

Optimizing Merdeka Curriculum in West Aceh: Challenges and Opportunities in Education

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Abstract. *This study evaluates the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in West Aceh District and its significant implications for local education policies. Through comprehensive regional-level analysis, this study explores its potential impact on enhancing educational quality. This research uses survey methods, interviews, and document analysis to understand better the dynamics of the Independent Curriculum's implementation in West Aceh. The findings indicate positive outcomes such as curriculum flexibility, freedom in teaching methodologies, and responsiveness to local conditions, which align with the principles of freedom-based learning approaches. This is consistent with literature emphasizing the importance of allowing teachers and schools to design a curriculum more relevant to local needs and student characteristics. However, challenges such as resource limitations, understanding of educational freedom, low community participation, and resistance to change reflect implementation issues identified in the literature. Consequently, implementing the Independent Curriculum necessitates careful strategies to overcome these obstacles and ensure its effectiveness. Improvement in teacher quality through further professional development aligns with research affirming that well-trained teachers positively impact student learning outcomes. These findings contribute to understanding the Independent Curriculum's implementation locally, serving as a valuable reference for policymakers and educational practitioners in similar regions.*

Keywords: *Educational Implementation, Freedom in Education, Merdeka Curriculum, Opportunities and Challenges, Quality Improvement in Education*

INTRODUCTION

Merdeka Curriculum represents a revolutionary approach to education by providing substantial freedom to schools, teachers, and students (Muhsin, 2021; Ramadani, 2022). This freedom manifests in various aspects, starting with the development of the curriculum, which is entirely entrusted to teachers and schools. They have greater authority to design the curriculum according to students' specific needs and characteristics in their environment. Freedom is also applied when selecting teaching methods, allowing teachers to choose the most effective approaches according to student's learning styles, thus creating variety and innovation in the learning process.

The concept of freedom in the Merdeka Curriculum is also reflected in an assessment system responsive to local needs and students' learning styles. By reducing the emphasis on national standardized exams, this curriculum allows space for more contextual formative assessments, empowering teachers to measure students' progress more accurately. Responsiveness to local conditions is also a primary focus, where learning materials can be adapted to local realities, considering the culture, traditions, and specific challenges in particular regions (Ventura, 2014).

The ultimate goal of the Merdeka Curriculum is to offer sufficient flexibility and freedom within the educational system, allowing schools and teachers to adopt a more contextualized and relevant approach that addresses the specific needs of local communities. By empowering educators to tailor the curriculum to their unique environments, the Merdeka Curriculum aims to bridge the gap between national standards and regional realities, ensuring that students receive an education that is both meaningful and responsive to their cultural, social, and economic contexts.

At the same time, this flexibility enables the curriculum to accommodate the broader dynamics of global development, preparing students to navigate and thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. By balancing local relevance with global readiness, the Merdeka Curriculum seeks to create a more adaptable and forward-thinking educational framework that meets the diverse needs of learners across Indonesia (Mukminin et al., 2019). Therefore, this concept reflects a revolution in curriculum design and pursues a more adaptive and inclusive vision of education.

Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in West Aceh Regency underscores the complex dynamics of education influenced by several critical factors. Addressing local educational needs is fundamental to ensuring the curriculum's relevance and effectiveness in this implementation. West Aceh Regency, characterized by distinct cultural, social, and economic attributes, faces particular challenges and opportunities that national standard curricula may not adequately address. The Merdeka Curriculum provides the necessary flexibility for adaptation, enabling educators to customize their teaching methods and resources better to meet the specific needs of the local community. This adaptability guarantees that the curriculum aligns with national educational objectives while also reflecting the local context, thereby improving the relevance and effectiveness of education in the region.

The second factor is the socio-cultural conditions involving understanding and accepting the Merdeka Curriculum concept. The social and cultural context of West Aceh can play a crucial role in designing a curriculum that not only aligns with national norms but also integrates with local values. This creates a strong foundation for a more contextual approach (Nasution & Surbakti, 2020). Furthermore, educational infrastructure, including school facilities, also influences implementation. School readiness to adopt the Merdeka Curriculum can be enhanced through the availability of adequate facilities that support various, more diverse teaching methods (Angraeni & Yusuf, 2022).

