

## Existence of independent learning curriculum and portrait of ideal curriculum management in laboratory schools

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### ABSTRACT

Each schools have the autonomous right to manage and develop an independent curriculum according to its potential. However, the implementation of the independent learning curriculum is dependent on proper management at the school level, so there may be obstacles faced by schools in managing the independent learning curriculum. The purpose of this study is to investigate the concept and problems, as well as school strategies in managing an independent learning curriculum in laboratory schools. This research was studied qualitatively with a multi-site study design. Data collection was conducted through focus group discussions (FGDs) with semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation studies. Data validity was checked using source triangulation, discussion among fellow researchers, and adequacy of reference materials. Data analysis techniques used constant comparative analysis. The results show that learning activities in the independent curriculum emphasize character education and the achievement of students' happiness in learning, and schools implement differentiated learning and simplify the values contained in P5 through projects and fun learning. This research contributes theoretically and practically, by complementing previous literature and can be a guide for school managers in order to ideally manage an independent curriculum.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is the main pillar in the formation and development of a nation. In the context of education in Indonesia, the curriculum plays a crucial role as the basis for organizing learning at various levels of education. Along with the times, the demand for changes in the curriculum is becoming increasingly urgent to ensure the relevance, usefulness and adequacy of the curriculum in facing the dynamics of a global society [1]. One of the major efforts in the transformation of Indonesian education is the development of an independent learning curriculum, which emphasizes independence, freedom, and relevance of the curriculum to the needs and students potential [2], [3]. The independent learning curriculum was introduced as a systemic innovation in Indonesian education, promoting a curriculum approach that is more inclusive, adaptive and responsive to students' needs.

The independent learning curriculum aims to improve the quality of education by exploring individual potential, adjusting to local needs, encouraging creativity, and strengthening skills that are relevant to real life [4]. This is in line with the spirit of providing inclusive education and stimulating individual potential. However, the implementation of the independent learning curriculum is not only limited to theory, but also highly dependent on proper management at the school level, thus allowing for possible constraints that schools may face in managing the independent learning curriculum, this may include difficulties in implementing, developing or evaluating an appropriate curriculum [5], [6].

The laboratory school, as an innovative educational institution, is a strategic place to implement and manage the independent learning curriculum well [7], in this context, laboratory schools are an interesting subject to study. Each educational unit certainly has its own views and understanding in responding to the independent learning policy, especially at the laboratory school of the Universitas Negeri Malang. The Laboratory School is often considered a pilot in the application of educational innovation, because it is directly integrated with the education management bureaucracy at the Universitas Negeri Malang [8], [9]. With its expected status as an excellent educational entity, curriculum management at the laboratory school is important in determining the success of the independent learning curriculum and the portrait of ideal curriculum management.

Quality learning is currently the main target of every educational organization in relation to responding to the times, as well as an effort to equip prospective graduates with soft skills and hard skills so that they are better prepared to compete nationally and globally [10], [11]. In order to realize these conditions, there needs to be changes in learning activities in schools, changes to learning patterns with a conservative approach towards a more flexible direction [12]. Responding to this, of course, requires an ideal learning curriculum, especially in facilitating and accommodating students to have freedom in learning. The essence of the independent learning curriculum basically offers students to get used to a culture of independent learning without coercion which will later give birth to agentic potential in the personalities of students intentionally and continuously [13], [14].

In the face of rapid global change, understanding the existence of an independent learning curriculum and a portrait of ideal curriculum management in laboratory schools is an important first step in building an educational foundation that is adaptive and responsive to the demands of the times. The ideal curriculum management at the laboratory school is the main focus in gaining a comprehensive understanding of the independent learning curriculum. Ideal management will include aspects such as student participation, holistic assessment, integration of technology in learning, increasing teacher competence, and active involvement of all education stakeholders [15], [16]. As an educational institution, it is often the center of innovation and experimentation in curriculum development [17], the study of how the laboratory school manages the independent learning curriculum is very relevant to be reviewed in depth. Furthermore, this research makes an important contribution in revealing the potential, obstacles, and strategies in realizing adaptive and quality education. This research is not only important in the theoretical context of education, but also has great practical implications in improving the quality of education in Indonesia.

## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1. Research design**

This research uses a qualitative approach with a multi-site study design. The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of the existence of an independent learning curriculum in realizing quality learning at the Universitas Negeri Malang (UM) laboratory school. The existence of the Universitas Negeri Malang Laboratory Elementary School, which is located in Malang City and Blitar City, certainly has its own characteristics and advantages in responding to the independent learning policy. Given the differences related to community conditions, demographics, geography, and culture from each region.

### **2.2. Participants and data collection**

The location of this research is the Universitas Negeri Malang Laboratory Elementary School located in Malang City and Blitar City, East Java, Indonesia, both of these locations are schools under the auspices of the State University of Malang. The informants in this study totaled 20 people consisting of 2 principals, 2 vice principals of curriculum, 8 teachers, 4 parents and 4 students from both research sites. The participants in this study were voluntary and non-coercive, and the identity of the participants was kept confidential to ensure research ethics. Based on the results of the preliminary study, the sites were chosen because they have unique characteristics that are different from other schools. Both locations are also known as pilot schools in their respective regions, making them interesting to study, especially with regard to curriculum management in the era of independent learning. Data collection was conducted from June to October 2023, using a group interview

technique through focus group discussions (FGDs) involving principals, curriculum officers, teachers, parents and students. Data deepening was done with non-participant observation and documentation study.

### 2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis in this study used analysis of reduction, presentation, verification, and conclusion drawing, as recommended by Miles *et al.* [18]. Checking the validity of the data in this study used source triangulation, discussion among fellow researchers, and the adequacy of reference materials. After the data analysis of each site was completed, data analysis was then carried out using constant comparative analysis [19], where these two locations have quite dominant similar backgrounds.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Concepts and problems of independent learning curriculum implementation in laboratory schools

Entering the current era of independent learning, each educational unit is given full authority to manage and develop an independent curriculum by adjusting school conditions, especially on the readiness of teachers and students. In order to achieve optimal results in the management and implementation of the independent curriculum in laboratory schools, it is clear that it needs to be supported by solid and competent personnel. There needs to be an understanding of the concept and direction of the objectives of the current independent curriculum. Not only that, the success of managing an independent curriculum is certainly not free from obstacles. Therefore, all school personnel must have sufficient ability to turn these obstacles into opportunities for improvement. As the results of research findings from the two sites, namely Labschool UM (Universitas Negeri Malang Laboratory Elementary School) located in Malang City and Blitar City, have the same characteristics in terms of human resources in understanding the concepts and problems of managing an independent curriculum.

The results showed that every education manager in laboratory schools has a mostly similar understanding of the concept of the independent learning curriculum. As the findings at Labschool UM Malang City show that, the direction of implementing the independent learning curriculum is to provide quality learning by paying attention to the conditions of students in terms of cognitive aspects, talents, and interests of each individual. This statement is in accordance with what was conveyed by the vice principal of the curriculum at Elementary Labschool UM Malang City during group interviews as follows;

*“So, the existence of this independent curriculum teaches us that children are diverse, not like before where children must have this and that competency. The existence of this curriculum, we are more unhurried in forcing children to achieve the material, considering that there are phases. So that we interpret this independent curriculum is that children have diversity both in terms of cognitive, ability and how each child is handled. I believe the government's goal is good with the current independent curriculum”.*

While the findings at Elementary Labschool UM Blitar City show that the implementation of the independent curriculum focuses more on character education and the achievement of students' happiness, especially in the learning process. This statement is supported by the expression of the principal of Elementary Labschool UM Kota Blitar who stated that;

