

Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education: A Qualitative Study of Madrasahs in West Aceh, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum represents a significant reform in Indonesia's education system, emphasizing flexibility, student-centered learning, and character development. However, its application in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) within madrasahs remains underexplored, particularly in regional contexts such as West Aceh. This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to investigate the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in IRE. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 3 madrasah principals and 12 IRE teachers, complemented by document analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis involving data reduction, categorization, and interpretation. The findings indicate that the Independent Curriculum has been implemented across madrasah levels (MI, MTs, and MA) with institutional support through training, supervision, and provision of learning resources. Teachers demonstrated adequate ability in planning teaching modules, applying student-centered learning methods, and conducting formative and summative assessments. However, challenges persist, including limited teacher competence in differentiated instruction, inadequate use of information technology, and difficulties in designing varied assessment instruments. Efforts to address these challenges include participation in professional development, collaborative learning among teachers, and increased institutional support. The study highlights that while implementation is generally progressing well, its effectiveness is contingent upon teacher readiness and continuous professional development. Strengthening pedagogical competence and digital literacy is essential to optimize curriculum implementation. The Independent Curriculum in IRE has been implemented with moderate success in West Aceh madrasahs, but targeted interventions are needed to enhance teacher capacity and ensure more effective and sustainable implementation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is the path to achieving strong and high-quality Human Resources (HR), as well as an indicator of a nation's development and progress. Therefore, education needs to innovate in line with changes and developments over time, so that the world of education can meet the demands and needs of society, as well as the challenges of global life. One of the most recent innovations is the curriculum change, namely the replacement of the 2013 curriculum with the independent curriculum. This curriculum change, on the one hand, facilitates the implementation of education, greater educational autonomy, flexibility in learning, alignment with student characteristics, and a more contextual approach (Alimuddin, 2023).

On the other hand, curriculum changes are a response to changes in modern life, so that educational units are able to provide more focused and effective education in achieving nation-building goals, not just by changing names, but solving problems by changing the perspective on education as a place for the growth and development of students' potential, with the main target being the development of ethical values such as honesty and sympathy, as well as increasing innovative abilities in solving (Jane Delila, et al., 2025).

The independent curriculum was introduced by the Indonesian Minister of Education, Nadiem Makarim, with the main emphasis on the importance of independent, flexible learning and oriented to the needs of students. It is because real education is giving birth to individuals with character, intelligence, toughness, adaptability, criticalness, and responsibility (Kurniawan, 2020). The independent curriculum provides broad freedom for educational institutions in determining learning models and methods based on students' needs, contextual, and effective. On the other hand, it is to reduce the administrative burden on educators (Sofia Kamal, 2024). In its implementation, the independent curriculum has transformed the educational approach, moving from a conventional approach to a more dynamic, flexible, and relevant approach to the needs and demands of the times (Nurlaely, 2020).

Learning through the independent curriculum provides greater opportunities for students to play an active role in searching, exploring, and discovering for themselves what is studied in learning, so that they are more skilled, critical, and independent in learning, prefer to collaborate with each other, contextual, the learning atmosphere is more lively and enjoyable, so that students get more impressive and meaningful learning (Gusman and Kurniawan, 2018, Koni & Richard, 2024). Student-centered learning with a project-based and contextual approach will change the role of the teacher to become a learning facilitator (Mardiana & Emmiyati, 2025).

The Merdeka Curriculum (Merdeka Curriculum) focuses more on developing students' talents and interests. This curriculum provides opportunities for educational institutions and practitioners to incorporate relevant material tailored to students' talents, interests, and needs, such as technological innovations relevant to current developments and needs, practical skills, arts, and social sciences (Shindy & Shelly, 2024). This curriculum aims to prioritize student skill development, thus producing academically intelligent graduates prepared to meet the challenges of their era.

The Merdeka Curriculum has now been implemented at various levels of education, from elementary schools to universities in Indonesia, including madrasah (Islamic school) education in West Aceh. Madrasahs are religious schools under the auspices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, ranging from Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI), Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs), and Madrasah Aliyah (MA). The implementation of the independent curriculum in madrasahs has been implemented at all levels of madrasahs in West Aceh and applies to all subjects taught, including Islamic religious education including (Al Qur'an Hadith, Fiqh, Aqidah Akhlak, and History of Islamic Culture).

The madrasah education system integrates religious values with a modern general curriculum. Islamic religious education in madrasahs is an integrated system designed to shape students' personalities into those of faith, knowledge, and noble character. This system aims to develop students' potential and practice religious values in their daily lives, amidst the various influences of modern life. The implementation of the independent curriculum in madrasahs in West Aceh has entered its third year and

has been applied at various learning stages, from elementary school (MI), junior high school (MTs), and senior high school (MA). This is also the case with the project to strengthen the Pancasila student profile and the profile of the Rahmat al Lailamin Student (P5RA).

