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Research Article

Implementing the Independent Curriculum through Teaching Campus (Kampus Mengajar) 7: A Qualitative Study of School-Based Literacy Supports

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates how the Independent Curriculum was operationalized through the *Kampus Mengajar 7* literacy initiative in a non-metropolitan lower secondary school (SMPN 06 Mukomuko, Bengkulu, Indonesia). Using a descriptive qualitative design (25 February-16 June 2024), we purposively engaged information-rich stakeholders (principal, teacher partners, and the Kampus Mengajar team) and implemented three mutually reinforcing components: library revitalization (cataloguing, relabelling, optimization), mentored reading during otherwise idle minutes, and classroomadjacent reading corners. Data naturalistic observations, field notes, activity logs, photo evidence, and simple visit/borrowing records were inductively coded and thematically analyzed with constant comparison; trustworthiness was addressed via triangulation, analyst debriefs, member checking, thick description, and an audit trail. Results show increased frequency and purposiveness of library visits and book loans, more disciplined on-task reading during mentored sessions, and active use of proximate reading corners; enabling conditions included supportive leadership, curated digital resources from the Platform Merdeka Mengajar, and teacher collaboration through Kelompok Kerja Guru, while constraints involved irregular library staffing and uneven early-stage pedagogical confidence. The study concludes that an integrated space + scaffold bundle can rapidly convert unstructured time into sustained literacy practice under realistic resource constraints. Schools should institutionalize a protected daily reading slot, assign minimal staffing or a teacher rota for library access, leverage Merdeka Mengajar exemplars to standardize lesson micro-structures, and protect PLC/KKG time; policymakers can pair digital provisioning with micro-grants and simple monitoring (visit/loan logs, pulse checks) to sustain routines, while future research should test durability and learning gains via multi-site, longitudinal designs with standardized literacy outcomes

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Introduction

Education systems worldwide are being reconfigured to address accelerating social, technological, and economic change, with policy syntheses urging flexible, context-responsive reform after the pandemic's disruption to learning (Dimmock et al., 2021; Dowansiba & Hermanto, 2022; Liana et al., 2023; Pacheco, 2021). Cross-national evidence highlights

persistent inequities in foundational literacy and the need to rebuild classroom routines that foster deeper learning, especially in low- and middle-income settings (Fauzan et al., 2023; Piper et al., 2018; Rakhmawati & Mustadi, 2022). Within this global discourse, curricular frameworks are increasingly expected to function not only as prescriptive documents but also as dynamic instruments that respond to local constraints and opportunities, aligning goals, content, pedagogy, and assessment with evolving societal needs (Dewi, 2021; Dimmock et al., 2021; Sullanmaa et al., 2019).

In Indonesia, post-pandemic reform has centered on the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*), which emphasizes flexibility, differentiated instruction, and competency-based learning to better support heterogeneous classrooms (Brauer, 2021; Marcellis et al., 2024; Nursalam et al., 2023). This orientation is consistent with international findings that teacher autonomy, adaptive materials, and formative assessment improve instructional alignment and student outcomes during periods of change (Al-Khasawneh et al., 2024; Hardy et al., 2022; Tamba & Cendana, 2022). Yet the transition from the thematic structure of the 2013 Curriculum to a subject-based approach under the Independent Curriculum requires sustained pedagogical adjustment redesigning lesson plans, assessments, and classroom methods while navigating institutional readiness and resource constraints (Ketonen & Nieminen, 2024; Kneen et al., 2023; Orr et al., 2024).

At the primary level, Bahasa Indonesia is strategically positioned to cultivate literacy, critical thinking, and identity formation, thereby supporting cross-curricular learning and socio-emotional development (Bailey et al., 2023; Rahmayani et al., 2019; Wells et al., 2022). Indonesian studies further document that school-based literacy initiatives reading corners, mentored reading, and library revitalization can nudge reading engagement when access barriers are lowered and routines are institutionalized (Dayyanah et al., 2024; Merga & Ferguson, 2021; Nickow et al., 2024). These priorities align with the Independent Curriculum's competency orientation and the broader 21st-century skills agenda in language education (Haerudin et al., 2023; Lubis, 2018; UNESCO, 2021).

To operationalize reform at the classroom level, Indonesia has coupled policy with enabling supports: the Platform *Merdeka Mengajar* (PMM) provides curated modules, exemplars, and *Pelatihan Mandiri* to reduce planning load and accelerate teacher adaptation; and teacher working groups (Kelompok Kerja Guru, KKG) act as professional learning communities for collaborative problem-solving (Liu et al., 2024; Nurasiah et al., 2024; Potvin et al., 2024). Convergent scholarship shows that such digital scaffolds and PLC structures can lower transaction costs for teachers, encourage formative assessment practices, and strengthen implementation fidelity provided participation is regular and school leadership protects time for collaboration (Berisha et al., 2024; Fallon et al., 2022; Nurasiah et al., 2024). Nevertheless, early adoption frequently reveals tensions between policy expectations and classroom realities as educators calibrate new routines, resources, and roles (Ardianti & Amalia, 2022; Kenney et al., 2024; Nursalam et al., 2023).

