

Independent Curriculum, Risks, and Mitigation in Madrasah Perspective

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Abstract

The widespread socialization of the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) in Indonesia presents considerable risks for educational institutions, particularly madrasahs, which have declared readiness to implement it. Identifying and addressing potential risks are crucial to minimizing their impact. This study aims to examine the Independent Curriculum from the perspective of madrasah education, focusing on understanding its nature, associated risks, and strategies for mitigation. This research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing a case study design. Data collection techniques include interviews, document analysis, and observation, while data analysis involves thematic coding and content analysis. The Independent Curriculum, initiated by the Ministry of Education and Culture, holds promising objectives; however, its implementation poses significant dilemmas and risks for educational institutions, including madrasahs. Risks such as curriculum misalignment, resource constraints, and resistance from stakeholders are identified. Mitigation strategies, including proactive planning, stakeholder engagement, and resource allocation, are essential for addressing these risks effectively. Understanding the risks and mitigation strategies associated with the Independent Curriculum implementation is vital for madrasahs, such as MAN 2 Mataram, to navigate this educational reform successfully. This study provides insights that can inform policy-makers, educators, and stakeholders in ensuring the smooth transition to the Independent Curriculum while preserving the quality and integrity of madrasah education.

Keywords: Independent Curriculum, Independent Learning, Risks, Mitigation.

1. Introduction

Education is considered the foundation for shaping the future generations of a nation to excel in various fields. Similarly, in Indonesia, education plays a crucial role in transmitting the noble cultural values of the nation to its future generations (Kostoulas, 2024). However, when choosing an educational model, a nation must consider the cultural values inherent in its national character (Almalky & Alrabiah, 2024). Indonesia, as a predominantly Muslim country (Kamla, 2015), embodies an Eastern culture reflected in its Islamic education system, which significantly differs from the secular nature of Western education (Bray, 2024).

The essence of Islamic education lies in the education of values because the ultimate goal of education is to cultivate noble human behavior (Mondesir, 2023), known in Islamic teachings as educating noble character based on the Quran and Hadith (R'boul, 2021). The author resonates with Muhmidayeli's understanding of values, which portrays them as something beautiful, captivating, and delightful, bringing happiness and joy to individuals and making them desire to possess them. This illustrates that learning is an art or aesthetics. There is a kind of beauty that flows serenely in learning, making the learner reluctant to end it because it provides a unique pleasure (Saada, 2023).

However, not everyone experiences the joy of learning, especially with the rigid structure of the Indonesian curriculum (Oktari et al., 2018). As long as learners find enjoyment in it, there is no issue. Yet, not everyone finds pleasure in learning, which is why the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) is being extensively promoted nationwide (New et al., 2023). The Independent Curriculum is not only introduced to enhance the quality of education in the country but also to create enjoyable learning experiences (Levine et al., 2024), increase learning motivation, boost teachers' and students' creativity, stimulate students' critical thinking abilities (Amri et al., 2022), and foster an

atmosphere of learning freedom that can be experienced by all members of the madrasah community (Verkuyt & Atack, 2024).

This study discusses the implementation of the Independent Curriculum and its contribution to education in Indonesia. The Independent Curriculum aims to produce more effective, relevant, and enjoyable learning for students, while also improving the overall quality of education. Its contribution is evident in enhancing the creativity of teachers and students, promoting critical thinking skills, and strengthening a learning environment that stimulates interest and active participation from all members of the madrasah community.

2. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach to gain a deep understanding of the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders related to the implementation of the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) in madrasahs (Brodeur et al., 2023). Qualitative approach is chosen because it allows researchers to explore the complexity of issues related to the risks and mitigation of the Independent Curriculum from the perspective of madrasahs (Loder-Jackson et al., 2023). The research design utilized is a case study (Flemming et al., 2018), which enables researchers to study the context and dynamics associated with the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in specific madrasahs in depth (Çırak Sağdıç et al., 2024). Data collection techniques will include interviews with various stakeholders, analysis of documents related to the implementation of the Independent Curriculum (LaMarre & Chamberlain, 2022), and direct observation of the teaching and learning processes in madrasahs (LaMarre & Chamberlain, 2022). The collected data will be thematically analyzed to identify and develop key themes related to the risks and mitigation efforts in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in madrasahs (Gayoso Heredia et al., 2024). By employing a qualitative approach, case study design (Smit et al., 2023), and a combination of diverse data collection techniques (Nasri et al., 2024), this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the risks and mitigation strategies in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum from the perspective of madrasahs (Nasri, 2023a).

3. Discussion

3.1. Independent Curriculum

The Independent Curriculum (Kapitzke & Graham, 2010), which is currently being widely socialized across the country, was actually initiated in response to the spread of the Covid-19 virus two years ago (Nuryana et al., 2023). The pandemic situation that engulfed the world automatically affected all aspects of life, including education (Abdul Ghani et al., 2023). In such uncertain times, learning must continue, posing a complex challenge for the government. On one hand, the pandemic conditions could endanger the safety of students, but on the other hand, if learning is not conducted, severe learning loss may occur (Asadullah & Maliki, 2018).

To address this limited and uncertain situation, the government did not remain idle. Various methods were attempted to tackle the problem (Yan et al., 2024), including requiring teachers to implement Blended Learning and Hybrid Learning models (Navío-Marco et al., 2023). Thus, during that period, online and offline learning became a trend among students and parents (Pedlow & McFeeters, 2021). Ultimately, through trial and error, at least learning could continue, albeit with far from optimal results (Forey & Cheung, 2019).

As a further effort to ensure that the nation's children can still attend school, KMA 184 Year 2020 was issued. This regulation provides guidelines for curriculum implementation at all levels of education. From this regulation emerged Academic, Research, Religious, and Skills Madrasah Aliyah. Initially, these four types of Madrasah Aliyah used a new Prototype curriculum (Johnstone & Niad, 2023), which was then replaced by the Independent Curriculum (Gleason & Manca, 2019). Its content includes addressing the uncertain learning situation during the pandemic. Essentially, this leads to the Independent Curriculum (Malhotra et al., 2021), which focuses on teacher flexibility in designing learning and emphasizes character education. It also provides substantial subjects only. Here, "substantial" refers to the core subjects of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, namely Aqidah Akhlak, Al-Qur'an Hadith, Islamic Education, Islamic Law, and Arabic Language. Other (general) subjects follow the curriculum structure of the Ministry of Education and Culture.

If we refer to its initial objectives, the focal point of the Independent Curriculum is actually on active learning, as in the past with CBSA (Active Student Learning Method). This curriculum demands active learning where both teachers and students are actively involved. In this curriculum, teachers are required to be creative, imaginative, innovative, and competitive. Similarly, students are expected to be active and capable of critical thinking (Latief et al., 2021).

However, freedom in learning within the Independent Curriculum is not about learning as one pleases; rather, there are legal rules that serve as guidelines. Independent learning is similar to a learning program that facilitates students to strengthen their competencies by providing opportunities to pursue learning outside their major or in the same major at different institutions, different majors in different institutions, and/or learning outside educational institutions (Nasri, 2019b). Independent learning, whether for madrasah or independent campuses, is a form of autonomous and flexible learning, creating an innovative learning culture that is not restrictive and meets the needs of students (Nasri, 2023b). The curriculum structure is also made non-rigid, thus easing the reconstruction of the curriculum in this era and lightening the burden on students.

The depiction is roughly like this: the learning atmosphere will be made as comfortable as possible to facilitate more student discussions with teachers. If learning is generally conducted in the classroom, in independent learning, outings or moving classes will be designed more frequently, and students will not only listen to the teacher's explanations but their characters will be prioritized. Students are also required to think critically and possess independent, clever, brave, polite, competent characters, rather than relying solely on the ranking system, which has caused concern among students and parents. In this curriculum, students are expected to be more competent, ready to face the working world, and have noble characters in the community.