However, in its implementation, the independent curriculum still faces obstacles for educators, especially related to the readiness of educator human resources that still needs to be improved, especially in their adaptation and understanding of the independent curriculum concept itself. Educators are still confused about finding references related to the preparation of modules/teaching materials to develop students' talents and characters, difficulties in determining learning models and requiring a lot of time (Abdul Fattah Nasution (2023). Other obstacles are the still minimal socialization and support from the government and stakeholders, lack of adequate facilities and infrastructure, limited textbooks and learning resources, increasing teacher workload, and difficulties in implementing learning assessments and student adaptation to new learning styles (Agus Akhmadi, 2023). Where all of these obstacles also affect the effectiveness of the implementation of the independent curriculum carried out by educators in the learning process.

Another important factor that is often overlooked is the utilization of learning assessment results. Learning assessments conducted by educators are still limited, generally focused on final/summative assessments. Conceptually, assessments include initial assessments, process assessments (evaluation of the learning process), and learning outcome assessments (assessment of learning outcomes). These three assessments form an interconnected and integrated whole in learning: the initial conditions of students, learning objectives, the learning process, and learning assessment. The descriptions above indicate that educators still encounter many obstacles in the field in implementing the independent curriculum. The curriculum is truly a vital educational resource or asset in developing students with faith, knowledge, and noble character. Therefore, in this case, the author will examine the implementation of the independent curriculum in West Aceh in more depth, focusing on "Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Subjects in Madrasas in West Aceh".

The independent curriculum has been implemented at various levels of schools, from elementary schools to universities in Indonesia, including madrasa education in West Aceh. Many current studies discuss the Independent Curriculum conceptually; only a few examine its practical implementation in Islamic Religious Education in the madrasa environment, especially in Aceh. Existing research often focuses on general subjects or secular schools, leaving gaps in understanding teacher readiness, teaching practices, and assessment strategies in religious education contexts. So in this case, the author will examine in more depth the implementation of the independent curriculum in West Aceh with the focus of his study related to "Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Subjects in West Aceh Madrasas

2. METHODS

This research is a field study using descriptive qualitative analysis methods, understanding phenomena holistically and contextually without relying on statistical data or numbers. This approach allows researchers to explore meanings, experiences, and social interactions in depth (Winarni, 2021). Furthermore, qualitative research emphasizes the perspective of the research subjects, meaning that the experiences and views of the individuals or groups being studied are the primary focus (Fahriana & Dina Herminab. (2025). Thus, this approach is very useful for answering the questions "why" and "how" a phenomenon occurs.

2.1 Research Informant

The purpose of this study was to gather information from madrasah principals and Islamic religious education teachers working at various madrasahs in West Aceh Regency. The main informants in this research were Islamic religious education teachers and madrasa heads. The determination of informants is carried out using the following criteria: Head of madrasah, Islamic

religious education teacher, has attended training on the independent curriculum, has implemented an independent curriculum in the Islamic religious education learning that is carried out, and madrasahs that have implemented the independent curriculum. Therefore, informants in this research were three madrasa heads and 12 Islamic religious education teachers who met these criteria and actively implemented the curriculum in learning.

2.2 *The Method of Data Collection*

The data collection techniques were interviews with informants using interview guides and documentation studies using document completeness check sheets.

1. Interview

Interviews were carried out by asking several questions to informants verbally in direct meetings related to the research object. Interviews in this research were conducted with 3 madrasa heads and 12 teachers of Islamic religious subjects, with a duration of approximately 60 minutes per person. The list of interview questions prepared has received recognition from experts in the field.

2. Documentation

Documentation is a qualitative data collection technique by viewing or evaluating documents created by the subject concerned/other people. Through documentation techniques, researchers will extract information from existing documents related to the research data needed in the form of: Educational Unit Operational Curriculum (KOSP), teaching modules, attendance lists and student score lists, lists of participants in independent curriculum socialization and training, and various other documents related to the implementation of the independent curriculum.

2.3 *Data analysis*

The data analysis in the research will be analyzed through data triangulation, namely through data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. This is done to determine the level of data reliability. All data obtained will be selected, sorted, classified, and categorized based on relevant categories and suitability. Referring to the objectives and formulation of the research problem, a research report will be produced regarding the implementation of the independent curriculum in Islamic religious education learning in madrasahs using inductive and associative reasoning. Data analysis uses thematic analysis outlined by Braunn and Clarke (2006), all interview results and triangulation of various data sources will confirm and validate the coding.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. *Findings*

The research was conducted at three levels of madrasahs, including Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI), Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) and Madrasah Aliyah (MA), namely: MIN 11 Aceh Barat, MTsN 7 Aceh Barat and MAN 2 West Aceh. After researchers went to the field and interviewed madrasa heads and PAI teachers, the following results were found:

3.1.1 **Support from the madrasah**

The implementation of independent curriculum Islamic religious education learning in madrasahs was found based on the results of interviews with three madrasa heads that is "The madrasah strongly supports the implementation of the independent curriculum in madrasahs. This is proven by various efforts by the madrasahs to hold activities, such as training on the independent curriculum, independent

curriculum workshops and independent curriculum seminars for teachers in madrasas, including Islamic religious education teachers."

