

Leadership Readiness for Independent Curriculum Implementation in Indonesian Early Childhood Education Institutions

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Abstract

This study explores the readiness of kindergarten principals in Madiun Regency, Indonesia, to implement the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) in early childhood education institutions. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, observations, and document analysis from 304 kindergartens. The findings show that principals demonstrated readiness by participating in curriculum training, encouraging independent learning through the Merdeka Mengajar Platform, organizing comparative studies with School Mover Program (PSP) institutions, initiating learning communities, improving learning infrastructure, and engaging parents and stakeholders. These efforts reflect a proactive commitment to fostering student-centered and developmentally appropriate practices in line with the Independent Curriculum. The study highlights the pivotal role of school principals in leading systemic educational reform at the early childhood level and emphasizes the importance of leadership, collaboration, and contextual adaptation. It recommends strengthening differentiated instruction, family-school partnerships, and project-based learning to ensure sustainable curriculum integration.

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INTRODUCTION

Curriculum development is an essential and ongoing aspect of Indonesia's educational reform. Since the pre-independence era, Indonesia has experienced multiple curriculum changes, each reflecting shifts in educational priorities and national development goals ([Masykur, 2019](#); [Triwiyanto, 2021](#)). A curriculum serves as a structured plan encompassing learning objectives, content, and teaching strategies ([El-Astal, 2023](#); [Mengxia Liu & Yun, 2024](#)) and as a determinant of educational quality and children's achievement ([Ibad, 2024](#)). As a strategic component, curriculum evaluation is critical to monitor how students progress toward targeted learning outcomes ([Hamdi, 2020](#)).

The Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) represents the latest paradigm the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology introduced to promote student-centered learning aligned with individual interests, talents, and developmental stages. Officially launched in 2021 as a post-pandemic response and successor to the Emergency Curriculum, this approach emphasizes the development of the Pancasila student profile and the cultivation of character education ([Hapsari & Khuluqi, 2023](#); [Suriyati & Lubis, 2023](#)).

Implementation of the Independent Curriculum is not limited to schools designated under the *School Movement Program* (Program Sekolah Penggerak/PSP)*, which receive targeted support and mentoring. Educational institutions outside the PSP are encouraged to adopt the curriculum independently through three pathways: independent learning, independent transformation, and independent sharing ([Anwar, 2022b](#)). This inclusive policy necessitates that all educational units—regardless of status—demonstrate preparedness to embrace the shift toward flexible, student-focused learning ([A. Hadi et al., 2023](#)).

Madiun Regency provides a representative context for examining such readiness. Of the 692 formal Early Childhood Education (ECE) institutions in the region, only 11 are part of the PSP. The remaining institutions must adopt the Independent Curriculum autonomously ([Data.madiunkab.go.id, 2022](#)). While many ECE institutions have initiated the transition, implementation often remains superficial or fragmented, with schools adhering administratively to the 2013 Curriculum ([Anwar, 2022a](#)).

The role of school principals is pivotal in facilitating this curricular transformation. As educational leaders and agents of change, principals are responsible for setting institutional direction, managing resources, and supporting teachers in adapting to pedagogical innovations ([Aisah et al., 2024](#); [Fabry et al., 2022](#)). However, anecdotal evidence suggests that many principals, especially in non-PSP schools, struggle with insufficient knowledge and confidence in applying the new curriculum despite attending training or webinars.

* The School Movement Programme accelerates public and private schools in all conditions to move 1-2 stages forward. The program is carried out in stages and integrated with the ecosystem until all schools in Indonesia become part of the School Movement Programme.

Previous studies on the Independent Curriculum have primarily focused on its impact on student learning outcomes ([Rahmah et al., 2024](#)), the integration of character education ([Minsih et al., 2023](#)), and the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects ([Safitri et al., 2023](#)). However, a notable research gap exists regarding principals' institutional readiness and leadership strategies in early childhood settings.

