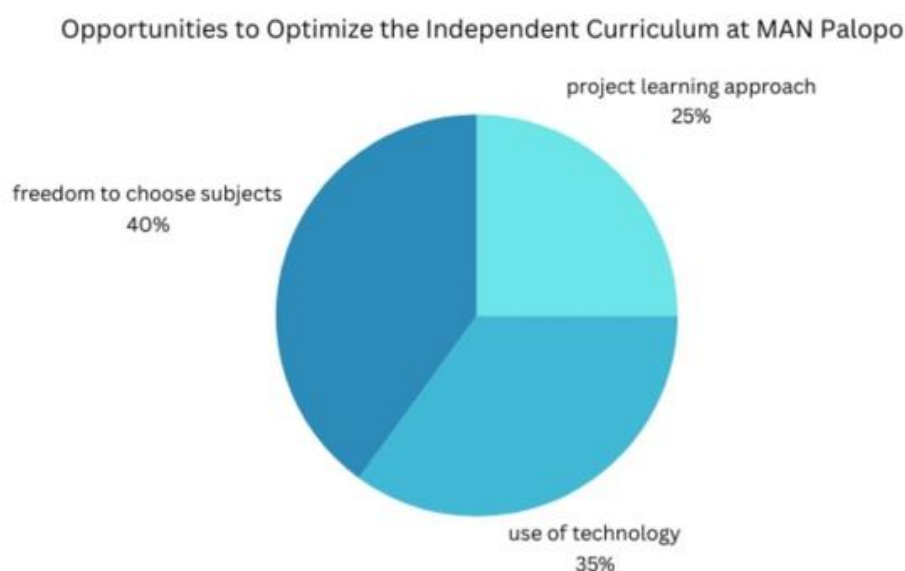


Figure 3: Challenges faced in implementing the Independent Curriculum

One of the main opportunities that emerge from the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is the freedom for students to choose subjects according to their interests and talents. This research is in line with the Self-Determination theory, which states that intrinsic motivation can be increased through freedom of choice that allows individuals to actualize their potential. In the context of education, this freedom allows students to feel more involved and motivated to learn because they learn about things that suit their interests.

In addition, this study also confirms Hattie's view that student motivation can develop through relevant learning experiences that focus on their interests. When students feel involved in choosing subjects, they are more likely to develop competencies

and actively participate in the learning process (Anggraeni & Purnomo, 2023; Saminan, Irwandi, Kamza, & Rasul, 2024; Zulfa & Zuhriyah, 2024). This curriculum flexibility not only provides opportunities for students to develop interests but also increases opportunities to optimize social and teamwork skills through interactions with classmates in various learning projects (Ismail, Junaedi, Hassan, & Nasikhin, 2024; Lafrarchi, 2020).

The use of technology in learning is a very relevant opportunity in facing the digital era. As found in this study, although the technological infrastructure at MAN Palopo is still limited, the use of information technology has begun to develop, and this has been proven to improve students' digital skills. Constructivism theory (Vygotsky, 1978) supports that technology can function as a tool in developing students' understanding by allowing them to access various information and develop critical thinking skills more interactively (Attaufiqi, Maskud, Maulana, Fatikh, & Firmansyah, 2024; Ismawati, Bakar, & Zamroni, 2024; Nadif, Nusucha, & Rofiq, 2023). The use of technology also has the potential to introduce more interesting and dynamic learning methods, as well as develop skills that are relevant to the demands of the future world of work.

In this case, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which introduces information technology as a new subject, shows the relevance of education to global needs. This change allows students at MAN Palopo to not only keep up with technological developments but also develop greater skills in using digital tools. This is in line with the view that digital skills have now become an important requirement to compete in the world of work.

Allocating more time for learning is another opportunity that can be optimized at MAN Palopo. With the increased time given, students have a greater opportunity to explore the subject matter in more depth and develop their creativity (Mubarok, Sholeh, & Irayana, 2023). This approach is in line with the principles of constructivist learning (Piaget, 1970), where knowledge is built through experience and deeper reflection on the material being studied (Pande & Bharathi, 2020). Increasing learning time allows teachers to use a more varied and project-based approach, which can improve critical thinking skills, problem-solving, and collaboration between students.

MAN Palopo also utilizes project-based and writing-based evaluation strategies, which are more holistic in assessing student development. This study supports the authentic evaluation theory developed by (Wiggins, 1990), which states that evaluations that assess students' real skills, such as creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving, provide a more complete picture of students' abilities (Schultz, Young, K. Gunning, & Harvey, 2022). With project-based evaluation, students are not only assessed based on academic results but also on their ability to collaborate, think critically, and adapt to changing situations - important skills in facing real-world challenges (Sokhanvar, Salehi, & Sokhanvar, 2021).