Furthermore, the heads of the three madrasas stated that "They are jointly and continuously trying to motivate Islamic religious education teachers to be able to manage the curriculum independently, creatively, innovatively and adaptively (contextually). With this various support, the madrasa heads hope to be able to help Islamic religious education teachers increase their competence to implement an independent curriculum and improve the quality of education." Apart from that, the head of the madrasah also mentioned in his interview "Other support is by providing resources in the form of teaching materials (package books), learning facilities and media (computers, infocus projector, WIFI and others), to support the implementation of the independent curriculum. Apart from that, the madrasah also monitors and evaluates the implementation of the independent curriculum to ensure that the curriculum is effective and relevant to the needs of students." Based on the data above, it can be seen that madrasas have great support for teachers in implementing the independent curriculum in madrasas.

3.1.2 Implementation of the independent curriculum

The implementation of an independent curriculum is actually intended to ensure that the learning process runs according to the principles of flexibility, is centered on students, and encourages the strengthening of their character. Based on the results of interviews with madrasa heads and Islamic religious education teachers, it was found that "At three levels of madrasas (MI, MTs, and MA) the independent curriculum has been implemented. This implementation has been going on for three years. In the first year, only a few madrasas were selected to take part in training and coaching as representatives from each level of madrasas. The selected madrasas were represented by the madrasah principal and only a few teachers, including Islamic religious education teachers. During the training they were provided with the concept of an independent curriculum, online and offline".

After the training was completed, the madrasah enthusiastically disseminated an independent curriculum to other teachers in their respective madrasas. This is in accordance with what the head of the madrasah said in the following interview:

"The socialization of the independent curriculum to all madrasah teachers was carried out in several meetings. Some were even carried out by bringing in resource persons from outside the madrasah, such as inviting driving teachers from the Education Service as resource persons for West Aceh MIN 11 teachers regarding the independent curriculum." It was also in MTsN 7 and MAN 2 West Aceh. An interview with the head of MTsN 7 and MAN 2 revealed that "The socialization of the independent curriculum at MTsN 7 and MAN 2 West Aceh, apart from being carried out by the madrasah itself, was also carried out by inviting resource persons from the Religious Education and Training Center of Aceh province and the Ministry of Religion of West Aceh. In this socialization several parties were also involved, such as madrasah supervisors, madrasah committees, traditional leaders, community leaders and guardians of students, with the aim that all parties understand the independent curriculum and support its implementation in madrasahs".

This statement is supported by documentary evidence in the form of participant absences during the socialization and training of the independent curriculum, guest books owned by each madrasah, as well as pictures (photos of activities) archived by the madrasah. This means that three levels of madrasas in West Aceh have carried out socialization and have implemented an independent curriculum

1) Planning religious education teaching modules

Teaching modules are the initial things that teachers must prepare in preparation for learning. This is in accordance with the results of interviews with Fiqh teachers in three madrasas that:

"Islamic religious education teachers need to make learning plans long before the implementation of learning, such as preparing teaching modules. These teaching modules contain: identification of learning objectives, analysis of student needs, selection and determination of learning methods and strategies, material development, assessment or evaluation."

Furthermore, the teachers of Al-Qur'an Hadith and Aqidah Akhlak in the three madrasas, from the interview results, explained regarding the preparation of teaching modules and the flow of learning objectives for Islamic religious education subjects, as follows:

"First, teachers need to have a good understanding of the principles of an independent curriculum and the needs of students. Because in preparing teaching modules, teachers will go through several steps, such as analysis of the conditions and needs of students, determining learning objectives, teaching module components, use of technology and learning resources. There is also a need to integrate the values of the Pancasila student profile. and the Rahmatan Lil' alamin student profile, includes cognitive and psychomotor aspects that are rooted in national values, because the Pancasila and Rahmatan Lil' alamin student profile values support the formation of students' complete character, such as faith, piety, noble character, independence, critical reasoning, and creativity. Second, the preparation of modules and the flow of learning objectives are carried out jointly with all teachers, including Islamic religious education teachers, so that they can ask each other, discuss and share information with each other."

This shows that character values in learning Islamic religious education are important to pay attention to in building future generations of young people who are stronger, greater and richer in character.

