



Managing Independence in Curriculum Design to Optimize Differentiated Learning: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines the role of Merdeka (Independent) Curriculum management in enhancing the effectiveness of differentiated learning in Indonesian schools. Curriculum management plays a pivotal role in improving education quality, particularly in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which grants flexibility to tailor learning to individual student needs. Differentiated learning fosters inclusive, adaptive, and responsive classrooms that address diverse abilities, interests, and learning styles. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA framework, this research analyzed 20 peer-reviewed articles published between 2019 and 2024 from Google Scholar and SINTA. Findings reveal that the Independent Curriculum's flexible, student-centered approach significantly supports differentiated learning, improving student engagement and enabling teachers to adapt instruction effectively. However, challenges remain, including varying levels of teacher preparedness and the complexity of addressing diverse learner profiles. Addressing these issues requires targeted professional development and sustained teacher support. Overall, this review highlights how Independent Curriculum management contributes to more active, personalized learning experiences, ultimately advancing educational inclusivity and responsiveness in Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

Quality education is a cornerstone for advancing human resources and national development, particularly in preparing students for the challenges of the 21st century. In the context of Indonesia, curriculum management plays a central role in determining how educational objectives are achieved, especially in fostering creativity, critical thinking, and adaptability among students (Ardianti & Amalia, 2022; Safitri et al., 2024). The importance of this research lies in its potential to strengthen educational inclusivity and responsiveness, ensuring that

learning addresses the diverse abilities, interests, and learning styles of all students. By managing the curriculum effectively, educators can design learning processes that not only transmit knowledge but also cultivate essential life skills. Evidence from recent studies shows that flexible, well-structured curriculum management enables schools to respond to societal changes more effectively, enhancing both academic achievement and student engagement. Therefore, exploring curriculum management within the framework of the Merdeka (Independent) Curriculum is essential for ensuring the sustainable improvement of education quality in Indonesia's rapidly evolving socio-cultural landscape.

Despite national education reforms, many Indonesian schools still face challenges in implementing curricula that are responsive to individual student needs. Conventional curriculum management tends to emphasize uniformity in content delivery and assessment, which can hinder personalized learning opportunities (Ervilia & Fauzi, 2024; Safitri et al., 2024). This issue becomes critical when considering the diverse socio-economic, cultural, and cognitive backgrounds of Indonesian students, which demand tailored instructional strategies. Without effective curriculum management that incorporates differentiated learning, schools risk leaving behind students whose abilities or learning styles do not align with standardized teaching methods. The lack of adaptability in current practices reduces the effectiveness of classroom instruction and can negatively impact student motivation. Furthermore, insufficient teacher readiness in managing flexible learning environments exacerbates the problem, limiting the potential benefits of recent curricular reforms. Addressing this gap requires innovative approaches to curriculum management that prioritize adaptability, student engagement, and inclusivity, making the Merdeka Curriculum an important focus for educational improvement initiatives across the country.

In practice, schools implementing the Merdeka Curriculum have shown varied results in applying differentiated learning. Some educators have successfully adapted instructional strategies to accommodate diverse learning needs, while others struggle due to limited training and resources (Pujiastuti & Retnosari, 2024; Safitri et al., 2024). Observations in several elementary and secondary schools indicate that teachers often face difficulties in designing learning activities that are both engaging and aligned with individual student profiles. In some cases, lesson planning remains overly rigid, limiting opportunities for students to explore topics according to their interests or preferred learning styles. Moreover, disparities in access to teaching materials and technological tools further complicate the equitable implementation of differentiated instruction. These conditions highlight the urgent need for improved managerial strategies that enable schools to fully realize the flexibility

promised by the Merdeka Curriculum. Addressing these on-the-ground challenges will not only improve academic outcomes but also ensure that all students benefit from a more inclusive, student-centered approach to education.

Several studies have explored the relationship between curriculum management and differentiated learning effectiveness. Ardianti & Amalia (2022) emphasize the importance of empowering teachers to design flexible instructional plans that accommodate diverse student needs. Safitri et al. (2024) found that effective curriculum management under the Merdeka framework can increase student engagement and foster more active learning environments. Ervilia & Fauzi (2024) highlight the significance of teacher autonomy in adapting teaching strategies, noting that it can lead to higher learning outcomes when supported by adequate professional development. These findings collectively demonstrate that independent curriculum management is crucial for personalized education. However, most prior research tends to focus on individual school case studies or narrow educational levels, limiting the generalizability of results. This creates a need for broader, systematic analysis to capture a more comprehensive understanding of how Merdeka Curriculum management influences differentiated learning across diverse contexts. Such research will help establish evidence-based strategies for schools to maximize curriculum flexibility effectively.