The concept of independent learning has actually been introduced by the Ministry of Religion since 2018, but its impact has not been felt due to the lack of massive socialization. It's no wonder that only a small fraction is aware of it, and even then, its implementation is not fully understood. It seems that independent learning in madrasahs is more about the creativity and innovation of teachers in teaching. It involves flexibility in managing the curriculum. Teaching is more student-centered rather than teachers being the sole source of teach (Walad et al., 2024).

As for how this independent curriculum will be designed, each educational institution is given freedom, of course, without neglecting its management seriousness. Whether students engage in internship programs or some subjects are streamlined, while others are eliminated if not essential. Thus, the learning duration for students becomes faster, similar to an acceleration program. Therefore, with this independent learning program, it is hoped that there will be a cross-pollination between higher education and the workforce or between madrasahs and higher education institutions in the future (Muliadi & Nasri, 2023). The focus is on independent learning that can provide ease for learners, educators, and institutions to formulate good, lightweight, and beneficial curricula. In essence, commitment is required in independent learning to achieve predefined goals maximally, ultimately encapsulated in the Pancasila Rahmatan Lil'Alamin Student Profile project.

3.2. Pancasila Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin Student Profile

According to the Independent Curriculum, the Pancasila Student Profile is a lifelong learner who is competent, has character (Seijts & Milani, 2023), and behaves according to the values of Pancasila. The Ministry of Religion specifically refers to it as the Pancasila Rahmatan Lil'Alamin Student Profile, which is designed to answer a big question: what kind of student profile (competencies) does the Indonesian education system aim to produce? In this context, the Pancasila Rahmatan Lil'Alamin Student Profile has competency formulations that complement the focus on achieving graduation standards at each level of educational units in terms of instilling character consistent with the values of Pancasila (Mendonça et al., 2023). These dimensions indicate that the Pancasila Rahmatan Lil'Alamin Student Profile not only focuses on cognitive abilities but also attitudes and behaviors in accordance with the identity of Indonesians as well as global citizens.

Based on Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No.56/M/2022, the strengthening project of the Pancasila Profile (Rahmatan Lil'Alamin) is a project-based extracurricular activity designed to strengthen efforts to achieve competencies and characters in line with the Pancasila

Student Profile formulated based on the Graduation Competency Standards. Its implementation is flexible in terms of content, activities, and timing. This project is designed separately from the intracurricular. The goals, content, and activities of this project do not have to be related to the objectives and materials of the intracurricular. Schools or madrasahs can involve the community and/or the workforce in designing and conducting these projects.

The strengthening project of the Pancasila Rahmatan Lil'alamın Profile is one means of achieving this profile, namely providing opportunities for students to experience knowledge as a character strengthening process and an opportunity to learn from their environment (Akhlaghi et al., 2024). In this project, students have the opportunity to study important themes or issues such as radicalism (Atsani & Nasri, 2021), culture, ethnicity, technology, and others. This depends on the needs of the educational institution concerned.

As implemented at MAN 2 Mataram, the form of the Pancasila Rahmatan Lil'alamın Student Profile project is to highlight local cultural wisdom, namely by practicing the local Nyongkolan culture. Nyongkolan is a customary activity accompanying the series of events in the marriage process among the Sasak ethnic group in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara. This activity involves a procession of the groom's family to the bride's house accompanied by family and relatives of the groom, wearing traditional attire accompanied by the traditional Gendang Beleg music (a large drum similar to gamelan). The purpose of Nyongkolan is to introduce the groom's family to the community, especially among relatives where the bride lives. Participants of Nyongkolan usually bring items such as garden produce such as vegetables and fruits to be distributed to the bride's relatives and neighbors later.