Therefore, this study explores the readiness of ECE school principals in Madiun to implement the Independent Curriculum. It aims to provide empirical evidence on how leadership, infrastructure, professional development, and stakeholder engagement converge to support curriculum implementation. The study offers theoretical and practical contributions by addressing a neglected dimension of curriculum reform: the capacity of educational leaders to drive systemic change in early childhood education.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative research strategies. Mixed-methods research enables a comprehensive understanding of complex educational phenomena by combining numerical data with contextual insights ([Creswell et al., 2015](#)). The strategy used in this research began with collecting and analyzing quantitative data to assess the general readiness of kindergartens to implement the Independent Curriculum. It was followed by qualitative data collection and analysis to explore school leaders' and educators' in-depth processes and experiences in executing curriculum reforms.

The research was conducted in Madiun Regency, East Java, and involved kindergarten principals as the study population. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, which involved selecting participants based on specific criteria determined by the researcher. This approach was chosen to ensure the sample accurately represented the conditions and characteristics relevant to the study's objectives. The purposive selection of participants allowed the researchers to gather rich and relevant data from individuals directly involved in curriculum implementation.

Table 1
Research informants

No	Name of District	Number of Kindergartens
1.	Wungu	25
2.	Madiun	19
3.	Balerejo	24
4.	Geger	27
5.	Dolopo	24
6.	Dagangan	25
7.	Mejayan	23
8.	Wonoasri	12
9.	Gemarang	16
10.	Jiwan	20
11.	Sawahan	13

No	Name of District	Number of Kindergartens
12.	Kebonsari	9
13.	Kare	14
14.	Saradan	29
15.	Pilangkenceng	24
Total		304

Source: personal documentation

The data collection relied on primary sources, meaning that all data were obtained directly from research subjects to answer the formulated problems. Four main techniques were used: questionnaires, interviews, observations, and document analysis. The questionnaire was distributed to kindergarten teachers to assess their school's level of readiness in implementing the Independent Curriculum. The instrument was designed to encourage honest, independent responses from participants.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach, allowing flexibility to explore various issues in-depth while maintaining consistency with the research objectives. This format facilitated deeper understanding by allowing interviewers to adapt questions based on situational developments and responses. Interview participants included kindergarten principals, teachers, and education stakeholders involved in curriculum implementation.

Observations focused on directly examining the physical and instructional environments of participating schools. These were conducted using naturalistic methods to capture how curriculum implementation was conducted in real-time. The documentation technique involved collecting written evidence such as demographic data, organizational structures, and other institutional documents that supported or influenced curriculum readiness and planning.

The data analysis for the qualitative component followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which includes four steps: 1) Data Collection, where researchers systematically gather data from the field using multiple techniques to ensure completeness; 2) Data Condensation, which involves the process of selecting, simplifying, and transforming raw data into meaningful units by summarizing and paraphrasing key ideas; 3) Data Display, where condensed data were organized and presented in a structured format to facilitate interpretation; and 4) Conclusion Drawing and Verification, in which the researchers interpreted the data to identify emerging patterns, categories, and causal relationships, ensuring that findings were systematically validated through triangulation.

RESULT

Initial observations in Madiun Regency revealed that the Independent Curriculum has begun to be implemented across early childhood education (ECE) institutions. According to data from the Madiun Regency Education Office, of the 692 formal ECE institutions, only 11 are officially part of the School Movement Program (PSP), while the remaining 681 institutions are implementing the curriculum independently ([Data.madiunkab.go.id](https://data.madiunkab.go.id), 2022).

Field observations also indicated that most institutions adopt the Independent Curriculum through a gradual, self-directed process.

Interviews with key stakeholders confirmed significant variation in implementation readiness. For instance, Mrs. YN, a kindergarten principal in Madiun Regency, admitted that her institution had yet to apply the Independent Curriculum due to insufficient understanding, despite having attended multiple trainings and webinars. Similarly, teachers in the Dolopo District expressed confusion and a lack of deep comprehension regarding the curriculum, signaling the need for further support in practical implementation.

The following sub-sections elaborate on six key areas that reflect the readiness of school principals to implement the Independent Curriculum in their respective institutions:

1. Participation in Various Independent Curriculum Training Programs

Principals demonstrated readiness by actively engaging in both online and offline training initiatives. As stated by Mrs. ADG, a principal from Wungu District, she has been participating in training activities since 2021 to prepare for the 2024 curriculum rollout. These sessions, often facilitated by sub-district and district-level teacher associations (IGTKI), served as a valuable source of knowledge and guidance. The Education and Culture Office of Madiun Regency also supported this effort by organizing technical guidance programs in August 2023, delivering 16 hours of training over two days with credible facilitators. These programs aimed to enhance the professional competence of educators and administrators.