Further, Pujiastuti & Retnosari (2024) and Ayuningtyas et al. (2023) explored the use of the ASSURE model in developing learning modules to support differentiated instruction. Their studies show that structured design approaches can help teachers plan lessons that align with student needs while integrating technology and active learning strategies. Indarta et al. (2022) also argue that curriculum management should prioritize teacher-student interaction as a medium for reinforcing 21st-century competencies. While these studies provide valuable insights, they often lack an integrated perspective that connects curriculum management theory with practical implementation challenges in the Indonesian context. Additionally, there is limited research that synthesizes findings across multiple regions and school types to identify common success factors and obstacles. This research gap highlights the necessity of conducting a systematic literature review (SLR) using established frameworks such as PRISMA, enabling a more holistic understanding of the role of Merdeka Curriculum management in improving differentiated learning effectiveness nationwide.

This study's novelty lies in its systematic and comprehensive approach to analyzing the Merdeka Curriculum's role in supporting differentiated learning across various educational contexts. Unlike prior studies that focus on isolated cases or specific instructional models, this research integrates findings from

multiple sources to identify overarching patterns, challenges, and strategies. By employing the PRISMA framework in the SLR process, the study ensures methodological rigor, enhancing the credibility and relevance of its conclusions. This approach positions the research at the forefront of curriculum management studies in Indonesia, particularly in relation to inclusive and adaptive education. The state-of-the-art aspect is the focus on the managerial dimension of curriculum implementation, an area often overshadowed by pedagogical discussions. Understanding how effective curriculum management can directly influence differentiated learning outcomes offers both theoretical contributions and practical guidelines for policymakers, school leaders, and educators. As Indonesia continues its educational transformation, these insights are critical for ensuring that reforms translate into tangible, equitable learning improvements.

The central research problem addressed in this study is the lack of clear, evidence-based strategies for managing the Merdeka Curriculum to optimize differentiated learning effectiveness. While the curriculum offers flexibility and autonomy, its success largely depends on how it is managed at the school level, including planning, resource allocation, and teacher support (Ardianti & Amalia, 2022; Safitri et al., 2024). This research argues that effective curriculum management can significantly enhance student learning experiences by enabling teachers to adapt their instructional approaches to individual characteristics and needs. The study also posits that managerial competencies—such as strategic planning, monitoring, and professional development facilitation—are essential for overcoming challenges related to teacher readiness and resource disparities. By synthesizing findings from multiple studies, this research provides a foundation for developing targeted interventions that strengthen both the managerial and instructional aspects of curriculum implementation, ensuring that the Merdeka Curriculum fulfills its promise of delivering high-quality, inclusive education for all students.

The contribution of this research lies in offering a consolidated understanding of how Merdeka Curriculum management can improve the quality of differentiated learning in Indonesian schools. By identifying key challenges—such as inconsistent teacher readiness and limited access to adaptive teaching resources—alongside effective strategies, the study provides actionable recommendations for educators, administrators, and policymakers. Expected outcomes include a set of best practices for integrating differentiated learning strategies into curriculum management, as well as guidelines for professional development programs tailored to the Merdeka framework. This research also contributes to the academic literature by filling a significant gap in systematic, large-scale analyses of curriculum management's impact on learning personalization. Ultimately, the findings aim to support the creation of learning

environments that are more inclusive, adaptive, and responsive to the diverse needs of students, thereby contributing to broader national education goals and the global agenda for equitable, quality education.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) approach to systematically examine various studies discussing the role of Merdeka curriculum management in improving the effectiveness of differentiated learning. The article searches and selection process was carried out through two main databases, namely Google Scholar and SINTA, using keywords such as "Merdeka curriculum", "curriculum management", and "differentiated learning". The articles reviewed were selected based on inclusion criteria, namely published between 2019–2024, relevant to the educational context in Indonesia, and are scientific articles published in indexed journals or proceedings.

The search results identified 20 articles that met the criteria for further analysis. The PRISMA approach involved identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and article inclusion. Data analysis was conducted thematically, grouping findings into several key themes, such as the managerial strategies of the Merdeka curriculum, the effectiveness of differentiated learning, implementation challenges in the field, and efforts to strengthen the role of educators. This approach is expected to provide a comprehensive, evidence-based overview of the Merdeka curriculum's contribution to improving the quality of learning in Indonesia.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Based on several study results in the article, there are several journals with similar research results regarding Independent Curriculum Management in Increasing the Effectiveness of Differentiated Learning.

