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Adaptation of the Cambridge curriculum: A comparative study of public and **Islamic schools**

Labibah Sayaka Ilma¹, Hanun Asrohah², Husniyatus Salamah Zainiyati³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel, Kota Surabaya, Indonesia sayakaaailma@gmail.com1, asrohah@gmail.com2, husniyatussalamah@uinsa.ac.id3

ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore how the Cambridge curriculum can be adapted as a relevant educational strategy for addressing global challenges, particularly in developing countries such as Indonesia. In the inequality between national education policy and its implementation in the field, the Cambridge curriculum offers an approach that emphasizes critical thinking, collaboration, and globalmindedness. The method used in this study is a qualitative literature review, analyzing various academic sources and reports on the implementation of the Cambridge curriculum in different school contexts. The results of the study show that the adaptation of the Cambridge curriculum in Indonesia, both in public and Islamic-based schools, exhibits different dynamics. However, both have a positive impact. Public schools implement this curriculum directly with a primary focus on global academic standards, without the need to conform to religious values. Meanwhile, the Islamic school has successfully combined the Cambridge curriculum with Islamic values, creating an educational model that is not only academically global but also spiritually and morally strong. Both approaches show great potential in bridging local education with global standards in a contextual and relevant manner.

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana adaptasi kurikulum Cambridge dapat menjadi strategi pendidikan yang relevan dalam menjawab tantangan global, khususnya bagi negara berkembang seperti Indonesia. Di tengah ketimpangan antara kebijakan pendidikan nasional dan pelaksanaannya di lapangan, kurikulum cambridge menawarkan pendekatan yang menekankan pada kemampuan berpikir kritis, kolaboratif, dan global-mindedness. Metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah studi literatur kualitatif, dengan menganalisis berbagai sumber akademik dan laporan implementasi kurikulum cambridge di berbagai konteks sekolah. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa adaptasi kurikulum cambridge di Indonesia, baik di sekolah umum maupun berbasis Islam, menunjukkan dinamika yang berbeda namun keduanya berdampak positif. Sekolah umum menerapkan kurikulum ini secara langsung dengan fokus utama pada standar akademik global, tanpa perlu menyesuaikan dengan nilai-nilai keagamaan. Sementara itu, sekolah Islam berhasil menggabungkan kurikulum cambridge dengan nilai-nilai keislaman, menciptakan model pendidikan yang tidak hanya global secara akademik, tetapi juga kuat secara spiritual dan moral. Kedua pendekatan ini menunjukkan potensi besar dalam menjembatani pendidikan lokal dengan standar global secara kontekstual dan relevan.

Kata Kunci: kurikulum Cambridge; sekolah Islam; sekolah negeri

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, the need for universal education has become increasingly important. Global education requires a broad perspective to prepare citizens who not only possess broad insights but are also able to face various global problems effectively. In this context, civic education has great potential to incorporate global issues into the curriculum, thereby fostering understanding and response to the challenges facing the world (Lamy, 2007). The conceptual model of global education and global citizenship education programs is the basis for evaluating how the key principles of global citizenship education are reflected in the curriculum and teaching materials used in schools (Ibrahim, 2005).

However, global education faces significant challenges, particularly in an increasingly complex and competitive world. International education is often regarded as a primary tool in preparing young people for life in an increasingly interconnected world, where the expansion of international markets, advances in communication technology, and environmental and human health threats are major concerns (Hayden & Thompson, 1995). Meanwhile, in many developing countries, including Indonesia, a significant gap persists between the government-set curriculum policies and the actual practices observed in the field (Crossley, 1984). Often, students' learning experiences are influenced more by the decisions of teachers and school curriculum leaders than by the national curriculum quidelines themselves (Sinnema et al., 2020).

To improve the competitiveness of national education and adapt to global demands, many schools are adopting an international standard curriculum, such as the Cambridge curriculum (Wylie, 2008). This curriculum is designed to have a flexible international nature, enabling it to meet the educational needs of various countries (Bunnell et al., 2017). The Cambridge Primary Review (CPR) pays great attention to the goals of the national education system and the values that can shape it in the coming decades. However, the main challenge in implementing the international curriculum is the uncertainty associated with crossing national borders as part of forming global citizens (Hayden et al., 2020). In Indonesia, the implementation of the Cambridge curriculum has also caused debate.

While some view it as a solution to global education competition, others perceive it as a form of educational discrimination. This phenomenon has been observed in the case of the dissolution of the "Rintisan Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional (RSBI)", which suggests a gap in access to quality education for all levels of society. Previous research has demonstrated that integrating the Cambridge curriculum and the 2013 curriculum has successfully improved student learning outcomes (Simanjuntak, 2020). Furthermore, research indicates that the integration of the Cambridge curriculum and the 2013 curriculum complements each other to produce an effective integrated curriculum in learning (Syafi'i, 2019).

Previous research has only discussed the integration of the Cambridge curriculum and the 2013 curriculum, in contrast to research that focuses on adapting the Cambridge curriculum to the local education system. Therefore, this study aims to explore how the adaptation of the Cambridge curriculum can serve as a global education transformation solution within the context of local education systems. In an increasingly connected world, the need for an

education system that equips students with critical thinking skills, creativity, and cross-cultural understanding is becoming increasingly crucial. The implementation of an internationally based curriculum, such as Cambridge, can be one of the strategies to address this challenge, especially for developing countries like Indonesia, which still face a gap between national education policies and on-the-ground practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cambridge Curriculum and Global Education Standards

One of the main challenges faced by decision-makers in international schools is determining the type of knowledge that is most valuable to students. This decision is closely related to curriculum selection, as it affects both the material taught and the cultural and ideological context that accompanies it (Corlu, 2021). Global education standards aim to align education systems worldwide in terms of quality and competitiveness, focusing on core skills such as literacy, STEM, and 21st-century competencies. Curricula such as the Cambridge and IB curricula support these standards, as do global assessments like PISA. Teacher quality and equal access to education are also key priorities (Hayden et al., 2020). Curriculum choice reflects social values and carries political and cultural weight. The Cambridge curriculum, widely adopted globally, has undergone significant evolution since the 2009 Cambridge Primary Review (Armstrong, 2011).