Community participation plays a key role in successfully implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The degree to which the community understands and supports this educational concept considerably affects not only its adoption but also the long-term sustainability of its deployment (Dalrymple et al., 2017). Building a collaborative environment where community members are actively involved in the process can lead to greater meaningful involvement and a shared feeling of responsibility. When the community is engaged, they give varied viewpoints that improve the curriculum, ensuring it is more inclusive and responsive to local needs. This inclusive approach not only boosts the relevance of the curriculum but also enhances its adaptability to varied educational environments. Moreover, community involvement can assist bridge gaps between educators, students, and families, building a supportive ecosystem that is vital for the curriculum's success. Therefore, the active participation of the community is not just advantageous but required for establishing a curriculum that is both effective and sustainable in the long term.

Human resources, particularly the involved teachers, represent another key factor. The availability of trained teachers who understand the Merdeka Curriculum concept contributes to the implementation's success (Thought, 2024). Training and support for teachers are crucial in ensuring this approach's effectiveness. The success of the learning process greatly depends on the teacher's ability to be creative and innovative. Therefore, teachers are expected to modify and adapt the learning model according to the demands of the times and the needs of students (Yaacob et al., 2020).

A more specific design of the Merdeka Curriculum must also address specific educational challenges, such as high dropout rates or educational inequality. This would allow a more targeted response to these issues. Local government commitment and collaboration between stakeholders are other determining factors. Support and commitment from the local government create a conducive environment, while synergy among various parties can enhance implementation effectiveness (Setyaningsih et al., 2024; Torres, 2021). By understanding and integrating all these

factors, the Merdeka Curriculum implementation strategy in West Aceh Regency can be designed more accurately and responsively to the unique local educational needs.

This research aims to identify and analyze concrete opportunities for improvement in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the elementary or secondary education levels in West Aceh Regency. The main focus is on critical aspects such as curriculum development flexibility, teaching method variation, and more contextual assessments. The research aims to provide a concrete foundation for enhancing educational freedom in the region by identifying these opportunities. In addition to identifying opportunities, this research also aims to analyze challenges faced in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in the local context, such as the West Aceh Regency. These challenges may stem from various aspects, including resource limitations, resistance to change, or a lack of understanding of educational freedom. This analysis aims to understand better practical obstacles hindering implementation success.

Beyond identifying opportunities and analyzing challenges, this research aims to contribute to a broader understanding of independent education. Focusing on the specific situation in the West Aceh District, this research seeks to provide new insights and innovative thinking on how educational freedom can be optimized locally. This goal involves contributing thoughts that can positively impact improving the education system, considering the uniqueness and specific needs of the local community.

Thus, this research explores opportunities and challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in West Aceh and actively contributes to developing a broader and more relevant understanding of the concept of independent education in the reality of local education. West Aceh Regency faces several specific challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. First, resource limitations, including constraints on educational budgets and inadequate facilities, may hinder fully leveraging the freedom in curriculum development and implementing diverse teaching methods. The second challenge lies in community involvement, where a lack of understanding or support for the Merdeka Curriculum concept can impede implementation. Active community engagement is considered critical to the success of implementing this curriculum (Kurniawan et al., 2023).

The geographical conditions and accessibility in West Aceh Regency also pose potential hindrances, especially in remote areas that are difficult to reach. Limitations in transportation infrastructure and accessibility can be a challenge in providing equitable education and ensuring equality in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Additionally, the cultural and linguistic diversity in West Aceh presents an additional challenge, requiring a more inclusive approach that considers and embraces this diversity. Another challenge is the availability and quality of human resources, especially in terms of trained teachers who understand the concept of the Merdeka Curriculum. Adequate training for teachers and educators is essential to implement this curriculum effectively. Resistance to change may also arise, especially among education stakeholders, requiring a wise approach and effective communication strategies (Alshammari & Thomran, 2023; Li, 2019).

A further challenge pertains to evaluation and assessment. The increased emphasis on contextual and formative assessments in the Merdeka Curriculum presents challenges in effectively measuring student progress. The absence of appropriate assessment tools for this curriculum approach constitutes a barrier (Muktamar et al., 2023; Mustoip, 2023). Understanding these challenges is crucial in designing more effective implementation strategies. Comprehensive support from all stakeholders and adapting local education policies can help overcome these barriers, ensuring the success of more flexible curriculum implementation in the West Aceh Regency.

