

Date Received : November 2025
Date Revised : December 2025
Date Accepted : December 2025
Date Published : December 2025

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN POLICY AND PRACTICE: AN EVALUATIVE STUDY OF MERDEKA CURRICULUM PLANNING IN INDONESIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Keywords:

*Independent
Curriculum 1; Stake's
Evaluation 2;
Learning Planning 3;
Primary School 4*

ABSTRACTS

This study aims to evaluate the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in primary schools. A qualitative approach with an explanatory case study design was used in three educational institutions in Southeast Sulawesi: SDN 2 Kendari, MIN 1 Kendari, and SDN 5 Landono. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and analysis of teaching module documents. The results show that teachers have a basic cognitive understanding of key elements such as Learning Objectives (TP) and Learning Objective Flow (ATP), but the depth of meaning varies from administrative compliance to philosophical internalisation. A phenomenon of 'digital shortcuts' was found, where teachers are highly dependent on modules from the internet due to a deficit in formal structural training. Document evaluation revealed inconsistent administrative quality, with some schools neglecting essential media and identity components. In conclusion, although teachers demonstrate 'transitional literacy' by mapping new concepts onto old structures, the sustainability of the Merdeka Curriculum requires intensive data-based instructional design training to reduce digital dependence and enhance pedagogical autonomy.

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A. INTRODUCTION

In the past two years, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum has become a significant phenomenon attracting the attention of education experts in Indonesia due to the emergence of new dynamics in learning practices in schools. This curriculum is seen as a strategic effort by the government to shift the direction of education towards a more creative, flexible, and student-centered learning process—a change deemed urgent given the low national literacy and numeracy achievements. Data from the 2022 National Assessment (Taufiq et al., 2025) shows that more than 50% of students fall into the category of “requiring special intervention” in literacy and numeracy. Marlina & Aini (2023) and Firmansyah et al., (2023) emphasize that the primary objective of the Independent Curriculum is to encourage independent learning that empowers students, while Abdul Ghani et al. (2022) highlight that this curriculum was formulated to address the long-standing stagnation in learning quality. However, various experts emphasize that the success of any curriculum is largely determined by the quality of the learning planning carried out by teachers (Nurhuda et al., 2023; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018)—an aspect that still shows real gaps in many educational units.

Changes in terminology within the Independent Curriculum—such as the transition from the National Exam to the National Examination (AKM) and the National Examination (USBN) to the Character Survey—have left many teachers confused, particularly because these changes directly impact learning planning (Ardianti & Amalia, 2022; Insani, 2019; Marlina & Aini, 2023). Research shows that teachers remain weak in understanding and designing meaningful learning, resulting in less engaging learning and assessments that do not reflect students’ holistic development (Sum & Taran, 2020). Yet, thorough planning is a key teacher responsibility and influences character development and the quality of the learning process (Feu et al., 2019; Hidayat & Syafe’i, 2018). In addition to supporting effective learning, comprehensive planning also hones important teaching skills such as method variation, critical questioning, and the ability to explain (Sufiati & Afifah, 2019). However, various obstacles—ranging from book distribution, time constraints, to minimal training—still hinder teachers from preparing optimal learning plans (Suwandayani, 2018).

Although the Independent Curriculum is designed to provide flexibility and freedom for teachers to adapt learning to student characteristics, the reality on the ground shows that this flexibility actually creates new confusion when teachers’ understanding is inadequate. The lack of empirical data on how teachers understand and develop lesson plans in the context of implementing this new policy creates an unanswered knowledge gap. Previous research has focused more on curriculum design, technology integration, or the TPACK approach (Backfisch et al., 2020; Schmid et al., 2021). Furthermore, König et al. (2020) revealed in their research that a teacher needs declarative pedagogical knowledge, which is a crucial predictor in adapting the teaching process. Nurtanto et al. explored teacher readiness in using different learning tools (Nurtanto et al., 2021). Meanwhile, Tsai and Tsai (2019) explored lesson planning with mobile device-based teaching and successfully boosted student engagement through active learning. Meanwhile, Wardani et al. (2023) and Taridala et al. (2023) highlight curriculum policy through policy and case analyses that emphasize the curriculum’s objectives in strengthening character through the Pancasila Student Profile and its impact on educational quality. However, these studies have not yet focused on a

comprehensive evaluation of learning planning based on the Stake evaluation model, which assesses input-process-output aspects. However, according to Ornstein & Hunkins (2018), the quality of learning planning is a key indicator of learning success. Therefore, this study is not only important for filling academic gaps but also contributes to strengthening curriculum literacy, educational policymaking, and improving the quality of learning in the context of the national curriculum transition.