Understanding the principles of the curriculum will really help teachers in developing the flow of learning objectives. As the Islamic cultural history teacher said from the following interview:

"In preparing the flow of learning objectives, teachers must understand the learning outcomes first, because learning outcomes are competencies that students need to have at the end of the learning phase. Then the flow of learning objectives is arranged sequentially and systematically in one learning phase, being simple, essential, contextual and adaptive."

Some of the interview statements above are confirmed by documentary evidence in the form of teaching modules owned by every religious education teacher, as every Islamic religious education teacher at Madrasah Aceh Barat already has a teaching module for religious subjects from their own work.

Apart from that, cooperation and contributions from various other parties are needed in preparing the curriculum and teaching modules so that they suit the characteristics of students and local potential, so that local content and cultural wisdom will be included in the learning process appropriately and appropriately. Collaboration between various parties is the main foundation for successful planning and implementation of an independent curriculum that is contextual, participatory and sustainable. Thus, the planning stage is not only oriented towards the learning structure, but also emphasizes the importance of the involvement of other parties (the community) in forming a contextual and meaningful learning environment.

2) Methods and strategies for learning Islamic religious education

Learning implementation is the implementation of planning teaching modules in the learning process in madrasas by teachers to achieve predetermined learning objectives. In implementing learning, Islamic religious education teachers use varied methods and are supported by the necessary learning facilities, as the results of interviews with fiqh teachers show that "the teaching modules that have been prepared show that there are efforts to select and determine learning methods and strategies by taking into account the material, learning objectives and available time. In learning Fiqh there are two demands, namely understanding the concept of fiqh and the ability to apply these concepts in life.

The methods commonly used are Discovery learning, Problem Based Learning (PBL), Project Based Learning (PJBL) and demonstrations." This is different from other PAI teachers who state *"the methods commonly used in PAI learning are lecture, question and answer and discussion methods."* From the several methods above, it shows that the learning efforts carried out are student-centered.

3.1.3 Implementation of assessment in Islamic religious education learning

Assessment is a means of monitoring progress and measuring the achievement of learning goals for future improvement. Therefore, assessment must lead to achieving quality learning. Based on the results of interviews with Islamic religious education teachers at three madrasas, it was stated that *"In Islamic religious education learning, assessment is carried out in the form of formative and summative assessments. Formative assessments are for assessing the learning process and summative assessments are for assessing learning outcomes or final assessments after the learning material has been completed for students."* Through these two assessments, Islamic religious education teachers discover the weaknesses and strengths of the learning process carried out, both the level of understanding, students' difficulties in understanding the material, and even weaknesses in the designs carried out by the teacher.

Furthermore, the Islamic religious education teacher also stated, *"From the evaluation, in addition to providing information related to learning outcomes, what is no less important is the feedback, so that Islamic religious education teachers can make follow-up plans to improve various weaknesses including cognitive, psychomotor and affective aspects in the future."* This statement is supported by teacher documentation data in the form of assessment rubrics prepared and used in the learning process as a process assessment and final outcome assessment, including cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. This means that the evaluation carried out by Islamic religious education teachers is holistic. Since the success of education actually includes the success of achievement in cognitive, affective and psychomotor aspects. Educational assessment includes the effectiveness of learning and educational programs.

3.1.4 The impact of implementing the independent curriculum on increasing interest and learning outcomes

Everything that is done of course has an impact on the environment. Likewise, the implementation of the independent curriculum in madrasas, the independent curriculum has an impact on students and educators themselves. The impact on students, as stated by Islamic religious education teachers in three madrasas, from interviews, is as follows: *"Learning with an independent curriculum, students look more motivated, more active in learning, especially in practical activities or learning in the form of projects. All students are actively involved, and their sense of care and curiosity also seems greater."* The results of this interview are confirmed by the results of the documentation that the teacher has in the form of the results of process assessments and final assessments of student learning, which appear to be getting better. The religious education teacher further said that "Students learn with an independent curriculum, not because they are forced, they learn according to their level of ability. Apart from that, the nature of projects or practices in Project-Based Learning must be relevant to real life and meaningful for them, so that they are more motivated and involved in the learning process.

3.1.5 Obstacles and solutions faced by Islamic religious education teachers in implementing the independent curriculum

The implementation of the independent curriculum by Islamic religious education teachers faced several obstacles encountered in the field. The following obstacles are as follows:

1. Obstacles encountered by Islamic religious education teachers in implementing the independent curriculum

Something that is implemented does not always run well and smoothly, but there are always obstacles encountered by the perpetrators; likewise, the implementation of the independent

curriculum. The implementation of the independent curriculum by Islamic religious education teachers also has obstacles. Based on the results of interviews with teachers of Islamic religious education in three madrasas,

"The main obstacle that teachers have is implementing learning according to the characteristics and needs of students. There are still teachers who are not yet proficient in preparing learning tools, such as preparing teaching materials and preparing formative and summative assessment instruments with different levels of difficulty and according to the level of students' abilities. Likewise, in implementing learning methods, not all teachers are proficient in implementing learning with varied methods, including the use of IT so that it suits students' learning styles, is interesting and fun. In fact Information technology really helps teachers in many ways, but there are still teachers who are less proficient in using IT."