Table 1 presents a literature review of research that discusses the concept of Independent Curriculum Management, the effectiveness of differentiated learning, and its implementation. This study draws on educational management theory, differentiation strategies, and Independent Curriculum policies to improve learning quality.

Table 1. Articles reviewed

No	Writer	Year	Method	Research result
1	Fitri, T. E., et al.	2024	Qualitative	Independent Curriculum Management is

				effective in supporting differentiated learning in elementary schools.
2	Sarnoto, A.	2024	Literature Study	Differentiated learning models are able to accommodate students' needs.
3	Elviya, R. & Sukartiningsih, W.	2023	Qualitative	Effective differentiated learning in Indonesian language lessons.
4	Meliza, M., et al.	2024	Qualitative Descriptive	The Independent Curriculum management in Bireuen Regency has been implemented quite well.
5	Maulidia, M., et al.	2023	Literature review	The Independent Curriculum improves the quality of education.
6	Yunita, Y., et al.	2023	Qualitative Descriptive	The implementation of the Independent Curriculum shows positive results.
7	Barlian, U. C., et al.	2023	Qualitative	Differentiated learning in English helps students to be more active.
8	Purwowidodo, A. & Zaini, M.	2023	Theoretical Study	Differentiation theory is appropriate to be applied in the Independent Curriculum.
9	Wahyudi, S. A., et al.	2023	Descriptive	A differentiated approach to science increases student engagement.
10	Aprima, D. & Sari, S.	2022	Qualitative	Differentiated application in Mathematics adapts to students' abilities.
11	Lenga, K. M.	2024	literature	This new paradigm supports a diversity of learning styles.
12	Rasmani, U.E.E., et al.	2023	Case study	Project learning in PAUD is effective in the Independent Curriculum.
13	Amalia, K., et al.	2023	Community service	CP, TP, and differentiated training improve teacher competency.
14	Sofiah, H. & Hikmawati, N.	2023	Qualitative	Differentiated Indonesian language learning was successfully implemented.
15	Kusuma, Y. Y., et al.	2023	R&D	Character and locality-based models support differentiation.
16	Heryahya, A., et al.	2022	Survey	Teachers' readiness to face the Independent Curriculum still varies.
17	Aritonang, M.H.	2023	Qualitative	Teachers can apply differentiated methods according to student character.
18	Syamsiar	2023	Qualitative	Learning management supports the effectiveness of differentiation.
19	Yanti, A. R., et al.	2023	Qualitative Descriptive	Teachers need assistance in designing differentiated strategies.
20	Widyaningtyas, H., et al.	2023	Qualitative	Teachers and students are helped by the flexibility of the curriculum in learning.

The findings of this study show that the flexible and learner-centered design of the Merdeka Curriculum enables teachers to adapt instruction to students' abilities, interests, and learning profiles. This adaptability fosters

inclusivity, accommodates diverse learning styles, and improves overall learning effectiveness. At the same time, significant challenges remain, particularly in teacher readiness and the complexity of adapting lessons to varied student characteristics. Many educators still require targeted guidance and professional development to design and implement effective differentiation strategies. Despite these obstacles, the implementation of differentiated learning within the Merdeka Curriculum has been shown to enhance student engagement, activeness, and satisfaction with the learning process. Approaches such as project-based learning, character-based models, and the use of curriculum flexibility have proven effective in creating richer, more responsive learning experiences. Overall, the Merdeka Curriculum offers a supportive framework for differentiated learning, but its success depends on sustained teacher training, strategic curriculum management, and adequate resource support to ensure its full potential is realized in diverse educational settings.

Discussion

How is the Merdeka curriculum management implemented to support the effectiveness of differentiated learning in schools?

Based on the analysis of the research table, there are three main articles that directly answer the research question about how the Merdeka curriculum management is implemented to support the effectiveness of differentiated learning in schools.