To fill the existing research gap, this study evaluates three important aspects in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the aspect of learning planning, namely (1) teachers' understanding of learning planning, (2) the process of preparing learning plans, and (3) the quality of learning planning documents. This research design is based on the argument that suboptimal learning planning has the potential to become a major obstacle in achieving learning objectives, especially during the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Independent Curriculum which demands a substantial paradigm shift.

This research is crucial for comprehensively identifying teachers' understanding, actual practices in developing lesson plans, and the quality of the planning documents they produce in the context of the Independent Curriculum. The results are expected to enrich the literature on curriculum implementation during the transition period and fill a research gap that has so far not examined the relationship between teachers' conceptual understanding and the quality of lesson planning practices. In terms of practical contributions, this research can help principals map teachers' fundamental understanding and their practices in lesson planning, allowing for the formulation of more targeted coaching strategies. Meanwhile, from a policy perspective, the research findings can serve as a reference for madrasah principals and supervisors in formulating policies to improve teacher competency, particularly related to the development of lesson plans based on the Independent Curriculum.

B. METHOD

This research was conducted at three elementary education units in Southeast Sulawesi Province: SDN 2 Kendari, MIN 1 Kendari, and SDN 5 Landono. These three locations were selected because they had been designated as implementing the Independent Curriculum through the 2022–2023 BSKAP Decree and the Director General of Islamic Education Decree, thus possessing strong empirical relevance for assessing the implementation of learning planning during the curriculum transition period. Furthermore, these three schools/madrasahs differ in terms of institutional status (Primary School and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah), student demographics, and teacher capacity, thus providing diverse contexts for evaluation. The research informants in this study included school principals and subject/class teachers directly involved in the development of the Independent Curriculum learning plan.

This research employed a qualitative approach with an explanatory case study design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The required data consisted of descriptive data regarding teachers' understanding, the learning planning process, and the quality of the Independent Curriculum learning planning documents. The data collected included primary data from interviews, observations, and review of teaching module documents, as well as secondary data in the form of Independent Curriculum policy documents and learning planning guides. The primary data source for this study came from the field,

namely direct interactions with teachers and school leaders, while secondary sources were used to confirm evaluation standards or criteria.

The research informants consisted of nine participants, including school/madrasah principals and teachers actively involved in developing the teaching modules. Informants were categorized based on their strategic roles in the learning planning process: school-level policy planners (principals) and technical implementers (teachers). The selection of informants was carried out using purposive sampling, taking into account their direct involvement in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, their teaching experience, and their availability to provide in-depth information regarding learning planning practices (Hoepfl, 1997; Symon & Cassell, 2012).

The research instruments consisted of a semi-structured interview guide (Brinkmann, 2020), an observation sheet, and a document review format for the teaching modules. The interview guide included questions regarding teachers' understanding of Learning Outcomes (CP), Learning Objectives (TP), Learning Objective Flow (ATP), and the process of developing teaching modules and assessments. The observation sheet contained observational indicators regarding planning practices, while the document review instrument included criteria from the Independent Curriculum Learning and Assessment Guide (Anggraena et al., 2022). These instruments were used in a triangulation approach: interviews explored informants' understanding and experiences (Gundumogula, 2020), observations verified actual practices, and document analysis assessed the alignment of the teaching modules with curriculum standards.

Data were collected through three main techniques: semi-structured interviews, limited participant observation, and documentation. The interview technique was chosen because it provided space for informants to explain their experiences and understandings in depth without the pressure of formality. Observations were used to capture teachers' actual behavior in the process of planning and using teaching modules, while documentation was used to objectively assess the quality of the teaching modules. The implementation of data collection techniques was carried out directly at school, by scheduling in-depth interviews, observing learning planning meetings, and collecting teaching module documents that had been used by teachers (Moleong, 2002; Robinson, 2014).

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Understanding the Concept of Independent Curriculum Planning

An evaluation of teachers' understanding of the planning concept in the Independent Curriculum at MIN 1 Kendari, SDN 2 Kendari, and SDN 5 Landono revealed a spectrum of varying perceptions, ranging from technical-administrative understanding to deeper philosophical understanding. Based on interview data at MIN 1 Kendari, teachers have a sufficient basic understanding of key elements such as Learning Outcomes (CP), Learning Objectives (TP), and Learning Objective Flow (ATP). One teacher, SM, explained that CP is the main foundation underlying the development of TP and ATP. He stated:

“Learning Outcomes are a set of competencies that students must master at each stage. In the 2013 CP curriculum, these are probably similar to KI-KD. So, these

learning outcomes will be translated into learning objectives and learning goal pathways.” (Interview SM, 2024).