*“That in this independent curriculum emphasizes character education, because so far there has been a boom related to mental degradation and here character education has turned into six values in accordance with the Pancasila student profile (P5) which includes several things such as faith, noble character and devotion to God, global diversity, mutual cooperation, independence, critical and creative reasoning”.*

In addition, two teachers of Elementary Labschool UM Blitar City also said that;

*“The implementation of this independent curriculum basically refers to the philosophy of Ki Hajar Dewantara. It is said there that education must be able to lead the child to achieve his happiness in accordance with the nature of the times. Actually, the teacher here acts as a guide, where children are like seeds that we must care for and educate so that they become humans who are beneficial to the surrounding environment. Most likely the teachers here must prioritize the character of the child to be good first. Especially in my class, they must prioritize the issue of manners, because in my opinion it is useless even though they are smart and have high knowledge if they do not have manners”.*

Thus, it can be said that the current independent curriculum requires teachers to have diligence in serving each individual, of course, in the teaching and learning process and the process of instilling character values. Furthermore, the findings in both sites also show that the government gives autonomy to each school to implement an independent learning curriculum. This is especially true with regard to determining the boundaries of learning materials and learning outcomes at each grade level. The existence of phases in each learning material can provide benefits for students. They can get maximum learning services from teachers,

not even burdened with learning targets that must be completed quickly. This is reinforced by the statement of the vice principal of the curriculum for Elementary Labschool UM Malang City in the focus group discussion activity which states that;

*“Because in this independent curriculum there is a phase for each material, for example, the addition material in Mathematics must later be differentiated in the phase for the addition of grades 1 and 2. We as teachers have to sort out the learning material, because the learning outcomes of grades 1 and 2 are the same, so we determine the limits for grade 1 material up to where and grade 2 up to were. The government also gives freedom to each institution to organize an independent curriculum according to the conditions of students and schools, especially regarding the limits of learning materials”.*

However, it should also be noted that the implementation of the independent learning curriculum in laboratory schools actually did not go smoothly. Principals and teachers from each education unit experienced difficulties in implementing the independent curriculum in the first year. This is due to the lack of workshops and training activities provided by the government, especially the local education office. This review is also supported by the statement of the principal of Elementary Labschool UM Malang City who stated that;

*“We as implementers still encounter many obstacles, because at the beginning related to workshop activities it was very minimal and still uneven, even those of us who participated in the workshop activities actually did not really understand the independent curriculum and from there it was hoped that it could have an impact on others. So from the government, they immediately told us to implement it, for example, if there were any findings later, we would all go that way”.*

Not only that, the emergence of new terms, components and assessment systems in independent learning is also a problem that hinders the success of the independent learning curriculum. This is also reinforced by the opinions of three teachers from Elementary Labschool UM Blitar City who stated that;

*“Honestly, in the first year we were confused, even though we had received training, it was limited. Even though there is training from the Office, it is only limited to theory and that cannot be maximized, we must immediately practice in the field. Indeed, there are many changes from the K-13 to the independent curriculum and even the terms are different. In addition, training activities and workshops only focus on providing theory without direct practice, especially in the preparation of lesson plans, learning objectives, learning outcomes, flow of learning objectives, and student assessment systems”.*

The next problem faced by the two research sites is the lack of understanding of the implementation of the P5 project (Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project) and the lack of facilities and infrastructure to support P5 project activities. Principals and teachers still feel confused, especially in determining what Pancasila character values are strengthened and developed through the project and its implementation flow. In line with the opinions expressed by two teachers from Elementary Labschool UM Blitar City in the following focus group discussion activities;

*“We are still groping about P5, how it is implemented, and what characters can be developed through P5 towards the character values in the Pancasila student profile. In the first year, we were still learning about P5 both from the internet and the experience of the Teacher Working Group and from the Department of Education”.*

In contrast to the opinion conveyed by the deputy principal of the curriculum of Elementary Labschool UM Malang City regarding the obstacles in implementing the P5 project, the following are the results of the interview excerpts;