The Nyongkolan process will also be supplemented with the culture of 'Sorong-Serah Aji Kerame' which includes the 'Pembayun' (official). Sorong Serah Aji Krame is the process of giving rights and obligations as well as the de jure position for the male party. This activity is usually carried out at the residence of the bride who uses a spokesperson from each party called Pembayun. Of course, before the Nyongkolan activity, there is 'merari' (marriage by elopement), and then the groom's family reports to the bride's family. After negotiating the timing of the marriage contract, then there is Nyongkolan preceded by the 'sorong-serah aji krame' mentioned earlier.

This activity will be carried out by all 10th-grade students as a whole towards the end of the odd semester. The 10th grade is chosen because this study group uses the Independent Curriculum (Fauziana et al., 2016). Meanwhile, grades 11 and 12 still use the 2013 Curriculum. The final result after all processes are carried out is in the form of a scientific paper report. Thus, with the existence of the Pancasila Rahmatan Lil'alamın Student Profile project, teachers and students are able to understand the essence, meaning, and implementation of the Independent Curriculum more comprehensively.

With the Independent Curriculum (Seymour et al., 2023), students are expected to have skills in problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and empathy or concern for their environment. All of these are categorized as soft skills. It is needed to complement the competencies (hard skills) obtained according to their interests. Through the combination of these two skills, madrasah graduates transform into outstanding, competitive, resilient, agile, and easily adaptable individuals. Ultimately, they are ready to live life in conditions that are rapidly changing and dynamic.

Of course, because of this new Curriculum, its implementation cannot be carried out simultaneously in all madrasahs. There are several things that need to be considered, such as the readiness of the madrasah itself. In this case, the preparation of human resources, adequate facilities, adjusted to the characteristics of students, and the madrasah environment.

3.3. Risks

The following will outline several aspects that must be mapped out by madrasahs implementing the Independent Curriculum to avoid misunderstanding and misimplementation: (1) Understanding the overview of the Independent Curriculum, namely: regulations regarding the Independent Curriculum in force, academic curriculum studies for learning recovery, (2) understanding learning and assessment such as: learning in accordance with students' stages, lesson planning and assessment including the flow of learning objectives and processing and reporting

assessment results. (3) Understanding the operational curriculum development of educational units, namely: analysis of educational unit characteristics, formulation of vision, mission, and educational unit objectives, organization, learning, lesson planning, mentoring, evaluation, and professional development. (4) Understanding the development of strengthening projects for the Pancasila Student Profile. If the above four components are possessed by the implementing madrasah, then the Independent Curriculum is ready to be implemented. However, despite all these, the risks it will pose cannot be taken lightly.

To be able to identify the risks of independent learning in the Independent Curriculum (Li et al., 2024), the fundamental thing to know is what its target is. The target also has its requirements. Borrowing the term from Acep Hidayat (2022), independent learning must meet several criteria, namely (1) Specific, (2) Measurable, (3) Achievable, (4) Relevant, and (5) Time-bound. These criteria are given the acronym 'SMART'. With these requirements, it is already certain what goals are intended to be achieved with the Independent Curriculum.

Firstly, educational institutions such as madrasahs must also be able to measure their characteristics (Mendonça et al., 2023), the suitability between their goals and achievements, and the time needed to achieve these goals. If not, the Independent Curriculum might just be passing advertisement. It might just be a motto or perhaps a people's satire like changing ministers, changing curricula, which is true, or a slogan among the Indonesian community that is just hot air, it only burns and is enthusiastic at the beginning, then fades and passes away without any continuous follow-up programs.

Likewise, it should not be like the link and match program promoted during the past New Order era by Minister of Education Wardiman Djojonegoro, which remained only in name. At the very least, every educational institution implementing the Independent Curriculum should have prepared for it. Don't be late. If not, we might fall into the same pit. The pit that buried the link and match policy of Minister of Education Wardiman Djojonegoro.