The data from this interview shows that there are still many obstacles that teachers have in implementing the independent curriculum.

2. Teachers' efforts to overcome obstacles to implementing the independent curriculum

The success of implementing the curriculum is determined by the success of the learning activities carried out by the teacher. The quality of teachers determines the success of the education they provide. Teachers are the main actors in education; therefore, the quality of teachers needs attention and needs to be continuously improved. As the results of interviews with fiqh teachers stated that *"Teachers need to always be given guidance through training related to the independent curriculum, the use of appropriate learning methods according to learning objectives and students' needs."* Then an interview with the Al-Qur'an Hadith teacher stated, *"Teachers also need to make efforts independently, such as taking part in various online training and training which is increasingly open in the current era of digitalization, with themes that suit their needs. Apart from that, this can also be done by studying with fellow teachers at the madrasah."* Then, based on the results of interviews with Akhlak and SKI teachers, it was found that, *"There is a need for monitoring and supervision from the head/deputy head of the curriculum regarding the implementation and implementation of teaching modules in Islamic religious education learning, the follow-up of which has an impact on improving the quality of teachers and the quality of madrasah education."* The interview data above shows that there are several efforts that teachers can make to overcome existing obstacles.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 Support from the madrasah

Implementing the curriculum in madrasas is a must, because the curriculum determines the goals or direction that education wants to achieve. The independent curriculum is a transformation of the Indonesian education system designed to improve the quality of learning and answer the challenges of the times (Muhammad Nur Qalbi & Wati Susilawati, 2024). Therefore, the implementation of an independent curriculum in Islamic religious subjects in madrasas needs to receive full support from the head of the madrasah, both in the form of socialization, providing training for teachers and providing learning facilities. This is in line with the findings of Nur Almaidah Rudalamun (2024) that achieving good implementation of the independent curriculum is also determined by the support and role played by the school principal, such as his ability to mobilize, direct teachers appropriately, provide guidance, involve teachers in training and coaching, provide supportive facilities, regular monitoring and evaluation. Arum Puspa Dewi, et al., (2025) also conveyed the same thing that the curriculum development process requires support from the school in the form of providing technology-based learning facilities and regular evaluation of teacher performance.

The independent curriculum is different from the previous curriculum, one of which is that it provides space for schools and educators to develop operational curricula independently based on the needs of students and the characteristics of the school environment, to achieve learning that is more

relevant, meaningful and appropriate to local potential (Windy Hastasasi, et al., 2022). This statement is in accordance with the basic concept of the independent curriculum, namely student-centered learning with a flexible, contextual approach and oriented towards character development and 21st century competencies. To realize this is not an easy and light matter, and cannot be achieved individually by teachers. However, together all elements of education need to support the implementation of the curriculum, especially madrasa heads as the main driver of education. This is similar to what Siti Khotimah (2024) said that the active implementation of the independent curriculum cannot be separated from the active role of the madrasa head as an educator, namely providing guidance and understanding to teachers regarding understanding the concept of independent learning apart from being an innovator, motivator leader and supervisor, and giving appreciation for his success. The support of the madrasah and the role of the madrasah head in implementing the independent curriculum is a big and main motivation for teachers in achieving learning that meets the demands of the curriculum.

3.2.2 Implementation of the independent curriculum

The implementation of the independent curriculum in madrasas will run well if teachers have a good understanding of the concepts, objectives and principles of the curriculum in question. To achieve this goal, teachers need to be provided with various coaching, guidance and training related to the independent curriculum, both offline and online. Understanding this curriculum is important for teachers, because the curriculum in the world of education is an important factor in improving the learning process and quality of education which contains educational objectives, content, methods and evaluation. This is in accordance with the statement by Cyndi Togi Marito Sitorus, et al., (2024) that teachers need to be equipped with an in-depth understanding of the principles of the Independent Curriculum including the philosophy and goals to be achieved. Apart from that, teachers need to be given ongoing training and the skills to design interactive and interesting learning. This is confirmed by Gigit Mujianto's (2024) statement that to implement the independent curriculum, teachers need to be included in structured and continuous training and mentoring. Increasing teacher competency will support improving the quality of learning carried out. This was also confirmed by Vicky Dwi Wicaksono et al, (2025) school principals and educators need to be provided with various training on the independent curriculum, teaching modules and assessments.