This study shows that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at MAN Palopo offers various opportunities to improve the quality of education. Flexibility in choosing subjects, the use of technology, increasing learning time, and project-based evaluation all contribute to the development of student competencies more comprehensively. These opportunities need to be supported by improving infrastructure, training for educators, and adequate resource allocation so that the implementation of this curriculum can run optimally.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at MAN Palopo shows a strong commitment from management and educators to improving the quality of education. Several important strategies in implementing this curriculum include classroom adjustments, more flexible time allocation, and integration of technology in learning. Students' freedom to choose subjects according to their interests and talents, the elimination of the majoring system, and structured teacher training are key factors in increasing student motivation and creativity. The implementation of project-based evaluation also supports the development of students' holistic skills. However, significant challenges remain, such as limited facilities and technology infrastructure, efficient time management, and the need for more in-depth teacher training. To optimize the success of the Independent Curriculum, it is necessary to improve facilities, provide adequate technological devices, more intensive training for teachers, and manage learning time more flexibly. However, great opportunities are open with the freedom to choose subjects that can increase students' intrinsic motivation and the use of technology that can enrich their learning experience. Therefore, with the right support, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at MAN Palopo can contribute significantly to improving the quality of education in Indonesia.

REFERENCES

- Abdillah, R. M. I., Asiah, S., & Suwiyono, S. (2023). Strategies to Face the Challenges of the Independent Curriculum in Improving the Quality of Islamic-Based Education. *An-Nuha: Jurnal Sosial & Humaniora*, 1(1), 54–63. <https://doi.org/10.63005/annuha.v1i1.15>
- Aguillon, S. M., Siegmund, G.-F., Petipas, R. H., Drake, A. G., Cotner, S., & Ballen, C. J. (2020). Gender differences in student participation in an active-learning classroom. *CBE – Life Sciences Education*, 19(2), ar12. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.19-03-0048>
- Agus, A., Juliadharma, M., & Djamaluddin, M. (2023). Application of the CIPP Model in Evaluation of The Inclusive Education Curriculum in Madrasah Aliyah. *Nidhomul Haq: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 8(1), 31–50. <https://doi.org/10.31538/ndh.v8i1.2705>

- Anggraeni, L., & Purnomo, H. (2023). Penerapan Merdeka Belajar Materi Pkn Pada Karakter Profil Pelajar Pancasila. *Attadrib: Jurnal Pendidikan Guru Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*, 6(2), 389–399. <https://doi.org/10.54069/attadrib.v6i2.584>
- Arifmiboy, A., Iltavia, I., & Iswandi, I. (2024). Full Online Teacher Training Service Scheme on Improving Pedagogical and Professional Competencies. *Nidhomul Haq: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 9(1), 55–66. <https://doi.org/10.31538/ndh.v9i1.4542>
- Attaufiqi, A. F., Maskud, Maulana, A., Fatikh, M. A., & Firmansyah, C. (2024). Design of Contextual-Collaborative Assure-Based Learning Program Development in Improving Reading Skills and Bilingual Communication Skills of Early Childhood Children. *Munaddhomah: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 5(3), 303–314. <https://doi.org/10.31538/munaddhomah.v5i3.1332>
- Efendi, F. K., & Suastra, I. W. (2023). Implementation of The Independent Curriculum in Elementary Schools. *International Journal of Contemporary Studies in Education (IJ-CSE)*, 2(2), 149–153. <https://doi.org/10.56855/ijcse.v2i2.363>
- Fauzan, F., Ansori, R. A. M., Dannur, M., Pratama, A., & Hairit, A. (2023). The implementation of the merdeka curriculum (independent curriculum) in strengthening students' character in Indonesia. *Aqlamuna: Journal of Educational Studies*, 1(1), 136–155. <https://doi.org/10.58223/aqlamuna.v1i1.237>
- Fidayani, E. F., & Ammar, F. M. (2023). The Use of Azhari Curriculum in Arabic Language Learning at Islamic Boarding School. *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 6(1), 25–45. <https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v6i1.2866>
- Fitri, A., Herman, T., Sa'ud, U. S., Suparman, T., & DS, Y. N. (2023). Analysis of the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Mathematics Subjects in Elementary Schools. *4th Borobudur International Symposium on Humanities and Social Science 2022 (BIS-HSS 2022)*, 906–915. Atlantis Press. https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-118-0_103
- Fullan, M. (2020). System change in education. *American Journal of Education*, 126(4), 653–663.
- Goss, H. (2022). Student Learning Outcomes Assessment in Higher Education and in Academic Libraries: A Review of the Literature. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 48(2), 102485. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2021.102485>
- Gouëdard, P., Pont, B., Hyttinen, S., & Huang, P. (2020). Curriculum reform: A literature review to support effective implementation. *OECD Education Working Papers*, (239). <https://doi.org/10.1787/efe8a48c-en>
- Haleem, A., Javaid, M., Qadri, M. A., & Suman, R. (2022). Understanding the role of digital technologies in education: A review. *Sustainable Operations and Computers*, 3, 275–285. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.susoc.2022.05.004>
- Ismail, A., Junaedi, M., Hassan, Z. bin, & Nasikhin, N. (2024). Comparison of Undergraduate Religious Education Curriculum in Indonesia and Malaysia. *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 7(2), 315–337. <https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v7i2.4903>