LITERATUREREVIEW

The concept of independent learning and its philosophical foundations

The philosophy of independent learning is based on fundamental principles that prioritize the values of freedom, creativity, and adaptability in the realm of education (Khadafie, 2023; Susanti et al., 2023). The main goal of independent education is to provide greater freedom to schools, teachers, and students in designing the curriculum, teaching methods, and assessments. Teachers and schools are given greater authority to design a curriculum that aligns with students' needs and characteristics, creating a more relevant and contextual learning environment. This freedom is also applied when selecting teaching methods, allowing teachers to choose the most effective approaches according to student's learning styles and fostering variety and innovation in the learning process.

The significance of freedom is reflected in the assessment system, where the Merdeka Curriculum reduces the focus on national standardized exams and provides space for more contextual formative assessments. Responsiveness to local conditions is critical, allowing for adapting learning materials to local realities and considering the culture, traditions, and specific challenges in certain areas. Independent education encourages student expression and creativity, creating a dynamic and diverse learning environment.

Beyond merely providing freedom, this philosophy also encourages the development of student autonomy by granting them the freedom to choose subjects or fields of study according to their interests. Overall, independent education creates a framework that supports freedom, active participation, and adaptability in the educational world. Educational freedom forms the basis for creating a more inclusive and locally relevant learning environment, initiating a revolution in designing more adaptive and dynamic education.

Curriculum implementation models and critical aspects to consider

Implementing the curriculum involves a series of stages that begin with careful planning. In the planning stage, decision-makers design implementation strategies that include the participation of teachers, educators, and relevant stakeholders. Subsequently, teacher training and development become vital steps to enhance their competence in implementing curriculum changes. Socializing with all stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, and the community, is crucial to gaining support and understanding of curriculum changes.

Developing learning materials that align with curriculum principles is also a crucial stage in implementation. Learning materials should support curriculum objectives and incorporate various teaching methods to meet the needs of students with different learning styles. Furthermore, teachers implement the curriculum using the developed learning materials. Periodic evaluation and monitoring become the final stage to monitor the progress of implementation and measure the achievement of curriculum goals.

Critical aspects of curriculum implementation involve understanding and addressing various challenges. Implementation success depends heavily on teachers' knowledge, acceptance of changes, and strong leadership support from the school to the district or provincial levels. The availability of resources, including textbooks, learning materials, and other supporting infrastructure, is also a critical factor, as a lack of resources can pose a serious obstacle to curriculum implementation (Haron et al., 2021; Mohammadabadi et al., 2019).

The engagement of parents and the community, coupled with the localization of the curriculum, is essential for the effective execution of educational reforms. Parental and community involvement can greatly improve the implementation process, strengthening the relationship between schools and their local environments. A curriculum designed to align with local needs and contexts is more likely to gain acceptance and achieve successful implementation as it reflects the cultural, social, and economic realities of the community it serves. Considering these implementation models and emphasizing these critical aspects can enhance the curriculum implementation process, making it more adaptable to local conditions and more effectively

aligned with attaining educational objectives. This approach enhances the relevance of education for students and fortifies the collaboration among schools, families, and the community, resulting in more sustainable and impactful educational outcomes.

Factors influencing the success of implementing the independent curriculum at the regional level

The success of implementing the Independent Curriculum at the regional level is influenced by several crucial factors that need to be considered within the context of curriculum implementation models and critical aspects. Teachers' understanding and engagement play a crucial role in applying the concept of educational freedom. Hence, adequate training is necessary to build their capacity. Leadership support, both at the school and district or provincial levels, is also vital, encompassing resource allocation and commitment to change (Karakuş, 2021; Net et al., 2023).

The participation of parents and the community has a significant impact, requiring effective communication and active involvement in the education process. The availability of resources, including textbooks, learning materials, and infrastructure, also becomes a critical factor, while a lack of resources can pose a serious obstacle. The importance of local contextualization of the Independent Curriculum also reflects its success; a curriculum adapted to local culture, traditions, and needs has a more significant potential for acceptance and successful implementation.

Teacher training and development are crucial in ensuring the understanding and effectively integrating the philosophy and basic principles of the Independent Curriculum into teaching practices (Suryaman, 2020). Furthermore, ongoing curriculum implementation monitoring and evaluation are necessary to identify barriers and allow essential adjustments throughout the implementation process. Overall, the success of implementing the Independent Curriculum requires a holistic approach that takes these factors into account, creating an educational environment that supports freedom, responsiveness, and relevance to local needs.