*“Alhamdulillah our project activities are running smoothly even though it is said to start from zero, friends here are also eager to learn, share with each other, compact too. Because for this P5, we make our own module for the children, what the product will be like, until the performance activity later”.*

### **3.2. School strategies in managing the independent learning curriculum in laboratory schools**

Based on the results of data collection in the field as outlined in the form of interview transcripts, as well as field notes, which are corroborated by the documentation study that was successfully obtained, several important points were obtained related to the school's strategy in succeeding the independent curriculum in laboratory schools. Schools actually have an effective strategy in making independent learning successful according to the conditions and characteristics of each school. As is the case with the findings at Elementary Labschool UM Malang City which shows that the principal always involves teachers in training activities and workshops both internally and externally. The training aims to equip teachers. The review is reinforced by the statements of two teachers in the focus group discussion activities, as follows;

*“Of course there are efforts from the leadership, namely by involving us in workshops and trainings. He also always provides directions and assistance when we experience difficulties related to the independent curriculum. Then every semester there are direct supervision activities from the principal”.*

Another finding at Elementary Labschool UM Blitar City shows that the principal applies a ball pick-up system by preparing all the tools to deal with curriculum changes which are none other than the independent learning curriculum. This effort is a creative step from the principal, so that the implementation of independent learning in schools can be achieved optimally, considering that laboratory schools are classified as reference schools, especially in Blitar City. This is in line with the statements of two teachers from Elementary Labschool UM Blitar City, namely;

*“In relation to the implementation of the independent curriculum, we have been picking up the ball from the beginning, especially in Blitar city. Because the implementation of this independent curriculum is basically legalized and used in Indonesia in 2024, so we are ready before it comes to that time”.*

The implementation of independent learning basically aims to position students as the center of learning. This means that they must obtain learning services in accordance with maximizing the abilities and potential of each individual. As is the case with the findings at Elementary Labschool UM Malang City which implements a differentiated learning system that focuses on accelerating students.

The differentiated learning program had been implemented by the school before the independent learning policy was established by the Indonesian Minister of Education. In fact, the program is running optimally, as evidenced by the prospective graduates produced by the school can continue and be accepted at favorite junior high schools in Malang City. In addition, the differentiated learning program also received a good response from the community, of course parents, because they consider that their children are more independent and have different learning strategies from other students. In line with the opinion of the principal and one of the teachers at Elementary Labschool UM Malang City, as follows;

*“Because our school is different, we have implemented differentiated learning even though it is in grade four. At that level we use acceleration, where the child can graduate faster than others according to his ability. So that with this independent curriculum, it accommodates and there are opportunities. Children who graduate from this program have good grades and are accepted at favorite junior high schools, the school is also happy because this child already has a learning strategy and is more independent”.*

Other findings at Elementary Labschool UM Blitar City show that the principal involves the active role of the community, especially student guardians, in supporting and supporting school programs, especially the implementation of the independent learning curriculum. The background of the majority of student guardians from intellectual circles actually responds well to curriculum changes. In addition, student guardians are also loyal to the school, they think that anything that can help their children develop their potential. This expression is in line with the opinion expressed by the principal of Elementary Labschool UM Blitar City, as follows;

*“To be honest, many of the student guardians here are intellectuals, so the majority of them actively ask questions to the school and in terms of costs, they are very loyal, as long as it is to help develop the potential of the children, they will definitely support. What this means is that the student guardians here are very supportive of the school. For example, if I ask for something like that, they will immediately do it. But it needs to be underlined that we are still under UM so yes, you can't suddenly accept it like that”.*

As is known, the independent learning curriculum is actually different from the previous curriculum. In this curriculum, learning materials are categorized in phases according to the grade level of the students. Thus, laboratory schools adopt two curricula, namely the national curriculum and the Cambridge curriculum to help students understand the essence and material of the independent learning curriculum. This statement is in line with the opinions of three teachers from Elementary Labschool UM Blitar City in the focus group discussion activities, as follows;