Fitri, T. E., et al. (2024) through their qualitative research found that the management of the Independent Curriculum proved effective in supporting differentiated learning at the elementary school level. This study specifically analyzed how a more flexible curriculum management structure allows teachers to adapt learning according to individual students' needs, resulting in a more inclusive and effective learning process. In line with these findings, Syamsiar (2023) in his qualitative research found that good learning management is a key factor in supporting the effectiveness of differentiation. This study emphasizes that with appropriate learning management, teachers can implement various differentiation strategies that are appropriate to the diverse characteristics of students. This finding is reinforced by the theoretical study of Purwowidodo, A. & Zaini, M. (2023) who concluded that the theory of differentiation is very suitable for application within the Independent Curriculum framework. Their research provides a strong conceptual foundation that explains the alignment between the principles of differentiation and the philosophy of the Independent Curriculum which prioritizes independence and adjustment to students' learning needs.

These three studies collectively demonstrate that the Merdeka Curriculum

(Independent Curriculum) management, with its flexible and learner-centered characteristics, provides an ideal framework for effectively implementing differentiated learning in schools. Appropriate implementation of this curriculum management allows teachers to tailor their learning approaches to each student's unique needs, interests, and learning profiles.

The Independent Curriculum, as an educational innovation, has demonstrated significant effectiveness in supporting differentiated learning at the elementary school level. Research conducted by Rahmadayanti and Hartoyo (2022) noted that the management of the Independent Curriculum creates a more flexible structure, allowing teachers to adapt to individual students' needs, resulting in a more inclusive and effective learning process. This also relates to a study by Muliardi (2023), which emphasized that good learning management is a key factor in the effectiveness of differentiation. This research shows that appropriate management by teachers facilitates the implementation of differentiation strategies relevant to diverse student characteristics.

These findings reinforce those suggesting that differentiation theory is highly compatible with the Independent Curriculum framework. They state that the principles of differentiation align with the Independent Curriculum philosophy, which focuses on independence and adapting to students' learning needs (Kamal, 2024). Collectively, these three studies demonstrate that Independent Curriculum management not only provides an ideal framework for differentiated learning but also strengthens teachers' ability to adapt learning approaches to each student's unique needs and interests (Ahmad, 2024; Lisnawati et al., 2023).

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum, as outlined in this study, can provide teachers with the opportunity to design more responsive instruction. This allows for a more adaptive and flexible learning environment. Similarly, Wahyudi et al. (2024) emphasize that the Independent Curriculum aims to simplify the previously complex curriculum, making it more aligned with student competency achievement. The emphasis on sound management and teacher training within the Independent Curriculum is crucial for the effective implementation of differentiation strategies.

Thus, these studies demonstrate that the Independent Curriculum, designed to improve post-pandemic education, serves not only as a tool for achieving academic competency but also as a medium to foster student character and creativity, focusing on each individual's learning context (Angga & Iskandar, 2022; Tampubolon, 2024). Therefore, the importance of training and support for teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum cannot be overemphasized to ensure its successful implementation across all levels of education.

What are the challenges and strategies faced by educators in implementing differentiated learning through the Merdeka curriculum?

Based on the analysis of the research table, the challenges and strategies faced by educators in implementing differentiated learning through the Merdeka curriculum can be narrated as follows:

Educators face several significant challenges in implementing differentiated learning through the Independent Curriculum. Heryahya, A., et al. (2022) identified that teacher readiness still varies greatly in facing this curriculum change, indicating a competency gap that needs to be addressed. This challenge is reinforced by the findings of Yanti, A. R., et al. (2023), who emphasized that teachers require special assistance in designing effective differentiated learning strategies. Furthermore, the complexity of adapting learning to diverse student characteristics, as identified by Aritonang, M. H. (2023), presents a unique challenge that requires a specialized approach.

To address these challenges, several strategies have been developed and implemented by educators. Amalia, K., et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of training in Learning Outcomes (CP), Learning Objectives (TP), and differentiated learning as strategies to improve teacher competency. Syamsiar (2023) found that good learning management is key in supporting the effectiveness of differentiation, while Kusuma, Y. Y., et al. (2023) proposed the development of character-based and locality-based learning models. Other strategies include adaptive approaches for specific subjects as demonstrated by Aprima, D. & Sari, S. (2022) in Mathematics learning, the effective use of project-based learning at the PAUD level, and the utilization of curriculum flexibility which is proven to help teachers and students in the learning process.

The implementation of differentiated learning within the context of the Independent Curriculum in Indonesia faces significant challenges, particularly related to teacher readiness to adapt to curriculum changes. Teacher readiness in the field varies widely, indicating competency gaps that need to be addressed for effective implementation (Rahmadhani et al., 2022). This is reinforced by research that found that many teachers require specialized guidance in designing differentiated learning strategies that meet the diverse needs of students. Furthermore, the complexity of adapting learning methods to student characteristics is also a challenge, requiring innovative and adaptive approaches (Ilmawan, 2024).