METHOD

The research "Optimizing Educational Freedom: Opportunities and Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in West Aceh District" employs a qualitative approach to gain in-depth insights into the opportunities and challenges of implementing the Independent Curriculum in West Aceh District. The research design involves various data collection methods, including in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Participants are purposively selected, involving teachers, students, parents, school staff, and education officials to ensure a balanced representation of various perspectives related to the curriculum (Denny & Weckesser, 2022; K. Schaffer, 2021).

In-depth interviews allow participants to articulate their views and share experiences comprehensively, yielding qualitative data that captures their insights and perspectives. Classroom observations provide direct, real-time insights into the implementation of the curriculum within the learning environment, enabling researchers to capture the practical aspects of teaching and learning dynamics. Document analysis, encompassing learning materials, school policies, and curriculum-related documentation, enhances the research by providing a thorough understanding of the formal structures and resources that underpin the curriculum. The analysis employs a thematic approach to identify patterns and themes within the data, facilitating a deeper exploration of participants' views and experiences. This method facilitates a systematic data analysis, uncovering fundamental themes that enhance comprehension of the curriculum's implementation and its effects on the educational process.

The data analysis is conducted manually by organizing thematic categories that reflect crucial findings. Data triangulation is employed to validate and enhance the reliability of conclusions by confirming data from interviews, observations, and document analysis. The

analysis results are then organized into a comprehensive narrative explaining the opportunities and challenges of implementing the Independent Curriculum in West Aceh District. By integrating various methods and approaches, this research aims to provide a holistic and in-depth understanding of the dynamics of curriculum implementation at the regional level.

Here is Table 1.1 discussing "Optimizing Merdeka Curriculum in West Aceh: Challenges and Opportunities in Education":

Tabel 1. The Source for Details Regarding Research

| No | Abbreviation | Position (English) |
|----|--------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | KS | Principal |
| 2 | WKBK | Vice Principal of Curriculum |
| 3 | WKHS | Vice Principal of Public Relations and Facilities |
| 4 | WKKS | Vice Principal of Student Affairs |
| 5 | KOS | School Committee |
| 6 | PS | School Supervisor |
| 7 | GR | Teacher |

This table provides the abbreviations, positions in Indonesian, and positions in English for each participant interviewed in the study on optimizing the Merdeka Curriculum in West Aceh, which addresses challenges and opportunities in education, specifically at MTSN Meureubo, MIN 8 West Aceh, MIN 11 West Aceh, MIS Cendikia West Aceh, MTsN 2 West Aceh, and MAN 2 West Aceh.

FINDINGS

Key findings related to opportunities and challenges in implementing the Independent Curriculum

This research has yielded vital findings that provide a comprehensive overview of opportunities for improvement and challenges in implementing the Independent Curriculum in West Aceh District. In terms of improvement opportunities, the research highlights that the curriculum's flexibility offers teachers and schools valuable autonomy to tailor learning materials to meet students' specific needs and characteristics in their local environment. Educators highly appreciate this freedom, as it enables them to design more relevant and engaging learning experiences that resonate with students' backgrounds. The ability to choose and vary teaching methods is also seen as a significant opportunity, fostering innovation and creativity in the classroom. This flexibility allows teachers to experiment with different instructional strategies, making learning more dynamic and adaptable to diverse learning styles. Additionally, the curriculum's responsiveness to local conditions is a positive aspect, as it facilitates the integration of regional cultural realities, traditions, and specific challenges into the educational content. By aligning the curriculum with the local context, schools can provide a more meaningful and contextually relevant education that addresses academic and socio-cultural needs, ultimately enhancing the overall effectiveness of the learning experience (KS, WKBK, PS, GR).

Resource limitations, including a scarcity of textbooks and inadequate educational facilities, represent a significant obstacle to the effective implementation of the curriculum. Resource constraints impede teachers' capacity to provide quality education and restrict students' access to essential learning materials, consequently impacting the overall learning experience. Insufficient resources complicate curriculum adaptation and exacerbate disparities between schools, especially in underfunded areas. To address these challenges, targeted interventions and policies are necessary to enhance resource allocation, ensuring that all schools possess the materials and infrastructure essential for effective teaching and learning (WKHS).