This statement indicates that teachers at MIN 1 Kendari are attempting to synchronize the previous curriculum structure with the Independent Curriculum to facilitate the instructional transition. On the other hand, teachers at SDN 2 Kendari demonstrate a more metaphorical understanding of CP. They view the Independent Curriculum as a refinement of the 2013 Curriculum, which focuses more on essential material. Regarding CP, one teacher illustrated it as a journey:

“...a journey from Kendari to Kolaka, where CP is the goal to be achieved, and how to achieve it depends on the teacher and students” (Interview SM, 2024)

Regarding the formulation of Learning Objectives (TP), teachers at SDN 2 Kendari demonstrated technical excellence by implementing the ABCD (Audience, Behavior, Condition, Degree) method. This was reflected in their interviews:

“As far as I understand, learning objectives are derived from learning outcomes. More specifically, at least the learning objectives must meet four components, ma'am: audience, behavior, condition, and degree (ABCD).” (Interview HK, 2024).

A slightly different situation was found at SDN 5 Landono. Although teachers are aware of the principle of curriculum flexibility, there are obstacles to a deeper understanding that cause them to act haphazardly. A teacher stated that “because of a lack of understanding, sometimes if not, teachers nowadays just do what they can.” In understanding ATP, teachers at SDN 5 Landono tend to view it simply as “a way to achieve TP” without delving into the ideal formulation procedure.

Evaluation of the Learning Planning and Teaching Module Preparation Process

Field data indicates a significant digital dependency phenomenon in the three schools, resulting from a lack of formal training. At MIN 1 Kendari, the planning process relies heavily on online modules. This is explicitly confirmed by a teacher's statement:

“Yes, we've been taking information from the internet. Because there's no training provided for that.” (Interview SH, 2024)

This dependency is also evident in the development of online learning objectives (TP) and ATP (Analysis of Learning Objectives) at MIN 1 Kendari, where teachers find it more practical to use downloaded materials than to develop them independently. A teacher explained, “To formulate them, we usually search online, and we take the existing learning objectives,” adding that for ATP, they chose the internet because “it's already organized or sequential.” In fact, the principles of the Independent Curriculum are often adopted as is without contextual modification.

At SDN 2 Kendari, although teachers also use references from the internet, there is a more active adaptation effort. They stated, “We take them from the internet and then adapt them to the conditions of the school or class where we teach.” This also applies to ATP and assessments, where teachers adapt existing examples to the local context. Interestingly, teachers at SDN 2 Kendari have begun integrating student-centered learning methods. In interviews, they explained:

“We combine several methods, such as discussions, Q&A, or demonstrations, so that the teacher does not dominate the learning process.” (Interview HK, 2024)

Meanwhile, at SDN 5 Landonu, the process of developing the TP and ATP is still at the pure imitation or “copy-paste” stage. Teachers openly acknowledge their limitations:

TP is part of a module, right? Actually, the steps for developing a module are still copy-pasted, looking at examples on the internet and then adapting them. Usually, teachers, especially here, can't even create a complete curriculum...”

This situation confirms that without adequate curriculum literacy, teachers at SDN 5 Landonu simply follow the instructions in the module without innovating to meet their students' needs.

Analysis of Teaching Module Documents and Structural Barriers

An analysis of the physical documentation of the teaching modules at the three schools revealed stark differences in quality in terms of administrative completeness. A Document Evaluation at MIN 1 Kendari revealed that their teaching modules largely met standards, but there were crucial gaps in the educational unit's identity. Furthermore, compared to the Learning and Assessment Guidebook, the teaching module at MIN 1 Kendari did not include a component for learning media.

In contrast, the Teaching Module Document at SDN 2 Kendari demonstrated very comprehensive quality. The document covered all the minimum components, including: a) Complete Identity: Educational Unit (SDN 2 Kendari), Subject (Social Sciences), Class/Semester (3/1), Main Material (Introducing Energy), and Time Allocation (3 x 35 minutes); b) Substantive components: Learning objectives, activity steps, initial and final assessments, and learning media; c) Additional components: Student needs analysis (diagnostic assessment), initial competencies, Pancasila Student Profile, learning model, and reflection and remedial sheets.

