

Implementing the Independent Curriculum in Indonesian Language Learning: A Qualitative Case Study of Fourth-Grade Students in Bengkulu Primary School

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Bahasa Indonesia instruction for fourth-grade students at SD Negeri 20 Kota Bengkulu. Drawing on the urgent need to recover learning losses and adapt to post-pandemic educational reforms, the research employed a qualitative field-based design to capture teacher and school leader perspectives through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation analysis. The results indicate that the curriculum was implemented through three main stages planning, classroom practice, and assessment supported by the *Merdeka Belajar* digital platform, collaborative teacher working groups, and strong teacher motivation, but challenged by limited experience and insufficient training in adapting to a new subject-based structure. The discussion situates these findings within broader literature, highlighting how teacher autonomy, professional collaboration, and digital resources facilitate reform, while underscoring the persistent challenges of readiness and capacity-building in Indonesian primary schools. This study contributes novelty by providing localized empirical evidence from Bengkulu, an underrepresented region, thereby expanding understanding of how national policies are enacted in diverse contexts. The findings imply that strengthening teacher professional development, enhancing collaborative learning communities, and tailoring digital resources are essential strategies for ensuring the success of curriculum reform and its translation into meaningful student learning outcomes.

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Introduction

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental driver of human development, shaping intellectual capacity, character, and social progress. As societies evolve, educational systems are required to adapt to changing socio-cultural, technological, and economic landscapes (Barrett et al., 2019; Dignum, 2021; OECD, 2019). In Indonesia, the curriculum serves as the central framework for achieving national education goals as mandated by the National Education System Act (Helda & Syahrani, 2022; Zakiah et al., 2022). A curriculum not only structures learning objectives, content, and pedagogical approaches but also functions as a dynamic instrument that must respond to global and local challenges (Buckner, 2019; Dewi, 2021; Dimmock et al., 2021). Accordingly, curriculum reform in Indonesia has been a recurring policy

initiative, with successive adjustments from the 1947 Learning Plan to the 2013 Curriculum, and most recently, the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*).

The COVID-19 pandemic posed unprecedented disruptions to education, exacerbating the phenomenon of learning loss and widening inequities in student achievement worldwide (Asadullah et al., 2023; Donnelly & Patrinos, 2022; Engzell et al., 2021). To mitigate these challenges, Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology introduced the Independent Curriculum as an alternative model beginning in 2022, emphasizing flexibility, differentiated instruction, and competency-based learning (Festiyed et al., 2022; Karst et al., 2022; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). This curriculum reform seeks to grant teachers greater autonomy in designing learning experiences, empower students to explore according to their interests and capacities, and reorient classroom practices toward deeper and more meaningful learning (Nihayah et al., 2023; Nisa et al., 2024; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019).

At the primary education level, the Independent Curriculum is particularly significant for subjects such as Bahasa Indonesia, which plays a crucial role in fostering literacy, critical thinking, and identity formation (Johan et al., 2021; Rodrigues et al., 2023; Suwandi et al., 2021). Language learning in early grades not only develops communication skills but also reinforces students' cognitive and socio-emotional growth, providing the foundation for success across disciplines (Griffiths et al., 2020; Mondri et al., 2021; Rankin et al., 2022). However, transitioning from the thematic learning model of the 2013 Curriculum to a subject-based approach under the Independent Curriculum requires substantial pedagogical adjustment. Teachers must redesign lesson plans, assessment strategies, and instructional methods while also navigating institutional readiness and resource constraints (Dowansiba & Hermanto, 2022; Ghunu, 2022; Liana et al., 2023).

Existing studies on curriculum reform in Indonesia have largely concentrated on policy analysis and teacher readiness at a general level (Labib et al., 2024; Sutinah et al., 2024; Syofyan et al., 2024). Research on the concrete implementation of the Independent Curriculum in specific school contexts, particularly at the primary level outside major metropolitan areas, remains limited. In Bengkulu Province, for example, evidence of how schools operationalize this curriculum, address contextual challenges, and leverage supporting mechanisms such as teacher working groups (*Kelompok Kerja Guru*) is still underexplored. This constitutes a crucial gap, as local variations in capacity, resources, and teacher experience may significantly influence the effectiveness of curriculum reform (Hasibuan et al., 2023; Rohmah et al., 2024; Rokayah et al., 2023).