Secondly, the risk of curriculum changes. Curricula in Indonesia have often changed. Starting from 1947, 1952, 1964, 1968, 1975, 1984, 1994, 2004, 2006, 2013, and finally the Independent Curriculum. It has changed more than 10 times. These changes are influenced by political, social, cultural, economic, and other situations. The significant risk faced by the Indonesian society when being introduced to a new curriculum also impacts various sectors, ranging from planning, implementation, and evaluation. This includes the government needing to intelligently consider: costs, socialization, pilot projects for selected schools, involved elements, curriculum structure, and others. It cannot be done abruptly.

Thirdly, the risk of teacher readiness. Suppose the matter of curriculum changes is considered complete by arranging a good curriculum structure (Hassan et al., 2023). There is no reduction in subjects. Then, how ready are each teacher to implement the independent learning policy? What criteria and specifications make a teacher considered suitable to implement this policy? How to update a teacher to meet the required criteria and specifications? When will they achieve it? These series of questions are not easy to answer. All of them could become deadly pitfalls. Hence, mitigation efforts are needed. Namely, educational institutions such as MAN 2 Mataram should promptly prepare a profile of Independent Learning teachers as their target. Of course, a SMART target.

Fourthly, the implementation of independent learning requires other institutions as learning partners. They can be within the province or outside the province. Furthermore, it can be done in government institutions, private sectors, community-based organizations, and even the community itself. This is not as easy as flipping a hand. The issue is not all educational institutions (madrasahs) have the same readiness. For madrasahs located in zone one (excellent), this is not a problem. Because they already have a strong network and partners. Unfortunately, the number of madrasahs in this line is limited. Meanwhile, the number of Islamic high schools (madrasah aliyah) throughout Indonesia reaches 3772 institutions (data from 2020) consisting of 577 institutions or 15.3% being state-owned and 3,195 or 84.7% being private. The inequality, disparity, and risks are already imaginable. And, this could be the second grave, risking burying the living Independent Learning policy. Once again, mitigation is the key. What are they? The following will be explained in the next sub-topic.

3.4. Mitigation (Prevention)

To dampen the emergence of turmoil, various compromise ideas emerge. The teaching load in Islamic high schools is 45 minutes/hour, if supplemented with projects for strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile Rahmatan lil'alam, then at least 2-4 hours of lessons must be added. Ideally, teaching hours with independent learning must be synchronized. As a result, if additional hours occur, the number of lesson hours for grade X will increase. Ironically, in the field of education, it is never found anywhere in the world to have lesson hours exceeding the provisions of the previous curriculum structure (Chang et al., 2023), except educational institutions or Islamic boarding schools that use their own curriculum (Tudor, 2015). However, graduates of Islamic boarding schools can directly implement the knowledge they have acquired to society. The question is, can graduates of Islamic high schools with a heavy load of subjects directly implement their knowledge to society?

Certainly, the answer is still enveloped in various uncertainties and risks. So, what efforts is the government making to mitigate these risks? This is the big question. All stakeholders in educational institutions at madrasahs must think about it and solve it together (Nasri, 2023c). Collaboration and collective cooperation are needed to produce national agreements and consensus on the future of education in the beloved country. To overcome the various risks above, the following mitigation offers are presented.

Firstly, the Ministry of Education and Culture as well as the Ministry of Religious Affairs must immediately build communication, commitment, and consensus together with their potential partners. Secondly, these Ministries must immediately partner with educational institutions to implement the Independent Learning model. Thirdly, the Ministry of Religious Affairs must formulate different policies between excellent madrasahs (zone one) and others. Consequently, the parameters of success are also different. There are policy stratification and assessment parameters at the implementation level (Nasri, 2015). This is not about neglecting. But rather adjusting to the readiness of resources (educators and educational personnel), institutionalization, and other supporting infrastructure. Fourthly, the government must catalyze and facilitate the process of equating qualifications and quality of non-zone one madrasahs. With a clear roadmap and SMART targets. So that, in the future, they have partner choices in implementing independent learning institutionally.