Other challenges include the difficulty many teachers and school staff face in fully understanding and embracing the concept of academic freedom, which can impede its effective integration into everyday teaching practices. This lack of clarity and confidence in exercising

academic freedom may lead to hesitancy in adopting innovative methods and adapting the curriculum to local needs, thereby limiting the potential benefits of the curriculum's flexibility. Additionally, low levels of community participation were identified as a significant challenge, hindering efforts to foster a more inclusive and sustainable educational environment. Insufficient engagement from parents and community members can weaken the connection between schools and their surrounding communities, making it harder to effectively address local educational needs and support students. Overcoming these challenges will require not only professional development for educators to understand better and apply academic freedom but also strategies to encourage and facilitate greater community involvement in the educational process (KS, PS).

Potential Impact on the Quality of Education in West Aceh District

Implementing the Independent Curriculum in West Aceh District has the potential to impact the quality of education in the region substantially. One critical impact assessment is the increased relevance of the curriculum to local needs. The ability to better respond to the specific conditions in West Aceh District can enhance the attractiveness and relevance of the curriculum, providing students with a more meaningful learning experience.

Furthermore, allowing teachers to create learning materials can greatly improve the learning environment, increasing engagement and aligning more closely with students' needs. This autonomy enables educators to design pertinent and significant lessons for their students, thereby enhancing students' comprehension and academic performance. Teachers can enhance the educational experience by customizing content to align with their learners' distinct characteristics and interests. The autonomy in selecting teaching methods facilitates innovation within the classroom environment. This flexibility promotes the adoption of interactive and diverse instructional methods that address individual learning styles, thereby aiding students in developing critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. The curriculum facilitates teacher experimentation with innovative methods and strategies, thereby enhancing engagement and fostering the development of essential skills vital for students' success in academic settings and beyond (KS, WKBK, PS, GR).

Another potential impact is the development of a more contextual assessment system. Freedom in assessment can lead to creating methods that better suit local needs and provide a more accurate picture of students' progress. Furthermore, implementing the Independent Curriculum can stimulate community participation in education by providing educational freedom. Increased involvement of parents and the community can create more significant support for the teaching and learning process (WKBK, GR).

Improvements in teacher quality can also be observed as a positive effect. The autonomy afforded to educators in curriculum design and teaching method selection acts as a significant motivator for skill enhancement and ongoing professional development. This autonomy enables educators to remain updated on educational trends, investigate innovative teaching methods, and enhance their strategies to address the varied needs of their students. Consequently, educators are increasingly inclined to pursue professional development, actively seeking training opportunities and resources that enhance their capacity to provide superior education. The emphasis on professional development enhances both teacher performance and student outcomes, as well-prepared and motivated educators are more capable of delivering effective and engaging learning experiences. The flexibility inherent in the curriculum promotes a culture of continuous improvement among educators, thereby enhancing the overall education system..

Impact evaluation involves carefully monitoring and measuring quality education indicators, such as academic achievement, student engagement, and classroom learning quality. Thus, concrete evidence of the positive impact generated by implementing the Independent Curriculum can be identified, indicating significant improvements in the quality of education in West Aceh District(PS).

The research findings on implementing the Independent Curriculum provide valuable insights for contextual application in West Aceh District. In interpreting and applying these research findings, several aspects need to be considered to ensure relevance and sustainability in the local context. It is crucial to contextualize the curriculum to align with the culture, traditions, and unique challenges in West Aceh District. The curriculum flexibility identified in this research can serve as a foundation for adapting learning materials to be more relevant and meaningful for students in the area (WKBK).

The research findings highlight challenges related to low community engagement. Therefore, stakeholders in West Aceh District can use these findings as a basis to design initiatives that enhance the participation of parents and the community in education. Concrete steps, such as parental involvement programs or extracurricular activities, can be implemented to strengthen the positive relationship between schools and the community (KS, KOS).

West Aceh District can formulate innovative strategies to address challenges associated with resource limitations. This research's findings can guide policies to enhance educational resources, including access to textbooks, upgrading school facilities, and ensuring the availability of teaching materials. Furthermore, policies should improve community engagement by motivating local stakeholders, such as parents and community leaders, to actively contribute to educational support. Establishing partnerships with the private sector is vital, as it can provide additional resources, expertise, and financial support to enhance public education initiatives. Collaboration among schools, communities, and businesses in West Aceh District can enhance the sustainability and resource availability of the educational environment, thereby improving educational quality and ensuring that all students have access to necessary tools for success (WKHS, WKKS).