Teachers also followed suit under the encouragement of school principals. For example, Mrs. SS, a kindergarten teacher from Sidomulyo, reported attending workshops and technical guidance events prompted by her principal. In Jiwan District, several teachers participated in online webinars organized by the Ministry of Education, accessible through platforms like YouTube and video conferences. Digital technology has significantly eased access to these learning opportunities.

Based on this, it was found that the principal prepared his educational institution by seeking knowledge about the independent curriculum through various training activities. The interview results found that Madiun Regency had held technical guidance activities for the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which was held for 2 days for 8 Lesson hours per day in August 2023. The office facilitated educational units to study the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum offline by bringing in trusted speakers who understand the independent curriculum. The implementation of training activities, both through technical guidance and seminars, is an effort to improve the competence of an educator in order to increase knowledge and become a learning process.

2. Independent Learning via the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM)

The study results showed the readiness of the Kindergarten Education Unit in Madiun Regency by studying various knowledge through the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM). The results of the interview with the Kindergarten Supervisor, Mr. RR, stated:

"School readiness in implementing the Merdeka curriculum is now very easy. It can be done through the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM). PMM has much knowledge. I usually supervise the principal in my fostered school to see what topics they have learned, whether they have received certificates or not, and so on. This method is very effective, and the principal also encourages teachers to study at PMM."

The Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM) emerged as a widely used digital tool supporting curriculum understanding. According to Mr. RR, a kindergarten supervisor, PMM provides continuous access to instructional content and serves as a monitoring tool to track the progress of principals and teachers in their self-paced learning. This digital platform fosters a culture of independent, time-flexible professional development.

The widespread adoption of PMM in the Madiun Regency has enabled educators to expand their pedagogical competencies and digital literacy. Questionnaire data revealed that 87% of respondents found the knowledge gained from PMM valuable in implementing the Independent Curriculum.

3. Comparative Studies with School Mover Program Institutions

Based on the results of interviews with teachers, it was said that kindergartens conducted a visit in a comparative study activity at a kindergarten that had become a School Mover Program. The comparative study activity is one of the efforts of the Education Unit to learn how the Independent Curriculum is correct and appropriate. The hope of conducting a comparative study activity is to see the success of the School Mover Program, which has implemented an independent curriculum.

Figure 1
Documentation of a comparative study of kindergarten school principals in Sawahan District at the Penggerak School Program (PSP) institution



Several institutions undertook comparative studies by visiting PSP kindergartens within the region. These initiatives, driven by school-based initiatives rather than policy mandates, enabled educators to observe best practices and adapt strategies for their institutions. In Madiun Regency, 11 PSP schools were available in the second cohort, and 10 more were added in the third.

The results of an interview with the Principal in Sidomulyo Village, Sawahan District, Mrs YSU stated:

"I am very grateful that in Madiun Regency, there are those who have passed the School Mover Program (PSP) so that we can benchmark the implementation of the independent curriculum. We can emulate various things they have done because the knowledge from PSP comes directly from the Ministry of Education and Culture, so we have a school we can learn from."

As Mrs. YSU, a principal in Sawahan District, shared, these comparative studies provided critical insights into effective curriculum implementation. Exposure to PSP institutions helped standardize understanding and built confidence among educators about applying the curriculum effectively.

4. Establishing Learning Communities

Kindergarten institutions were also found to foster collaborative learning environments through regular learning community (LC) activities. These communities, formed within clusters of kindergartens at the sub-district level, facilitated peer learning through shared sessions and invited resource persons knowledgeable in the Independent Curriculum.

Learning communities play a significant role in cultivating a professional learning culture within schools. Although their frequency varied, all schools reportedly held such meetings at least once per month. These activities reinforced the curriculum's values and enhanced teacher leadership in instructional design and pedagogical innovation.

The observation results show that all schools have implemented learning communities, although they are not yet perfect or have not been implemented routinely every week. The questionnaire results show that 100% of schools have implemented learning communities routinely at least once a month.

5. Provision of Learning Facilities and Infrastructure

School readiness was also evident in the efforts to upgrade learning infrastructure and provide relevant media and tools. These enhancements, often supported by government funding through the Regular Operational Assistance for Implementation (BOP), included materials for both regular instruction and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects (P5).