- Ismawati, Bakar, M. A., & Zamroni, M. A. (2024). Improving Students' Critical Thinking Skills Through the Application of the Scramble Learning Model. *Andragogi: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Pembelajaran*, 4(1), 65–78. <https://doi.org/10.31538/adrg.v4i1.1293>
- Kulkarni, A., Chu, S. L., Sharma, N., & Sathe, S. (2022). Interest-Based Learning through a Contextualizing Chatbot for Video-Based Online Learning Platforms. *2022 International Conference on Advanced Learning Technologies (ICALT)*, 66–70. <https://doi.org/10.1109/ICALT55010.2022.00027>
- Lafrarchi, N. (2020). Assessing Islamic Religious Education Curriculum in Flemish Public Secondary Schools. *Religions*, 11(3), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11030110>
- Laurillard, D. (2024). *Trust the Teachers: A Collaborative Approach to Learning Design Solutions BT - Envisioning the Future of Education Through Design* (R. Huang, D. Liu, M. A. Adarkwah, H. Wang, & B. Shehata, Eds.). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-0076-9_6
- Mandouit, L., & Hattie, J. (2023). Revisiting “The Power of Feedback” from the perspective of the learner. *Learning and Instruction*, 84, 101718. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2022.101718>
- Mazid, S., Futaqi, S., & Farikah, F. (2021). The concept of “freedom of learning” in a multicultural education perspective. *Ta'dib*, 24(1), 70–80. <https://doi.org/10.31958/jt.v24i1.2759>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. London: Sage publications.
- Mubarok, R. (2024). Management Innovation in Building Independence Educational Institutions. *Jurnal El-Hamra: Kependidikan Dan Kemasyarakatan*, 9(1), 11–22. <https://doi.org/10.62630/elhamra.v9i1.176>
- Mubarok, R., Sholeh, M., & Irayana, I. (2023). Classroom Management Strategy in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum (Independent Curriculum) in Primary Education Institutions. *Al-Adzka: Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Guru Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*, 13(2), 189–202. <https://doi.org/10.18592/aladzkapgmi.v13i2.11356>
- Musthofa, M. D., & Agus, A. H. (2022). The implementation of an independent curriculum in improving the quality of madrasah education. *International Journal for Studies on Children, Women, Elderly and Disabled*, 17, 187–192.
- Nadif, A., Nusucha, J. A., & Rofiq, A. (2023). The Concept of Soft Skills Teacher Islamic Education Studies The Book 'Izzat Al-Nasyi'in By Sheikh Musthafa Al Ghalayani. *Dirasah International Journal of Islamic Studies*, 1(2), 102–110. <https://doi.org/10.59373/drs.v1i2.20>
- Ngoasong, M. Z. (2021). Curriculum Adaptation for Blended Learning in Resource-Scarce Contexts. *Journal of Management Education*, 46(4), 622–655. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10525629211047168>