To address these challenges, various strategies have been proposed by researchers. Training focused on Learning Outcomes (CP) and Learning Objectives (TP) is crucial in supporting teacher competency development in differentiated learning practices. Good learning management is considered key

to increasing the effectiveness of differentiated learning (Rahmadhani et al., 2022). Furthermore, the development of character- and locality-based learning models as an approach to adapting learning to students' local contexts increases learning relevance (Septiani et al., 2022).

How does the Merdeka curriculum management contribute to improving the quality of learning experiences that are appropriate to the needs and characteristics of students?

The Merdeka curriculum management contributes significantly to students' learning experiences through several important aspects. Maulidia, M., et al. (2023) and Yunita, Y., et al. (2023) show that the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum generally improves the quality of education and shows positive results in learning practices. More specifically, Sarnoto, A. (2024) found that the differentiated learning model in the Merdeka curriculum is able to accommodate the diverse needs of students, while Purwowododo, A. & Zaini, M. (2023) emphasized the alignment between differentiation theory and the principles of the Merdeka curriculum.

Another important contribution is seen in the increased engagement and activeness of students in the learning process. Barlian, U. C., et al. (2023) and Wahyudi, S. A., et al. (2023) reported that differentiated learning within the Merdeka curriculum framework helps students become more active and engaged, both in English and science learning. Rasmani, U. E. E., et al. (2023) added evidence of the effectiveness of project-based learning in early childhood education (PAUD) within the Merdeka curriculum context.

The Merdeka curriculum's ability to facilitate learning adaptation to student characteristics is also an important contribution. Aprima, D. & Sari, S. (2022) demonstrate how differentiated learning in Mathematics can adapt to student abilities, while Aritonang, M. H. (2023) and Lenga, K. M. (2024) emphasize that the Merdeka curriculum supports the implementation of methods that are appropriate to student characteristics and diverse learning styles. Widyaningtyas, H., et al. (2023) emphasize that the flexibility characteristic of the Merdeka curriculum greatly assists teachers and students in creating an adaptive and responsive learning process.

The Independent Curriculum makes a significant contribution to students' learning experiences through various aspects that support and enhance the quality of education. Several studies have shown that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum can improve the quality of education and produce positive outcomes in learning practices. Ahmad (2024) stated that the implementation of this curriculum aligns with the emphasis on learning that is more flexible and responsive to student needs. This is also supported by research

by Afriani et al., (2023), which shows that the differentiated learning model in the Independent Curriculum can meet the diverse needs of students in a more targeted and motivating manner. (Zaini, 2022) emphasized the alignment between differentiation theory and the basic principles of the Independent Curriculum, indicating that a differentiated approach can strengthen the effectiveness of this curriculum's implementation (Indarta et al., 2022).

Student engagement and activeness in the learning process also experienced significant improvements. Indarta et al. (2022) found that the use of differentiated learning in this curriculum encouraged students to be more actively involved in learning, both in English and science. The effectiveness of project-based learning methods, particularly in the context of early childhood education (PAUD), also aligns with the principles of the Independent Curriculum (Angga & Iskandar, 2022). This demonstrates that adapting collaborative and project-based learning models provides more meaningful experiences for students.

The Independent Curriculum's ability to accommodate individual student characteristics is another important contribution. Differentiated learning in Mathematics can be tailored to students' abilities (Fakhrudin et al., 2023). The Independent Curriculum supports the implementation of learning methods tailored to students' characteristics and diverse learning styles (Rijal & Valen, 2024; Widiyaningsih & Narimo, 2023). The flexibility within this curriculum allows teachers to create adaptive and responsive learning processes, resulting in a more effective and efficient learning environment (Muchtar et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

The Merdeka curriculum management provides a conducive framework for the effective implementation of differentiated learning. While various challenges exist in its implementation, the strategies developed demonstrate the potential to address these challenges. The Merdeka curriculum's contribution to improving the quality of students' learning experiences demonstrates that this approach has significant potential to enhance the overall quality of education by addressing individual student needs and characteristics.

As an innovation in the Indonesian education system, the Merdeka curriculum and differentiated learning still require ongoing support from various stakeholders to ensure optimal and sustainable implementation.

This section provides a clear, simple, concise, precise, and informative answer to the research objectives, and is suitable for publication in a journal. Do not repeat the abstract or simply list the results and discussion. The conclusion can be a generalization of the findings relevant to the research problem, and should also include recommendations for next steps.

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