The results of an interview with the Head of Curriculum at the Madiun Regency Education Office stated:

"The Madiun Regency Education Office is trying to help all education units focus themselves and schools on preparing the Independent curriculum. We know that this curriculum is also part of the digital transformation. Therefore, schools must prepare themselves regarding learning facilities and infrastructure from a technological perspective. However, if schools do not have and provide technology, it can be done by utilizing other learning resources besides technology, for example nature."

A curriculum officer from the Madiun Regency Education Office emphasized the importance of technological preparedness, aligning with the Independent Curriculum's digital transformation goals. However, natural and alternative materials were encouraged as complementary learning tools for schools with limited digital resources.

6. Socialization with Parents and Stakeholders

Other research results found that educational units conducted socialization with parents, foundation leaders in private kindergartens, village governments in kindergartens under the auspices of the Village Government, and socialization parties who have essential roles in each educational unit.

Another key readiness component was effective communication with parents, school foundations, and village governments. Institutions organized parenting sessions and meetings to introduce the new curriculum and its implications. These events aimed to foster parental support and encourage stakeholder involvement in the learning process.

The results of interviews with parents at kindergartens in Bantengan District, Madiun Regency, stated:

"Parents and I have been given socialization several times regarding the Independent Curriculum. Initially, we did not know about the curriculum, but because the principal explained it, we could understand it and were happy about this curriculum change. However, hopefully, this curriculum will not burden students and will be able to shape students' character."

Interviews with parents in Bantengan District confirmed the impact of these efforts. Parents expressed appreciation for the transparency and shared understanding fostered by the schools. They acknowledged initial unfamiliarity with the curriculum but showed increased support after receiving proper information and guidance.

DISCUSSION

Readiness in early childhood education refers to the availability of infrastructure or administrative compliance and the preparedness of educational leaders and teachers to facilitate developmentally appropriate, child-centered learning. The results of this study demonstrate that principal readiness was reflected in active participation in professional development activities. According to adult learning theory ([Knowles, 1980](#)), effective professional development in ECE must be experiential and self-directed. The participation of principals and teachers in continuous training supports the development of pedagogical content knowledge ([Barut & Wijaya, 2020](#); [Özdemir, 2020](#)), which is essential when implementing constructivist ECE frameworks.

These findings align with Anwar and Alfina's study and also with Anwar, Agusri, et al., who emphasized that targeted training improves teachers' ability to scaffold young children's learning—a foundational principle in ECE ([Anwar et al., 2022](#); [Anwar & Alfina, 2019](#)). A similar point was made by Duraku et al., who stated that professional training improves early education teachers' knowledge, skills, motivation, and self-efficacy ([Duraku et al., 2022](#)).

Supporting this, Hadi's findings and Abubakar and Sahriana have noted that training is a formality and a strategic intervention to enhance pedagogical capacity ([Abubakar & Sahriana, 2022](#); [M. Hadi, 2017](#)). The principal's role in encouraging teacher participation in such programs was also identified as a critical success factor in this study, as supported by Rahma et al. and Rahayuningsih & Rijanto ([Rahayuningsih & Rijanto, 2022](#); [Rahma et al.,](#)

[2022](#)). Using blended learning methods—combining face-to-face and virtual sessions—was highlighted as an adaptive strategy that leverages digital technology to increase training accessibility ([Castro-Rodríguez et al., 2021](#)).

The study also found that independent learning using the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM) has played a critical role in facilitating continuous professional growth. In the ECE context, technological integration must serve pedagogical functions aligned with young children's learning characteristics—such as interactivity, simplicity, and adaptability. That aligns with Rashid and Yadav's assertion that digital platforms facilitate broader access to knowledge in the current educational landscape ([Rashid & Yadav, 2020](#)). McMullan further conceptualizes digital platforms as tools and environments where teachers can reimagine their roles in nurturing children's agency and independence ([McMullan, 2020](#)).

Consistent with these views, Anwar highlighted that digital tools allow continuous teacher development regardless of time or place ([Anwar, 2024](#)). These findings also reinforce prior research indicating that educational institutions' performance in the digital era is closely linked to the digital competence of human resources ([Cordova, 2021](#); [Stofkova et al., 2022](#)). The use of PMM facilitated content acquisition and served as a channel for disseminating best practices among educators ([A. S. L. Sari et al., 2022](#)).