Apart from that, the touch and attention of the local Education Department and the Ministry of Religion is also needed to continuously provide technical direction, training for teachers, and monitoring so that curriculum implementation remains in line with national policy. This means that madrasah residents understand the concepts, goals and principles of the Independent Curriculum, are able to identify student needs, are able to develop learning plans, use varied methods, integrate technology and assess student progress. This is in accordance with the expression that the curriculum is an important pillar for the progress of a nation. The presence of a curriculum as a guide to educational concepts in Indonesia is important in realizing good quality education

3.2.3 Teaching module planning

The independent curriculum is a renewal of the previous curriculum, which then opens up freedom for teachers and schools to adapt to the needs and character of students. In this curriculum, there are several aspects of changes to the previous curriculum. There are the teaching tools that teachers must prepare for learning. The previous curriculum, known as RPP, was replaced by teaching modules in the independent curriculum. This is in line with Aulia et al., (2023) and Maulida (2022) that the teaching tools in the independent curriculum are known as teaching modules which are different from the previous curriculum called RPP. This change is actually a simplification, because teaching modules can be arranged more simply and variedly by each subject teacher.

Apart from understanding the concept of an independent curriculum, teachers are also required to develop teaching modules according to the scientific field and subjects taught. Teaching modules are

structured guides for planning and implementing quality learning. So the preparation of teaching modules is the process of creating a detailed learning guide, including General Information, Core Components, and Attachments, based on Learning Outcomes (CP), Learning Objectives (TP), and Learning Objective Flow (ATP), taking into account the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) and initial assessments to produce learning that is essential, interesting, and relevant for students. Teachers can compose their own, adapt from the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM), or adopt, focusing on systematic steps such as needs analysis, determining ATP, activity design, assessment, and evaluation. The preparation of teaching modules is carried out by considering several things such as the needs of students, the school's vision and mission, and the characteristics of the local environment. This is intended so that the modules produced are in accordance with the needs and characteristics of students. This is in accordance with the presentation of Mohamad Syarif Sumantri et al., (2024) in preparing teaching modules; the formulation of learning refers to Learning Achievements (CP) by integrating the Pancasila Student Profile values, which are adaptive and contextual.

To achieve a good teaching module that meets needs, teachers must understand the following important elements: first, learning objectives. The formulation of learning objectives must be clear, specific, measurable, achievable and relevant. This goal determines the direction and focus of the entire module content. The second element is Student Characteristics. Teachers must understand students' cognitive levels, learning styles, interests, backgrounds and specific needs. This will really help teachers in adapting language, methods and materials that are relevant and interesting for students. The third element is learning materials and activities. The content must be accurate, up-to-date and logically structured. Learning activities should be interactive, encourage critical thinking, collaboration, and real-world application of concepts, and varied to accommodate different learning styles. Fourth element is Assessment. Teaching modules must include various forms of formative and summative assessments, even better if there is an initial assessment. This is in line with the statement by Budiono & Hatip (2023) that assessment can be carried out at the beginning (initial assessment), assessment during the learning process (formative assessment), and final assessment of learning (summative assessment). Sulistiyaningrum & Fathurrahman (2023) stated that to achieve holistic and integrated assessments, the independent curriculum cannot be separated from project activities to strengthen the profile of Pancasila students. It is because P5 activities are part of the independent curriculum which is implemented conceptually and contextually. This assessment helps teachers track student progress, provide feedback and adjust teaching strategies if necessary. The fifth element is Learning Resources and Media. Use of diverse relevant learning resources (textbooks, articles, videos, digital resources, etc.) and use of various learning media can increase students' understanding and involvement. Sixth, Flexibility and Adaptability Modules must be flexible according to different class contexts, available resources, and unforeseen situations, allowing for adjustment (differentiation) if necessary. Learning planning is actually a teacher's structured effort to create a conducive learning environment, motivate students in learning, and facilitate the achievement of competency in students in the learning process.

2.3.4 Learning strategies and methods

The learning process is a process of learning interaction between teachers, students, and the learning environment. In learning, strategy is an action plan or series of learning activities, such as the use of methods and utilization of various resources to achieve learning goals (Abdul Hamid, 2020). Thus, teachers need to understand strategies so that they can be directed towards achieving goals in the teaching and learning process.

The teacher's ability to determine good learning strategies lies in the teacher's pedagogical competence to understand students, objectives and material, as well as skills in managing the classroom to be conducive. This is in line with Betris and Dorlan's (2024) statement that choosing a strategy must be relevant to the characteristics of students, learning objectives and teaching materials. Likewise, in choosing the right method, the delivery is clear, the atmosphere is active, interesting, effective, and relevant.