Enhancing teacher quality via professional development can establish a basis for creating a more comprehensive and effective training program. Empowering teachers through intensive, targeted training enables schools to ensure that educators possess the requisite skills and knowledge to adapt to the flexibility of the Independent Curriculum. Collaborative forums can be created to exchange ideas, best practices, and innovative teaching strategies among educators, promoting a community of ongoing learning and professional development. Furthermore, developing interactive learning models that correspond with flexible teaching methods enables educators to explore innovative approaches that actively engage students and accommodate various learning styles. This comprehensive method of professional development enhances teacher competency and fosters a more dynamic and responsive educational environment, resulting in improved student outcomes (KS).

The potential integration of life skills by local conditions can be the basis for developing a more holistic curriculum. West Aceh District may consider including aspects of life skills relevant to the needs and context of the local community. By considering these findings in context, West Aceh District can optimize the implementation of the Independent Curriculum to create an educational environment that aligns with its unique characteristics and needs. The success of this implementation requires collaboration and commitment from various stakeholders, including local government, schools, teachers, parents, and the local community.

The research findings on implementing the Independent Curriculum in West Aceh District significantly impact shaping and adjusting education policies at the local and national levels. The research results can serve as a foundation for developing local education policies that are more responsive to the characteristics and needs of the West Aceh District. Considering the curriculum flexibility and responsiveness to the local context, the local government can formulate policies that support the adaptation of the curriculum locally, promote learning innovation, and strengthen community involvement in the education process (KS, PS).

Challenges related to resource limitations require special attention in designing policies focused on allocating and improving educational resources. These policies may include strategies to

ensure the availability of textbooks, adequate educational facilities, and sustainable training and professional development for teachers (WKHS, WKKS).

Policies that enhance teacher counselling and training are crucial for elevating teacher quality, especially within the context of the Independent Curriculum. The government can significantly influence educational outcomes by developing targeted training programs that enhance skills pertinent to this curriculum approach, including curriculum adaptation, student-centered teaching, and cultural responsiveness. Furthermore, providing incentives for teachers to engage in professional development activities, including financial rewards, career advancement opportunities, or professional recognition, can enhance motivation for ongoing learning and growth. Prioritising counselling and training within these policies equips teachers to implement the Independent Curriculum effectively, resulting in enhanced educational outcomes and a more dynamic learning environment (GR).

Challenges in community engagement underscore the need for policies that promote and enable parental and community involvement in education. Policies must prioritise specific actions, such as enhancing collaboration between educational institutions and local communities, as well as encouraging parental engagement in educational decision-making processes. These policies can strengthen the relationship between schools and their communities by facilitating meaningful participation, resulting in more culturally relevant and effective educational practices. Facilitating collaborations between educational institutions and community organisations, alongside providing resources and training for parents to participate in their children's education, is essential in tackling these challenges. Policies that emphasise community and parental involvement can enhance the inclusivity and supportiveness of the educational environment. Challenges in community engagement indicate the need for policies that encourage and facilitate the participation of parents and the community in education. These policies can focus on concrete steps, such as supporting collaboration between schools and the community and encouraging parental involvement in decision-making (KOS).

In the national context, the research findings can offer significant contributions to the formulation of education policies that promote the development of a more responsive and adaptive national curriculum. These policies could incorporate the principles of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes granting schools and teachers the autonomy to design learning experiences that are tailored to local needs while remaining aligned with global educational trends. By providing flexibility in curriculum design, policymakers can ensure that educational practices are both relevant to the specific cultural and socio-economic contexts of various regions and capable of preparing students to meet global challenges. This approach not only enhances the quality of education but also fosters innovation and creativity among educators, ultimately contributing to a more dynamic and effective national education system. The national context, the research results can provide a valuable contribution to formulating education policies that support the development of a more responsive national curriculum. These policies may consider the principles of the Independent Curriculum to provide freedom to schools and teachers in designing learning that suits local needs and global developments (KS, PS).

DISCUSSION

The research findings on implementing the Independent Curriculum in West Aceh District have important implications consistent with the extant literature on learning methods based on freedom. In accordance with the ideas of educational autonomy and localized curriculum design, the study emphasizes the good results in terms of curriculum flexibility, autonomy in teaching methods, and responsiveness to local conditions. These results support the academic literature that highlights the significance of allowing teachers and schools the autonomy to develop curricula that are more tailored to the individual requirements of their pupils and communities (Dalrymple et al., 2017; Karakuş, 2021; Setyaningsih et al., 2024). Customizing educational material to mirror a certain geography's cultural and socio-economic circumstances increases its

relevance and facilitates more successful learning results. By aligning with previous studies, implementing the Independent Curriculum in West Aceh District could potentially serve as a blueprint for other regions aiming to embrace comparable autonomy-based educational frameworks. A more thorough examination of these topics in the literature can enhance the comprehension of how these curricula can be tailored to various local circumstances, leading to more individualized and efficient educational interventions.