*“If the guardians and students understand that we use two curricula, namely the Cambridge curriculum and the national curriculum, so they will not experience too deep a shock. For example, if there is a change in the curriculum, it must be followed and there is also socialization at the beginning of the school year by gathering student guardians”.*

This expression is also emphasized by the principal of Elementary Labschool UM Malang City, as follows;

*“Looking at schools that adopt the Cambridge curriculum, there are also mainly two programs, namely the international class program (ICP) and Bilingual. For ICP, we take the national and international curriculum. In the Cambridge curriculum, there is indeed little material studied by students, but it is quite in-depth. So that the children understand the material until it is complete so that”.*

The independent curriculum is also known as a project-based curriculum, the existence of P5 projects is an advantage in this curriculum. In addition, through the P5 project, students can express the potential, talents and interests of each individual. The principal plans to implement the P5 project once in each semester. This is done as a step to strengthen character education in students. As with the findings at Elementary Labschool UM Malang City and Blitar City, which show that the principal and team always plan the theme in the P5 project according to the level of students and focus on developing character values which will be inserted in the P5 project. This is reinforced by the opinions of the principal and two teachers from Elementary Labschool UM Malang City, as follows;

*“There is a project activity that is carried out once a semester, so for elementary school in one school year at least two projects are carried out, we choose in odd and even semesters, it is different later when in junior high school and senior high school. Yesterday, for the implementation of P5, we chose the block system behind, meaning that we took a certain week to carry out the project according to the theme carried by each grade”.*

In contrast to the expression of the principal of Elementary Labschool UM Blitar City regarding the efforts made so that the independent curriculum and important points in P5 can be achieved optimally and absorbed in students, namely by implementing fun learning. Through the excellent programs of Elementary Labschool UM Blitar City such as the entrepreneur program, fun English, cooking class, and market day. This statement is also supported by the results of observations made by researchers while in the field. Especially for the fun English program, the school always brings in speakers directly from the USA Figure 1 who will later accompany students to learn to communicate directly in class and through fun games.

In addition, to support the independent learning program, both the UM Laboratory Elementary School in Malang City and Blitar City also collaborate with external parties, such as the psychology department of UM in supporting differentiated learning programs, especially in monitoring the emotional, mental, and psychological development of students. Then collaborate with Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) for school branding.



Figure 1. Learning process with USA resource persons

### 3.3. Discussion

Currently, the independent learning policy has been running for the second year for its implementation at Elementary Labschool UM. Various problems arose in the first year of implementing the independent learning curriculum. According to the findings which show that at the beginning of the implementation of the independent learning curriculum, teachers experienced difficulties, especially in understanding the components of assessment, terms, and learning flow. Not only that, teachers also do not understand the flow of implementing the P5 project, especially in determining what character values are strengthened through the project. This happened, due to the lack of training activities and workshops from the government, namely the local education office at the beginning of the first year. Elementary Labschool UM has a strategy in succeeding the independent learning curriculum, namely by preparing competent human resources by involving teachers in training activities, workshops and the principal provides regular supervision. In line with research by Aksal [20] in his research that school leaders as

leaders must try to overcome gaps or weaknesses of staff members by providing continuous guidance. School leaders also act as supervisors, by providing guidance to all teachers, especially in improving their competence so that educational and learning goals can be achieved optimally [21], [22].

The research findings show that the direction of implementing the independent learning curriculum actually pays more attention to the readiness of students in terms of cognitive aspects, talents, and interests of each individual. Learning activities are aimed at providing happiness to students during the learning process, and focusing more on character building and strengthening. Furthermore, each education unit is given the freedom to set limits on learning materials for students. The consistency of the principal in providing an understanding of the independent learning curriculum will have an impact on the quality of learning produced [23], [24]. The principal must be the initiator and agent of change for teachers, especially with regard to the teacher's perspective in compiling learning materials to be as creative as possible and up to date according to the times. The independent learning curriculum aims to provide flexibility for each school to customize learning according to student needs and local potential [25], [26]. Through this approach, the aim is to encourage innovation, creativity and diversity in learning. By giving freedom to schools, the independent learning curriculum is expected to improve the quality of education, motivate students and create a learning environment that is inclusive, competitive and adaptive to change.