The study also demonstrated that comparative study visits were an effective tool for professional benchmarking. For early childhood educators, such collaborative learning is significant because pedagogical knowledge in ECE is highly contextual and requires reflection on fundamental classroom interactions ([Mengran Liu et al., 2024](#); [Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2023](#)). That supports Mamat et al.'s findings that comparative study activities help schools improve performance, refine institutional planning, and develop policy insights ([Mamat et al., 2023](#)). The comparative study visits conducted by non-PSP schools to established PSP institutions also reflect a community of practice model ([Lave & Wenger, 1991](#)). By observing PSP institutions, non-PSP kindergartens gained practical exposure to well-executed curriculum implementation strategies, enhancing their internal adaptation capacity.

Moreover, the formation of learning communities (LCs) contributed significantly to collaborative capacity-building among teachers. These LCs created platforms for mutual reflection, co-teaching development, and pedagogical experimentation. According to Mutiani et al., such communities promote shared ownership of learning goals, essential for systemic reform ([Mutiani et al., 2020](#)). Similarly, Damayanti et al. noted that effective learning communities rely on participatory engagement, where each educator is a learner and a knowledge contributor ([Damayanti & Asbari, 2023](#)).

Learning communities embody social constructivist principles, where learning is co-constructed through dialogue, reflection, and shared inquiry ([Dingyloudi & Strijbos, 2020](#); [Vygotsky, 1978](#)). In the context of implementing the Independent Curriculum, these communities become essential for interpreting curriculum goals and adapting them to local cultural values and children's lived experiences.

Providing developmentally appropriate learning environments, including access to diverse learning media and materials, was another aspect of school

readiness in this study. In early childhood settings, learning is holistic and highly sensory, and the physical environment is considered a "third teacher" (Reggio Emilia approach) ([Dominguez, 2024; Senent et al., 2021](#)). Therefore, the preparation of digital or nature-based materials ensures that children experience active, exploratory, and joyful learning, as envisioned by the Independent Curriculum.

As Anwar explained, high-quality learning tools foster creativity and enable teachers to design more engaging instructional activities ([Anwar, 2021](#)). This support is especially critical in the context of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes character and competency-based education.

Finally, the active involvement of parents and stakeholders reflects the importance of family-school partnerships in early learning. As Anwar and Diadha highlight, parents are the child's first educators, and their involvement significantly enhances the effectiveness of school-based learning ([Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2022; Mazikana, 2023](#)).

The Independent Curriculum encourages the co-construction of values and learning support between families and institutions, especially through character education initiatives like the Pancasila Profile. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which states that a child's development is influenced by interactions within and across home, school, and community systems ([Bronfenbrenner, 1979; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022](#)). Involving parents ensures that children receive consistent developmental guidance and emotional support across contexts, which is foundational in ECE.

CONCLUSION

Implementing the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) in Madiun Regency's early childhood education institutions reflects a significant shift toward learner-centered, character-based, and developmentally appropriate pedagogical practices. This study found that most kindergarten institutions outside the School Mover Program (PSP) have demonstrated tangible readiness to adopt the Independent Curriculum, even without direct government assistance. This readiness is evident through multiple strategic efforts, including participation in structured training, utilization of the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM), comparative studies with PSP institutions, establishment of learning communities, enhancement of educational facilities and infrastructure, and active socialization with parents and community stakeholders.

These findings confirm that school principals play a central role as curriculum leaders and agents of change in navigating systemic reforms. Their leadership fosters teacher professionalism, digital literacy, and collaborative culture—elements essential for successfully integrating the Independent Curriculum, particularly within the unique context of early childhood education. Notably, the study highlights that curriculum implementation in ECE settings is most effective when grounded in shared values, supported by strong family-school partnerships, and aligned with children's developmental needs.

Therefore, future efforts should not only sustain but deepen these initial practices. It is recommended that ECE institutions strengthen their

differentiated and project-based learning approaches, integrate reflective and collaborative learning models, and promote ongoing engagement with families and local communities. These elements are essential to ensure that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum goes beyond formal compliance and becomes embedded in everyday teaching and learning processes—resulting in meaningful, holistic experiences for young learners.

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