- Ningrum, R. L., Mirza, A. A., & Qamariah, Z. (2023). Curriculum Reform in Indonesia. *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan Nasional (JIPNAS)*, 1(3), 137–142. <https://doi.org/10.59435/jipnas.v1i3.114>
- Pan, G., Shankararaman, V., Koh, K., & Gan, S. (2021). Students' evaluation of teaching in the project-based learning programme: An instrument and a development process. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 19(2), 100501. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2021.100501>
- Pande, M., & Bharathi, S. V. (2020). Theoretical foundations of design thinking – A constructivism learning approach to design thinking. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 36, 100637. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2020.100637>
- Peña-Ayala, A. (2021). A learning design cooperative framework to instill 21st century education. *Telematics and Informatics*, 62, 101632. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2021.101632>
- Permatasari, P., Aldi, K., Nidiatika, A., & Maja, G. (2023). Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Improving the Quality of Education in SMA Negeri 1 Belitang III. *Sciencetechno: Journal of Science and Technology*, 2(2), 125–135. <https://doi.org/10.55849/sciencetechno.v2i2.164>
- Piaget, J. (1970). *Science of education and the psychology of the child*. Trans. D. Coltman.
- Pratikno, Y., Hermawan, E., & Arifin, A. L. (2022). Human resource 'Kurikulum Merdeka' from design to implementation in the school: What worked and what not in Indonesian education. *Jurnal Iqra': Kajian Ilmu Pendidikan*, 7(1), 326–343. <https://doi.org/10.25217/ji.v7i1.1708>
- Rizki, R. A., & Fahkrunisa, L. (2022). Evaluation of implementation of independent curriculum (kurikulum merdeka). *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogic Studies (JCPS)*, 1(1), 32–41. <https://doi.org/10.30631/jcps.v1i1.1383>
- Sa'diyah, M., Nurhayati, I., Endri, E., Supriadi, D., & Afrianto, Y. (2022). *The implementation of independent learning independent campus: The new paradigm of education in Indonesia*. <https://doi.org/10.20944/preprints202202.0302.v1>
- Sakinah, A., & Mukhtar, A. (2023). Problems of Implementing the Independent Learning Curriculum in the Digital Era. *ETDC: Indonesian Journal of Research and Educational Review*, 2(4), 36–43. <https://doi.org/10.51574/ijrer.v2i4.934>
- Saminan, S., Irwandi, I., Kamza, M., & Rasul, M. S. bin. (2024). Acehnese Ethnoscience as an Interdisciplinary Approach in Physics Education: Innovating in the Era of Merdeka Belajar. *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun*, 12(3), 1071–1098. <https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v12i3.1277>
- Santoso, A. M., Primandiri, P. R., Zubaidah, S., & Amin, M. (2021). The development of students' worksheets using project based learning (PjBL) in improving higher order thinking skills (HOTS) and time management skills of students. *Journal of Physics: Conference Series*, 1806(1), 12173. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1742-6596/1806/1/012173>
- Schultz, M., Young, K., K. Gunning, T., & Harvey, M. L. (2022). Defining and measuring authentic assessment: A case study in the context of tertiary science. *Assessment*

- & *Evaluation in Higher Education*, 47(1), 77–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2021.1887811>
- Sokhanvar, Z., Salehi, K., & Sokhanvar, F. (2021). Advantages of authentic assessment for improving the learning experience and employability skills of higher education students: A systematic literature review. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 70, 101030. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2021.101030>
- Syah, H. F., Wardani, S., & Suminar, T. (2023). Analysis of the implementation of the independent curriculum in the Bina Insani Integrated Islamic Elementary School in Semarang City. *Innovative Journal of Curriculum and Educational Technology*, 12(1), 27–36. <https://doi.org/10.15294/ijcet.v12i1.71255>
- Trye Jr, A. M. (2020). Faith integration in curriculum development: A Need for an integrated curriculum in post-civil war Liberia. *East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences (EAJESS)*, 1(1), 48–56. <https://doi.org/10.46606/eajess2020v01i01.0005>
- VanTassel-Baska, J. (2021). Curriculum-based assessment for advanced learners. In *Content-based curriculum for high-ability learners* (pp. 195–216). Routledge.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Amerika: Cambridge.
- Wiggins, G. (1990). The case for authentic assessment. *Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation*, 2(1).
- Wiliam, D. (2020). Research into practice: The case of classroom formative assessment. In *Getting Evidence into Education* (pp. 119–135). Routledge.
- Wisniewski, B., Zierer, K., & Hattie, J. (2020). The power of feedback revisited: A meta-analysis of educational feedback research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 487662. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.03087>
- Zulfa, A., & Zuhriyah, A. (2024). Relevansi Pendidikan Anak dalam Islam Perspektif Abdullah Nashih 'Ulwan dan Kurikulum Merdeka di Sekolah Dasar. *Attadrib: Jurnal Pendidikan Guru Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*, 7(1), 63–72. <https://doi.org/10.54069/attadrib.v7i1.721>
- Zulinto, A., Lestari, N. D., Kristiawan, M., Yanti, F. A., & Danim, S. (2023). The Principal's Perception of Independent Learning Curriculum and Teachers' Readiness for Compiling Learning. *Online Conference of Education Research International (OCERI 2023)*, 54–79. Atlantis Press. https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-108-1_7