Despite this architecture of supports, rigorous accounts of how the Independent Curriculum is concretely enacted in specific primary-school contexts outside major metropolitan areas remain scarce. Bengkulu Province, in particular, is underrepresented in empirical studies that trace how schools operationalize the curriculum, address local

constraints (e.g., irregular library staffing, weak reading routines), and mobilize PMM and KKG to sustain teacher adaptation (Kenney et al., 2024; Liana et al., 2023; Tomasouw et al., 2024). This constitutes a salient research gap because local variations in capacity, resources, and teacher experience can markedly influence reform effectiveness and the durability of literacy routines (Aldridge & McLure, 2024; Marmoah & Poerwanti, Suharno, 2022; van der Weijden et al., 2024). Accordingly, this study offers a qualitative, site-specific evaluation of *Kampus Mengajar 7* at a lower-secondary school in Bengkulu, with three objectives: (1) to document the concrete procedures by which the Independent Curriculum in Bahasa Indonesia is enacted through library revitalization, mentored reading, and classroom-adjacent reading corners; (2) to examine how PMM resources and KKG mechanisms are leveraged to reduce teacher workload and enable formative, competency-oriented instruction; and (3) to generate context-grounded implications for sustaining literacy routines in non-metropolitan Indonesian schools.

Methods

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative design to produce a context-rich account of how the Independent Curriculum was operationalized through the *Kampus Mengajar 7* literacy initiative at SMPN 06 Mukomuko (Bengkulu, Indonesia) between 25 February and 16 June 2024. The site was purposively selected as a non-metropolitan lower-secondary school piloting practical literacy supports. Information-rich participants the principal, teacher partners, and the *Kampus Mengajar* team were engaged owing to their direct roles in planning, implementation, and routine monitoring.

The intervention comprised three mutually reinforcing components co-designed with school staff following an initial needs analysis: (a) library revitalization (cataloguing, relabelling, and layout optimization), (b) mentored reading during otherwise idle classroom or corridor time, and (c) establishment of classroom-adjacent reading corners to reduce access frictions and nudge short, frequent reading. Activities were iteratively adapted to local constraints (space, staffing, and schedules) to maximize feasibility.

Data were collected through naturalistic observations of classrooms and corridors (focused on time use and on-task reading), contemporaneous field notes, and documentation review, including activity logs, photo records, simple visitation/borrowing notes, and brief reflective memos produced by the team. All textual materials were organized and prepared for analysis immediately after collection to preserve temporal fidelity and contextual detail.

Analysis proceeded inductively using constant comparison. Transcripts, notes, and documents were open-coded, categories were refined through axial coding, and themes were developed to capture patterns across planning, enactment, and formative adjustment. Rival/negative cases were actively sought to probe the robustness of emerging interpretations, and interim analytic memos were maintained to document decisions and reflections.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of methods and sources, peer/analyst debriefs within the research team, and member checking with school stakeholders to verify the plausibility of descriptions and inferences. An audit trail comprising dated protocols, evolving codebooks, and analytic memos supports dependability and confirmability, while thick description of setting, actors, and routines bolsters transferability. Ethical procedures were

agreed with school leadership prior to fieldwork. Participation was voluntary; no student identifiers were recorded; and photographic documentation foregrounded settings and artefacts rather than faces. All data were stored securely and reported in aggregate to protect confidentiality.

Results and Discussion

Preparation and Placement

Following central briefings, the *Kampus Mengajar 7* team was placed at SMPN 06 Mukomuko (Penarik, Mukomuko, Bengkulu). Online induction ran from 22 January to 12 February 2024 and covered policy orientation, literacy–numeracy pedagogy, classroom management, and safe-school content, after which the team reported to district and school leaders and conducted an initial needs analysis. The site description and baseline diagnosis emphasized low reading motivation and limited literacy routines, positioning the program as a pragmatic lever to strengthen everyday reading practices.



Figure 1. Reporting and handover of assignment letters to the Local Education Office and the School

Implementation Outputs

Three mutually reinforcing components were enacted. First, library revitalization reorganized shelving and space, labeled books, and improved overall accessibility. Second, mentored reading provided structured accompaniment during downtime so that students read with purpose and discipline, with extra attention to those with emerging fluency. Third, activation of reading corners established two classroom-proximate, visually engaging spaces; proximity reduced travel costs relative to the distant library, and student work or posters were displayed to heighten ownership and appeal.

Early Outcomes

Across the intervention cycle, the school documented more frequent, purposeful library visits and increased book loans, consistent with the improved organization and visibility of reading spaces. Students exhibited more disciplined reading behaviors during mentored sessions, suggesting that light-touch social scaffolds supported on-task engagement. The reading corners were reported to be attractive and actively used, further normalizing short, opportunistic reading

near classrooms. Stakeholders also perceived broader enthusiasm for reading and the usefulness of revitalized spaces and routines for sustaining literacy beyond the program period.