Challenges related to resource limitations, understanding the concept of educational freedom, low levels of community participation, and resistance to change reflect implementation issues identified in the literature. Consequently, implementing the Independent Curriculum requires careful strategies to overcome these obstacles and ensure its effectiveness. Furthermore, the potential for improving curriculum relevance and developing life skills in line with local conditions supports literature emphasizing contextualizing the curriculum and integrating skills applicable to daily life (Üker & Kirkiç, 2024).

Improving teacher quality through further professional development aligns with research emphasizing that well-trained teachers positively impact student learning outcomes (Pribudhiana et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2021). Furthermore, the results of this study constitute a substantial contribution to comprehending the execution of the Independent Curriculum in a specific local setting, providing useful perspectives for education policymakers and practitioners in comparable areas (Norman & Wall, 2020; Ralebese et al., 2022). The aforementioned implications are consistent with the current body of research that emphasizes the crucial need for adapting education policies to take into account the specific features of the local environment. This ensures that the curriculum design and teaching methods are not only pertinent but also efficient. By customizing professional development and curriculum implementation to suit the community's specific requirements, this study reinforces the overarching thesis that education systems should be flexible to local circumstances to maximise student achievement and improve quality education.

The research findings consistently reinforce and expand upon the existing literature, highlighting the necessity of acknowledging local challenges and sustaining flexibility in educational approaches that are contextual and responsive. This corresponds with the overarching educational framework that highlights the necessity of comprehending and adjusting to the distinct features of each educational setting. This research highlights the importance of recognizing the unique social, cultural, and economic factors that affect education locally, emphasizing that effective educational strategies should be customized to meet the community's specific needs. The findings underscore the importance of a localized approach that emphasizes flexibility and responsiveness, ensuring that educational policies and practices are relevant and effective across diverse contexts (Ventura, 2014).

Finally, the government needs to design practical evaluation and assessment policies to measure the achievement of educational goals and determine necessary changes in implementing the Independent Curriculum. Periodic evaluations ensure adopted education policies align with objectives and deliver the expected positive impact. Considering these implications, the government can ensure that local and national education policies support the Independent Curriculum's vision, creating a more adaptive, innovative, and high-quality educational environment (Alaca, 2022; Browne, 2022; Dilek & Taşgın, 2023; Wei et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

A thorough examination of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in West Aceh District is presented in this study, revealing important insights that are crucial for comprehending the potential problems encountered in this particular setting. One important discovery is the considerable capacity for educators and educational institutions to skilfully adapt the curriculum to meet particular local requirements, enabling the personalization of educational resources that align with the cultural and socio-economic context of the geographic area. The flexibility inherent

in the Independent Curriculum is a significant advantage since it provides a more pertinent and contextually aware approach to education. Nevertheless, the study also acknowledges many significant obstacles that need to be resolved to fully achieve this curriculum's advantages. These issues encompass the necessity to greatly augment community participation in the educational process, as civic engagement is vital for the effective adjustment and execution of the curriculum. Moreover, there are significant limitations in resources that restrict the capacity of schools to execute the curriculum as planned completely, necessitating focused endeavors to enhance infrastructure, availability of educational resources, and teacher preparation. Moreover, the study emphasises the need of enhancing the comprehension and implementation of educational autonomy among education professionals and administrators, guaranteeing the successful incorporation of the ideas of the Independent Curriculum into everyday teaching methods. This research is essential for gaining a detailed comprehension of how the Independent Curriculum can be executed more efficiently at the local level. It also provides critical suggestions for improving educational approaches to better match the requirements of West Aceh District. The impact of the curriculum on student learning outcomes and community engagement should be further investigated in future research. This will yield crucial data for informing policy improvements and ensuring that the curriculum remains adaptable to the ever-changing educational environment in this region. At its core, the objective is to maximise the execution of the Independent Curriculum in order to improve the general standard of education in West Aceh District, therefore establishing a fair and efficient educational system that caters to the varied requirements of all pupils..

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