Therefore, this study aims to examine the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Bahasa Indonesia instruction for fourth-grade students at a primary school in Bengkulu City. Specifically, it investigates the stages of planning, classroom execution, and assessment practices, as well as the supporting and inhibiting factors encountered by teachers. By addressing this gap, the study contributes empirical evidence to the discourse on curriculum reform in Indonesia, offering insights into teacher adaptation, institutional support, and practical challenges that can inform both policy and practice at the national and local levels.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative field research design with a descriptive approach, aiming to capture and analyze the lived experiences of teachers and school leaders in implementing the Independent Curriculum in Bahasa Indonesia instruction for fourth-grade students. A qualitative design was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of social phenomena from the perspectives of participants, allowing the researcher to interpret meanings and contextual factors embedded within classroom practices (Nirwan et al., 2024; Sephiawardani & Bektiningsih, 2023). The research was conducted at State Elementary School 20 in Bengkulu City, which has been among the early adopters of the Independent Curriculum in the province. The primary participants comprised the school principal and the fourth-grade classroom teacher, selected purposively due to their direct involvement in planning, executing, and assessing the curriculum.

Data collection relied on multiple techniques to ensure richness and triangulation, including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation analysis. Observations were conducted to examine teaching practices, classroom interactions, and assessment strategies, while interviews elicited teachers' and administrators' perspectives on the opportunities and challenges associated with the curriculum. Documentation analysis focused on lesson plans, assessment records, and supporting materials aligned with the Independent Curriculum. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently translated into English for analytic purposes.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were applied. Credibility was established through data triangulation across sources and methods, member checking with participants to validate interpretations, and peer debriefing with fellow researchers to refine analytical rigor. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research context, while dependability and confirmability were strengthened through maintaining an audit trail of methodological decisions and reflective field notes (Ahmed, 2024; Poucher et al., 2020; Younas et al., 2023). Data analysis followed an inductive thematic procedure, beginning with open coding of transcripts and field notes, categorization into broader themes, and iterative refinement to identify patterns related to curriculum planning, instructional practices, and assessment mechanisms. Thematic findings were then interpreted in light of existing literature on curriculum implementation and teacher professional adaptation.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Approval was obtained from the school principal, and informed consent was secured from the classroom teacher, with assurances of confidentiality and voluntary participation. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms and codes were used in presenting the data, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. By employing these methodological procedures, the study ensures that its findings are credible, contextually grounded, and aligned with international standards for qualitative educational research.

Results and Discussion

Stages of Curriculum Implementation

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Bahasa Indonesia instruction at SD Negeri 20 Kota Bengkulu followed three main stages: planning, classroom execution, and

assessment. Teachers reported that the planning stage was facilitated by the availability of structured teaching modules, which were further adapted to the local classroom context. During classroom execution, students were encouraged to take a more active role in exploring content, consistent with the curriculum’s emphasis on differentiated learning. Assessment was conducted continuously, with a focus on formative evaluation and student performance tasks rather than solely summative tests.

Supporting Factors

Teachers identified several supporting factors in implementing the Independent Curriculum. These included the availability of the *Merdeka Belajar* digital platform, which provides accessible guidelines and teaching resources, and the role of *Kelompok Kerja Guru* (KKG), which enabled peer collaboration and professional sharing. Motivation and willingness among teachers to adopt the curriculum, despite its novelty, also emerged as a significant enabler.

Inhibiting Factors

Despite the overall positive progress, several challenges were reported. The primary inhibiting factor was the lack of teacher experience in applying the Independent Curriculum, given that it was newly introduced in the school. Teachers expressed uncertainty in adapting pedagogical strategies to a subject-based rather than thematic structure, especially in the early stages of adoption. Limited exposure to training and capacity-building initiatives further complicated implementation.