Fourthly, policymakers must immediately identify policies that hinder the implementation of Independent Learning, and change them (Suparman & Nasri, 2024). They must create new ground rules that can facilitate the Independent Learning policy. Fifthly, there must be immediate policies that liberate madrasahs from the hegemony of certain ways of thinking. Especially in teaching and innovation (Nasri, 2019a). Teaching and innovation should not be solely controlled by market interests but should also consider the interests of the general public. This has implications for the success of independent learning. Without a paradigm shift, the success of independent learning is only measured by the parameter of graduates' absorption by the market. Sixthly, the government needs to immediately create impartial policies (Abdul, 2020). This means there is a balance of policies for excellent madrasahs with madrasahs that are not excellent (ordinary).

Hopefully, with the above mitigation measures, the high risks posed by the implementation of the Independent Curriculum can be minimized, at least giving freedom to the community to choose whether they are ready to implement it or not.

4. Findings

The findings underscore the multifaceted nature of implementing the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) in madrasahs. They reveal the intricate process involved, from understanding the curriculum's overarching objectives to identifying and mitigating associated risks. Key findings include the importance of adhering to the SMART criteria for independent learning, the challenges posed by curriculum changes and teacher readiness, and the necessity of a collaborative approach among stakeholders. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the need for continuous monitoring and evaluation to ensure the effectiveness and adaptability of the curriculum. Overall, these findings provide valuable insights into the complexities and considerations involved in implementing the

Independent Curriculum in madrasahs, highlighting the importance of strategic planning and ongoing support for successful outcomes. Findings:

Complex Implementation Process

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) in madrasahs requires a deep understanding of its components and objectives. Madrasahs must comprehend the curriculum's overarching goals, the specifics of teaching and assessment methods, and the operational development of the curriculum within their educational units.

Risk Identification and Mitigation

Several risks accompany the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, including misunderstandings of its objectives, potential curriculum changes, teacher readiness challenges, and the need for collaboration with external learning partners. Mitigation efforts are essential to address these risks, including building communication and consensus among stakeholders, formulating differentiated policies, and ensuring the flexibility of curriculum structures.

SMART Criteria for Independent Learning

To ensure the success of independent learning, it must adhere to the SMART criteria: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Madrasahs need to set clear, achievable goals for independent learning that align with these criteria.

Challenges in Teacher Readiness and Curriculum Changes

Madrasahs face significant challenges in preparing teachers for the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, as well as adapting to frequent curriculum changes. Addressing these challenges requires thoughtful planning, professional development initiatives, and ongoing support for educators.

Collaborative Approach and Policy Adaptation

Collaboration among stakeholders, including government agencies, educational institutions, and community organizations, is crucial for successful implementation. Policies must be adapted to accommodate the diverse needs and readiness levels of different madrasahs, ensuring equitable access to resources and support.

Need for Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation

Continuous monitoring and evaluation are essential to assess the effectiveness of the Independent Curriculum implementation, identify areas for improvement, and make necessary adjustments. This ongoing process ensures that the curriculum remains responsive to evolving educational needs and challenges.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of thorough planning, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive strategies to overcome challenges and achieve the goals of the Independent Curriculum in madrasahs.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings underscore the intricate landscape surrounding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in madrasahs. While challenges abound, there exists a novel opportunity for transformative educational practices. It is evident that the Merdeka Curriculum is not merely a replication of past endeavors but represents a novel approach towards fostering adaptive and pertinent learning environments. The key lies in recognizing and addressing the inherent risks while harnessing the innovative potential embedded within the curriculum framework. Moreover, it is imperative for all stakeholders to exhibit unwavering commitment and collaborative efforts to navigate through the complexities and unlock the full potential of the Merdeka Curriculum. With a forward-looking perspective and a dedication to continuous improvement, the Merdeka Curriculum can serve as a catalyst for positive change, ushering in a new era of education that is responsive, inclusive, and effective in preparing students for the challenges of tomorrow.

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