This demonstrates that teachers at SDN 2 Kendari are not haphazard in developing lesson plans, despite facing similar training challenges.

The most consistent finding across all three schools was complaints about the lack of training support from relevant authorities. At MIN 1 Kendari, teachers complained about the absence of training from the Regional Office: “If we wait for training on the independent curriculum from the regional office, for example, it doesn't exist.” A similar complaint was voiced by a teacher at SDN 2 Kendari:

“The challenge arose because we teachers didn't have any offline training on the independence curriculum, so we had to be proactive in seeking out information about the independence curriculum.” (Interview SS, 2024)

This lack of training is the primary reason teachers choose digital shortcuts by relying excessively on the internet. This situation demands systematic intervention from the government and school principals to hold ongoing workshops to empower teachers to develop independent, contextual, and high-quality lesson plans.

Analysis/Discussion

Findings regarding the understanding of curriculum planning concepts indicate that elementary school teachers possess a basic cognitive foundation related to Learning Outcomes (CP), Learning Objectives (TP), and Learning Objective Paths (ATP), but the depth of their understanding varies widely. The significance of this finding is that teachers' understanding of CP constitutes the primary framework underlying the entire learning structure. For example, teachers at MIN 1 Kendari understand CP as phase-by-phase competencies that are broken down into TP and ATP. This aligns with Priestley

et al.'s (2021) view that teacher agency in curriculum implementation is strongly influenced by how they interpret macro policies into micro practices. This contrasts with previous research, which often assumes uniform teacher understanding after socialization; this study instead found a dichotomy in perception.

On the one hand, teachers view the curriculum in an administratively rigid manner, as at SDN 5 Landonu, where CP is viewed as a standard issued by the education department. This perception reflects the phenomenon of “administrative compliance,” which, according to Fullan (2013), often hinders pedagogical creativity because teachers feel trapped by standardization. On the other hand, there is a philosophically flexible perspective, as illustrated by the “journey” metaphor at SDN 2 Kendari. Biesta (2023) describes this kind of philosophical internalization as a prerequisite for teachers to become autonomous curriculum developers, not merely technical implementers.

Similarities with official government literature lie in the recognition of CP as a phase-by-phase competency. However, differences emerge in how teachers internalize the concept into operational steps. This difference is influenced by the teacher's background experience and the intensity of independent literacy with reference to the guidebook. Revina et al. (2023) emphasized that teacher competence in translating the curriculum is highly dependent on the quality of professional preparation and ongoing support in schools. A contribution from this data is the identification of the phenomenon of “transitional literacy,” where teachers still attempt to map new concepts of the Independent Curriculum into existing structures such as the Core Competencies (KI-KD) to reduce the cognitive burden of adaptation. This adaptation strategy, according to Qian et al. (2023) and Penuel et al. (2016), is a natural human mechanism for coping with drastic policy changes through a sense-making process. Tiippana et al. (2024) and Sullanmaa et al. (2019) add that theoretical understanding must be supported by a coherent collaborative system at the school level to ensure the sustainability of teacher instructional innovation.

In the process of developing lesson plans in the sample schools, the phenomenon of “digital shortcuts” was discovered, which has a dual meaning: it serves as a form of teacher resilience in the face of rapid policy changes, and also as an indicator of professional vulnerability. This finding is crucial because it reveals a sharp gap between the idealism of the Independent Curriculum, which requires teachers to be creative learning designers, and the reality on the ground that positions teachers merely as consumers of internet content. This phenomenon reinforces Harris & Jones' (2019) theory regarding teacher workload in education reform, where curriculum decentralization often creates administrative pressure that pushes teachers to seek instant solutions. This result contrasts with the initial expectations of curriculum implementation, which expected teacher independence in designing contextual Learning Objectives (TP) based on an analysis of local needs. In contrast, the adoption of unmodified internet-based materials in the three schools demonstrates what Deng (2025) (2025) calls the “erosion of pedagogical autonomy,” where teacher creativity is marginalized by easy access to ready-made digital documents or the excessive use of Artificial Intelligence (ChatGPT) (Annamalai et al., 2025).