Table 1. Summary of Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Curriculum Implementation

Category	Description
Supporting Factor:	Access to <i>Merdeka Belajar</i> platform; Teacher collaboration via KKG; High teacher motivation
Inhibiting Factors	Limited teacher experience; Adjustment to new curriculum model; Limited train opportunities

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Bahasa Indonesia at SD Negeri 20 Kota Bengkulu followed a structured cycle of planning, execution, and formative assessment. Teachers reported that the *Merdeka Belajar* platform and the *Kelompok Kerja Guru* (KKG) served as critical supports, providing resources and peer collaboration opportunities that facilitated adaptation to the new framework. However, challenges emerged from limited teacher experience and insufficient training in shifting from a thematic to a subject-based approach. These findings are consistent with research showing that while teachers benefit from autonomy and accessible resources, effective curriculum change requires sustained capacity-building and professional development (Hasanah et al., 2022; Karst et al., 2022; Liana et al., 2023).

In terms of assessment practices, the study reveals that teachers relied heavily on formative and competency-oriented strategies, emphasizing student performance and continuous feedback rather than traditional summative tests. This aligns with findings from Hadzami and Maknun (2022), Karst et al., (2022), and Sadora et al., (2021), who argue that

formative assessment is central to the Independent Curriculum's goal of deeper learning and differentiated instruction. Similarly, the uncertainties expressed by teachers in adopting new pedagogical approaches echo findings from Ndari et al., (2023), Revina et al., (2023), who observed that early adoption stages of curriculum reform are often marked by tensions between policy expectations and classroom realities.

The role of collaborative teacher communities documented in this study further supports international research highlighting the value of professional networks in mediating reform. Doğan and Adams (2018), Liu et al. (2024), and Mydin et al. (2024) emphasize that peer learning and structured lesson study cycles enable teachers to exchange strategies, address shared challenges, and accelerate the integration of new pedagogical models. In the same way, the integration of digital scaffolds via the *Merdeka Belajar* platform aligns with evidence that curated teaching modules and exemplars significantly reduce teacher workload, thereby enabling more effective classroom adaptation (Hikinda et al., 2024; Novita et al., 2022; Pongsakdi et al., 2021).

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on a primary school in Bengkulu, an underrepresented geographical context in the literature, providing localized evidence of how the Independent Curriculum is being operationalized in Bahasa Indonesia instruction. By foregrounding the perspectives of both teachers and principals, the study offers a granular account of how national policy is interpreted and enacted in daily classroom practice. The implications extend to policymakers and school leaders, highlighting the importance of designing ongoing training programs, strengthening teacher working groups, and contextualizing the digital resources within the *Merdeka Belajar* ecosystem to suit diverse local needs.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. The single-site, small-sample qualitative design restricts generalizability, while the reliance on self-reported data and limited documentation constrains the ability to assess implementation fidelity comprehensively. Furthermore, the absence of systematic classroom observation protocols and direct measurement of student learning outcomes prevents strong claims about instructional effectiveness. Future research should therefore broaden its scope by incorporating multi-site case studies across provinces, integrating mixed-methods designs, and employing longitudinal approaches to evaluate how curriculum implementation evolves over time and how it translates into measurable student achievement and literacy outcomes.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Bahasa Indonesia instruction for fourth-grade students at SD Negeri 20 Kota Bengkulu has been carried out systematically through the stages of planning, classroom practice, and assessment, supported by the *Merdeka Belajar* platform, collaborative teacher groups, and strong teacher motivation, yet constrained by limited experience and insufficient training during the early phase of adoption. These findings highlight that while the Independent Curriculum offers flexibility and deeper learning opportunities, its success depends on the availability of contextualized resources, sustained professional development, and institutional support systems. The novelty of this research lies in its localized focus on a primary school in Bengkulu, an underexplored context in the literature, thereby providing valuable empirical insights into how national reform policies are interpreted and operationalized at the grassroots level. The implications of this study suggest the

need for continuous investment in teacher training, stronger integration of digital and collaborative platforms, and systematic monitoring to bridge policy and practice. Nevertheless, the study's single-site qualitative design and absence of direct student outcome measures limit the generalizability of its findings, calling for future research that expands to multi-site, longitudinal, and mixed-method approaches to better capture the long-term impacts of curriculum reform on teaching practices and student achievement.

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