Learning Islamic Religious Education with the Merdeka curriculum places more emphasis on a flexible, student-centred approach and the formation of the character of the Pancasila Student Profile. A flexible approach means that methods and strategies are relevant to learning objectives, such as Project-Based Learning (PBL), Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), discussion and cooperation, modeling, digital-based learning/blended learning. Some of these methods are very supportive of realizing a student-centered learning process (SCL) or Student Centered Approach, namely that students are given greater opportunities to learn independently and take responsibility for their learning process. Meanwhile, teachers act as facilitators and guides. PBL (Problem-Based Learning) and PJBL (Project-Based Learning) learning methods are two learning approaches that focus on the active involvement of students (Muhammad Shidiq Al Aziiz, Daris Kurnia, 2024). This is also supported by the findings of Tarisya Afdania's study (2024) that the Problem-Based Learning and Project-Based Learning Methods are appropriate for student-centered learning and are effective for developing 21st-century skills. This method places students as active subjects in finding solutions to real problems, developing high-level, creative, collaborative and independent thinking skills. The Problem-Based Learning method focuses on analyzing solutions and the Project-Based Learning method focuses on creating real products as the end result, making learning more meaningful and relevant.

Apart from that, religious learning is also very appropriate using the exemplary method. This is in line with Abdul Hamid's (2024) statement that learning using the exemplary method makes a better impression and the values are internalized well by students. Another reason is that this method directly exemplifies religious teachings through the behavior of educators, bridges theory and practice, strengthens the formation of students' character and noble morals, and is more effective in instilling religious values. Appropriate and good learning strategies and methods will make it easier for students to understand, know, recognize, appreciate, believe in and actualize Islamic values in their real lives.

2.3.5 Implementation of learning assessments

Assessment is an important matter in the world of education. It functions as an instrument for monitoring learning progress and weaknesses, measuring learning outcomes, and providing feedback for teachers and students. The assessment focuses more on the quality of learning and students' abilities and interests. Therefore, assessments are not only carried out at the end of the learning period (summative assessment), but also during assessment in the independent curriculum has several functions for improving the learning process, continuous feedback, and decision making. Through assessments, teachers can identify students' strengths and weaknesses, as well as adjust teaching methods to be more effective and make decisions. This is supported by research findings (I Putu Suardipa, Kadek Hengki, 2020) that assessments in learning activities aim to determine the success of activities that have been designed by educators. Apart from that, Alimudin, et al., (2022) & Anggraena et al., (2022) added assessment to learning activities to provide feedback on the learning process and improve the learning process.

Assessment in education is a very important aspect in determining the effectiveness of educational programs, both regarding teaching materials, students' understanding and ability to apply knowledge into practical skills as the main goal of the learning process, even towards the character values formed in students (the affective aspect). In this case, the role of assessment becomes very crucial

2.3.6 The impact of implementing the independent curriculum on increasing interest and learning outcomes

Learning in the independent curriculum emphasizes more on adapting to the characteristics and needs of students as well as the learning process. One of the learning efforts in this curriculum is carried out with a project-based approach (Project Based Learning) and differentiated learning. Differentiated learning has a positive impact on students, as students are more motivated and involved in the learning process; learning is more suited to their interests, learning styles and readiness. This case is supported by the findings of Dita & Karkono's (2024) study that differentiated learning has a significant impact

on increasing students' motivation and understanding of teaching material and active involvement in learning.

Apart from that, differentiated learning is also very appropriate to use in practical lessons, such as learning Fiqh in religious education. This is supported by the research findings of Ratu, et al., (2025) that differentiated learning accommodates students' individual differences, has a significant positive impact on their intrinsic motivation, learning outcomes and their involvement in the learning process. Even Salassa' et al., (2023) stated that the significant impact of implementing differentiated learning can create a more inclusive and effective learning experience for diverse students.

A project-based and differentiated approach is an appropriate alternative for addressing student differences in learning, both in abilities, interests and learning styles. Because learning in an independent curriculum facilitates deeper understanding, maximizes individual potential, and develops independence, creativity and tolerance for differences. This, of course, provides a different learning atmosphere for students in the independent curriculum; they learn according to their individual needs and characteristics. This is also supported by Lasmi (2025) learning in the form of projects and differentiated learning, providing a different learning atmosphere for students, learning is flexible and fun. Students learn independently, not because they are forced to, and according to their level of ability, relevant to real life and meaningful to them

2.3.7 Obstacles and solutions faced by Islamic religious education teachers in implementing the independent curriculum

1) Obstacles that Islamic religious education teachers encounter in implementing the independent curriculum in religious education learning in madrasas

The implementation of the independent curriculum in the field has not yet been fully realized, due to various problems being faced. One of the factors that influences the success of the independent curriculum is the readiness of human resources and adequate facilities. Each school tries to adapt to the current curriculum to achieve its goals. The independent curriculum has learning demands that are in accordance with the characteristics and needs of students, students can more easily follow the learning process, without being burdened by large burdens, according to their needs and level of ability. Therefore, the independent curriculum requires teachers to be active and creative in designing learning tools and implementing them in the learning process.