The findings further show that to support the success of the independent learning curriculum, schools implement differentiated learning that focuses on student acceleration. The differentiation learning model provides freedom for students to choose learning strategies that speed them up in completing their studies. Various studies also show that the application of differentiated learning can encourage students' learning independence, so that students are more motivated to learn [27], [28]. The school also tries to involve the community, especially parents, in supporting school programs. According research by Fakomogbon and Bolaji [29] the true success of education is not only the responsibility of the school principal but there must be cooperation and support from all parties in a synergistic manner.

In addition, to facilitate the absorption of material in the independent learning curriculum, schools had previously adopted the Cambridge curriculum which was collaborated with the national curriculum. The existence of the Cambridge curriculum makes it easier for students to understand the material, considering that the material in the Cambridge curriculum is very small and more in-depth in nature. This is in line with the objectives of the independent curriculum where students are emphasized more on learning through projects [30], [31]. In this way, students can deepen the material through project-based learning. Several studies state that schools that implement a collaborative curriculum will make it easier for students to internalize knowledge and make it easier for them to gain the skills needed [32], [33].

Another effort made by the school to make independent learning a success is by scheduling P5 project activities every semester and simplifying the values contained in the P5 points. The aim is none other than to insert character values which will later be developed through the P5 project [34], [35]. Not only that, the school implements fun learning through various superior programs. Schools also collaborate with universities to support differentiated learning, especially in conducting assessments of students' emotional, mental and psychological development. Several references state that cooperation between schools and universities in implementing the independent learning curriculum involves in-depth collaboration in curriculum development, provision of resources, lecturer mentorship for teachers, as well as access to higher education infrastructure for students [36], [37]. Dual enrollment programs, joint workshops, and project-based curriculum development are important strategies to unite school and college approaches in creating relevant and innovative learning experiences in accordance with the spirit of the independent learning curriculum [15], [38].

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Quality learning is currently the main target of every educational organization. Research findings show that the learning process in the era of the independent learning curriculum focuses more on student readiness in terms of cognitive aspects, talents, interests and focuses on character education and achieving student happiness. Apart from that, schools are given the freedom to organize learning materials that are tailored to the level of students. To make the independent learning curriculum a success, schools implement differentiated learning that focuses on student acceleration. Not only that, the school also involves the role of the community and collaborates with universities both from within and outside the country. The results of this research contribute by providing an in-depth understanding of the dynamics, challenges and strategies in implementing the independent learning curriculum at the school level, so that it can become a basis for formulating educational policies that are more targeted, more relevant learning, and developing an ideal curriculum management model in various educational institutions. However, this research is also inseparable from research limitations, namely that this research was only carried out at research sites in laboratory schools under the auspices of the Universitas Negeri Malang, so further research needs to be carried out to find out a portrait of the implementation of the independent learning curriculum in other laboratory schools. The next

limitation is that this research does not evaluate the impact and success of implementing the independent curriculum in schools, so that future researchers can complement the results of this research by using a program/policy evaluation approach.

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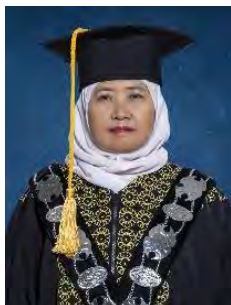
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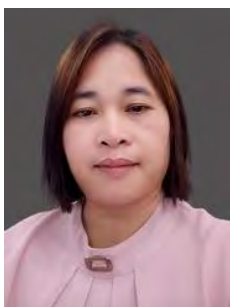
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