Table 1. Activity–Mechanism–Outcome Synthesis

Activity / Output

Mechanism

Early Outcome Signals

Library revitalization



Reduces search/friction costs; improves comfort and navigation

Higher visit frequency and borrowing; more purposeful use of library

Mentored reading



External structure and modeling for focused reading

Greater reading discipline during downtime; support for less fluent readers

Classroom-adjacent reading corners



Proximity + visual salience nudge micro-usage

Visible, attractive space; spontaneous short reading near classrooms

Discussion

The present study shows that a bundled set of low-cost modifications library revitalization, mentored reading during unstructured minutes, and classroom-adjacent reading corners can convert idle time into sustained literacy activity in a non-metropolitan school. The observed increases in purposeful library visits and more disciplined on-task reading are consistent with evidence that improving the physical affordances of reading (organization, labeling, proximity) lowers friction and cues habitual engagement (Nickow et al., 2024; Rachman & Rachman, 2019; Reijula & Hertwig, 2022). These results reinforce claims that environmental restructuring is not merely cosmetic but functions as a mechanism that normalizes frequent, short reading episodes and leverages students' visible work to cultivate ownership of space and practice (Liana et al., 2023; Tomasouw et al., 2024; Uleanya et al., 2023).

The mentored reading component aligns with intervention research showing that light-touch social scaffolds help focus novice readers and strengthen metacognitive strategy use. Studies of guided/reciprocal approaches in the primary grades report gains in comprehension, reading fluency, and metacognitive knowledge when adult cues structure brief reading episodes effects that are especially pronounced for struggling readers. Our pattern more purposeful reading behaviors when an adult cue is present accords with this literature and suggests that short, predictable mentoring windows can anchor classroom routines.

Digital scaffolds supplied through the Platform *Merdeka Mengajar* appear to have reduced teachers' design workload and accelerated local adaptation, which converges with survey and case evidence that curated modules, exemplars, and self-paced training increase perceived competence and ease the rollout of the Independent Curriculum. International work on data-informed differentiated instruction similarly indicates that aligned materials and assessment feedback tighten instructional coherence and save planning time, enabling teachers to focus on responsive pedagogy (Nickow et al., 2024; Rachman & Rachman, 2019; Reijula & Hertwig, 2022). Taken together, these findings support the complementary roles of environmental and digital scaffolds in lowering both access and design costs.

At the same time, our documentation of early-stage uncertainty and uneven pedagogical confidence echoes broader analyses of reform implementation in Indonesia and elsewhere.

Comparative and national studies show that transitions from thematic/integrated to subject-based structures require sustained sense-making, assessment redesign, and practice-embedded feedback; without coherent supports, policy intentions often clash with classroom realities (Ketonen & Nieminen, 2024; Kneen et al., 2023; Orr et al., 2024). In our site, the local teacher working group (KKG) functioned as a "last-mile" translator, consistent with evidence that professional learning communities can mediate reform when participation is regular and facilitation is needs-based.

The novelty of this study lies in demonstrating how an integrated space + scaffold bundle revitalized physical environments, micro-mentoring routines, and PMM-mediated planning can be organized quickly in a non-metropolitan junior secondary school and still yield credible early signals of behavior change. Much prior work treats these levers separately; our contribution is to show their interaction and the bridging role of the KKG in contextualizing national resources for local routines. Practically, the implication is that schools outside major urban centers can prioritize a small set of mutually reinforcing moves: fix access frictions (layout, labeling, proximity), schedule brief mentored reading to anchor habits, and draw from PMM exemplars to standardize "minimum viable" lesson structures, while protecting time for PLC/KKG cycles (Liu et al., 2024; Nurasiah et al., 2024; Potvin et al., 2024). Limitations include the single-site, short-duration qualitative design, reliance on behavioral/process indicators rather than standardized literacy outcomes, and potential positive bias in self-reports. Future research should incorporate multi-site comparisons, longitudinal reading comprehension measures, and variation in KKG facilitation quality to test whether the space + scaffold bundle produces durable literacy gains.

Conclusion

This study concludes that a practical, low-cost bundle revitalizing the library, instituting brief mentored-reading routines, and establishing classroom-adjacent reading corners can rapidly convert unstructured time into sustained literacy practice in a non-metropolitan junior secondary school implementing the Independent Curriculum. Early outcome signals included more frequent and purposeful library visits and loans, greater on-task reading discipline during mentored sessions, and active use of proximate reading corners; these gains were enabled by supportive leadership, curated digital resources from the Platform Merdeka Mengajar, and teacher collaboration through Kelompok Kerja Guru, yet constrained by irregular library staffing and uneven early-stage pedagogical confidence. The study's contribution lies in demonstrating how environmental restructuring and light-touch social/digital scaffolds function synergistically as a "space + scaffold" package that lowers both access and design costs for teachers under realistic resource conditions. Practically, schools should institutionalize a protected daily reading slot, assign minimal staffing or a teacher rota for library access, leverage platform exemplars to standardize lesson micro-structures, and protect PLC/KKG time, while embedding simple monitoring (visit/loan logs and brief pulse checks) to sustain routines. Given the single-site, short-duration design and process-oriented indicators, future work should test durability and learning gains through multi-site, longitudinal evaluations using standardized literacy measures to assess the broader transferability of this approach.

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