However, in fact in the field, Islamic religious education teachers are still hampered in implementing the independent curriculum, especially in preparing learning tools according to the desired approach. Teachers have difficulty adapting it to the needs and diverse characteristics of students. Teachers also struggle with limited resources in the use of information technology and school facilities which can hinder the development of diverse and innovative learning. Likewise, in assessment, teachers have difficulty using more diverse and competency-based assessment methods. Teachers need to develop skills in designing and implementing assessments that fit the new curriculum approach.

These obstacles are common problems for teachers in various regions, as stated by Muhammad Noor Fauzi (2023), there are several problems for teachers in implementing the independent curriculum, in the form of: not having experience with independent learning, lacking competence (skills), uneven internet access, time management, supporting media, stuttering in using information technology, and difficulties in implementing learning. It is also supported by the findings of Miming Arjuni & Fatimah Aristiati (2024) that teachers' obstacles in implementing the independent curriculum are: Lack of Understanding of the Independent Curriculum Concept, Limited Resources and Facilities, challenges in Adjusting to Student Needs, Difficulties in Assessment, Lack of Support and Training and Challenges in Developing Relevant Learning Plans.

Against these various difficulties, teachers need adequate support, guidance and training in implementing the Independent Curriculum. Especially in preparing learning plans that are relevant to the Independent Curriculum, including determining learning objectives, selecting teaching methods,

and assessing learning outcomes, so that learning can be effective, impressive and meaningful for students.

2) Efforts of Islamic religious education teachers to overcome obstacles to implementing the independent curriculum in madrasas

An independent curriculum is a curriculum designed to be simple and flexible, to assist teachers in the learning process, and encourage active participation of students according to their interests. However, the implementation of this independent curriculum will be successful if it is supported by good cooperation from all parties, one of which is the teachers. Teachers are the main movers and actors of education. Therefore, teacher quality is an important factor that needs to be paid attention to and improved continuously, so that various obstacles encountered by teachers in the field can be resolved quickly and precisely.

Several solutions that can be an effort to resolve the obstacles teachers encounter regarding the implementation of the independent curriculum, include:

a. Expanding knowledge about learning methods through various literacies

Embellishing one with insight and knowledge about the curriculum and learning methods for teachers is an effort to improve the quality of teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum. This is actually necessary for all elements of education to support the implementation of the new curriculum. With broad insight, it will give birth to new ideas that encourage teachers to design teaching tools to try various approaches and varied learning methods in realizing active, creative and innovative learning. Apart from that, take part in various trainings, both online and offline, to improve teachers' understanding and skills in making the learning process better and more interesting for students. Through this effort, it is hoped that teachers and madrasas will be successful in implementing the independent curriculum.

b. Attend training or workshops

Training or workshops for teachers are activities to develop and improve teaching competence, insight and pedagogical/professional skills. In training or workshops, teachers will gain a variety of knowledge and experience related to different learning activities, with diverse individual needs. In the context of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, a differentiation approach is also needed, especially in religious practices according to the demands of teaching materials and the needs of students. Likewise, the technical assessment is carried out in accordance with the assessment requirements. Assessment instruments for both individual and group work should reflect a standard of understanding and skills that accommodate diverse student needs.

c. Sharing with fellow educators

Sharing or exchanging experiences with fellow teachers can increase knowledge and insight, especially in terms of learning. This sharing can be done between teachers at schools or at different schools. Sharing between teachers can be an excellent forum for supporting each other and sharing suggestions, input and experiences towards improving the performance of educators. Sharing among teachers also becomes a motivation for teachers to support each other towards improving individual performance, which will also have a positive impact on the Madrasah. In fact, it becomes a forum for establishing good collaboration to support the Madrasah program in producing active, creative, and innovative teachers in designing and implementing learning, and producing students with character.

4. CONCLUSION

This study found that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education learning across madrasas in West Aceh—at the Ibtidaiyah, Tsanawiyah, and Aliyah levels—has generally been effective, with successful implementation largely supported by teachers'

competencies in curriculum design, teaching module development, instructional method selection, and formative and summative assessment practices, as well as institutional support from madrasahs and related stakeholders. However, the study also revealed several limitations, particularly the uneven capacity of some teachers in preparing learning tools, designing differentiated and engaging teaching materials, and developing assessment instruments that accommodate students' varying abilities and learning needs. In addition, this research was limited to the West Aceh context, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other regions. Therefore, future research should examine the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in broader geographical contexts, explore long-term impacts on student learning outcomes, and investigate the effectiveness of targeted professional development programs, such as training, workshops, and collaborative teacher learning communities, in addressing the challenges faced by Islamic Religious Education teachers.

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