A critical explanation for the similar patterns of digital dependency across the three schools is the lack of structural support in the form of ongoing formal training. The lack of training from educational authorities forced teachers at MIN 1 Kendari and SDN 2 Kendari to navigate online platforms independently. This finding reinforces the

arguments of Fullan & Edwards (2022) and Imron (2023) that the success of educational change is determined not only by the quality of policy, but also by the quality of “collective capacity” built through intensive mentoring. This widespread use of internet materials represents a practical adaptation by teachers to the complexities of the new curriculum (2021). Theoretically, this data provides new insights into the risks of digital dependency in transitioning education systems, in line with the warnings of Tadesse et al. (2023) and Baharuddin & Burhan (2025) that reliance on open resources without strong curriculum literacy can degrade the intellectual standards of learning. This means that curriculum digitalization must be accompanied by strengthening instructional design literacy (Aeni et al., 2023) so that teachers do not fall into the trap of “imitation pedagogy” that ignores students’ contextual needs (Jordan et al., 2024; Juhaevah et al., 2025; Rezat, 2024; Rofi et al., 2023).

Analyzing document quality through a physical evaluation of teaching modules is crucial as authentic evidence of the extent to which the principles of the Independent Curriculum are internalized in the learning instruments. This finding confirms that the completeness of module components is not merely a matter of fulfilling administrative requirements, but rather a “roadmap” that determines the direction of teacher-student interactions in the classroom. The results of this study revealed a disconnect between formal reports and the reality of the documents, with fundamental omissions such as the omission of educational unit identities and details of learning media in modules at MIN 1 Kendari. This phenomenon aligns with Fullan’s (2021) report, which states that curriculum implementation often becomes trapped in superficial formalities without considering the substantial completeness that supports instruction. The absence of this learning media component is very critical because the planned integration of multimedia resources is a determining factor in students’ cognitive load in processing complex materials (Bazarbekova et al., 2025; Hachmi et al., 2025; Mayer, 2011; Tisoglu et al., 2025). Furthermore, Zhai et al. (2024) emphasize that incomplete planning documents will obscure instructional transparency, so that the learning process becomes less directed and loses its pedagogical coherence.

Conversely, SDN 2 Kendari’s success in exceeding minimum standards by incorporating diagnostic assessments, Pancasila student profiles, and needs analysis demonstrates that curriculum flexibility can be optimally utilized through robust modification initiatives. This practice reflects Darling-Hammond’s (2006) theory on the importance of “responsive pedagogy,” in which teachers play an active role as curriculum architects, adapting national standards to classroom realities. These differences in document quality between schools demonstrate that teachers’ ability to translate curriculum principles into concrete activities is highly dependent on their design literacy, a key to educator professionalism in the modern era (Kholid et al., 2023; Willermark, 2017; Zhang & Tang, 2021). This data contribution provides a concrete picture of minimum standards, often overlooked but directly implicated in students’ intellectual development. Similarly, Aas (2022) and Aas (2023) emphasize that thorough planning that includes student needs analysis has a significant impact on learning effectiveness. This finding provides a significant theoretical contribution that curriculum autonomy will only be effective if it is accompanied by strengthening teacher capacity in designing adaptive and data-based instructional designs to ensure fair access to quality learning.

D. CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the elementary level demonstrates a diverse spectrum of teacher understanding, ranging from a technical-administrative orientation to a deeper philosophical internalization. Key findings indicate that although teachers possess a basic understanding of key elements such as CP, TP, and ATP, there remains a high level of digital dependency through the practice of copying and pasting teaching modules due to a lack of formal training. A significant finding is the identification of a phenomenon called “transitional literacy,” where teachers attempt to adapt to the new paradigm by mapping the concepts of the Independent Curriculum into the old structure of the 2013 Curriculum to reduce cognitive load during the transition period.

These findings have broad theoretical and practical implications for the sustainability of education reform. Theoretically, this research contributes to the literature on teacher agency in curriculum implementation, emphasizing that curriculum autonomy and flexibility will only be effective if supported by strong pedagogical capacity. Practically, the reliance on “digital shortcuts” indicates the risk of erosion of pedagogical autonomy if digitalization is not accompanied by strengthening instructional design literacy. Therefore, systematic intervention from the government and school principals is needed through intensive mentoring and ongoing workshops to build teachers' collective capacity in designing independent and contextual learning.

This study is limited by the number of informants and its limited geographic coverage in Southeast Sulawesi Province, making it unable to generalize the relationship between teachers' philosophical understanding and their self-efficacy in actual classroom practice at the national level. Future research should focus on a more in-depth examination of the quality of learning materials produced through the use of artificial intelligence and its impact on the originality of teachers' instructional designs. Furthermore, further study is needed to map how professional collaboration systems at the school level can ensure the sustainability of curriculum innovation without relying entirely on external resources.

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