The evolving Cambridge curriculum reflects the adaptability of education to global needs. Supported by Cambridge International Examinations, it provides international certifications to students worldwide, used by over 8,000 institutions (Lim, 2011). The widespread adoption of the Cambridge curriculum demonstrates global confidence in its academic quality, grounded in its extensive history of reliable assessments (Termaat, 2024). Despite its strong reputation, the Cambridge curriculum faces criticism, especially regarding its Thinking Skills component, which is seen as potentially biased by political and social class ideologies (Lim, 2012). This suggests that education, including international standards, is not always ideologically neutral and requires monitoring in terms of the values it implicitly conveys in the classroom.

Despite criticisms, the Cambridge curriculum provides a well-structured and relevant approach, especially in English. It offers clear objectives and engaging methods, such as visuals, videos, phonics, and dialogues, to support deep learning (Wijayanti, 2022). This approach demonstrates that the Cambridge curriculum not only emphasizes academic content but also a pedagogical approach that aligns with 21st-century learning styles. The application of the Cambridge curriculum in a global context has also given rise to a discourse on the extent to which international and multicultural values are equitably integrated. Although designed as an international curriculum, several studies have found that the literature syllabus in Cambridge still does not fairly represent global perspectives.

The British colonial legacy is still evident in the selection of literary works displayed, particularly in its relationship with countries in the Global South (Golding & Kopsick, 2023). This inequality reveals that the challenge of the global curriculum extends beyond distribution to the content and narrative it conveys, sparking a debate about cultural justice in education.

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Despite criticisms, the Cambridge curriculum remains focused on core subjects such as English, science, and mathematics, skills considered essential for global academic and professional success. Its emphasis on universal competencies reflects the need for relevance across contexts, though adaptation to local values remains crucial. Ongoing evaluation is vital, especially in public and faith-based schools that must integrate global standards with local cultural and religious principles. Ultimately, the success of an international curriculum lies not only in the quality of its content but also in its ability to align with the local context.

Global Education Curriculum Reform vs Indonesia's Politically Driven Educational Changes

The curriculum in Indonesia has a long history that reflects the social, political, and scientific dynamics. The curriculum is not only a guideline for learning in schools, but also serves as a structure that limits and directs the activities of teachers, students, and education policymakers (Harapan, 2023). Since Indonesia's independence, the curriculum has undergone several significant changes, beginning with the 1947 Curriculum, which focused on character and national education, and culminating in the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes student-centered learning and flexibility in the learning process. These changes include the 1952, 1964, 1968, 1975, 1984, 1994, 2004, and 2013 Curricula, each of which is adjusted to the conditions of scientific, technological, cultural, and economic development at the time. In addition, the policies of the government in power at that time also influenced the direction and content of the curriculum implemented (Abidin et al., 2023).

Curriculum reform is urgently needed due to technological advancements, changing job market demands, and evolving social trends. Finland employs Phenomenon-Based Learning with integrated themes, while Singapore adopts a Competence-Based Curriculum that balances academics, technology, character, and student well-being (Fangestu & Marpuah, 2025). Australia promotes historical awareness and integrates climate change across subjects, supported by sustainable school incentives. In the U.S., despite varying state policies, schools addressing sustainability are rewarded. The UK includes climate change consistently in its national curriculum at all levels (Siahaan, 2024). Compared to developed countries, Indonesia's curriculum changes more frequently in a short time. Countries like the UK, Australia, Finland, and Singapore have more stable, long-term curriculum changes based on research and evaluation, rather than changes driven solely by government or ministerial decisions (Fangestu & Marpuah, 2025). In contrast, Indonesia frequently updates its curriculum in a short period, often influenced by political shifts. This leads to inconsistencies in implementation and impacts teacher and student readiness. The rapid, uneven changes also widen the education quality gap between regions.

Comparative Curriculum Theory: Harold Noah and Max Eckstein

In comparative education studies, Harold Noah and Max Eckstein are known as figures who emphasize the importance of scientific and contextual approaches. They are of the view that

comparative studies are not just about comparing the two education systems on the surface. However, instead, they must be accompanied by a deep understanding of the social, cultural, economic, and political contexts of each system. In other words, this study not only measures differences in educational policies and practices but also examines how an educational mindset or ideology can spread and influence various global contexts (Tröhler, 2023). This approach opens up space for richer and more relevant cross-cultural research, as it can explain why a curriculum develops as it does today, as well as its role in shaping the power structure of a nation's knowledge.

Before conducting a practical comparative analysis, Noah and Eckstein emphasize the importance of affirming basic concepts in comparative education (Cowen & Kim, 2023). They believe that a vague theoretical foundation will result in a superficial analysis (Melosik, 2023). Harold Noah and Max Eckstein emphasized the importance of comparative curriculum theory in adapting international curricula, such as those from Cambridge, to local contexts. Successful adaptation depends not only on content but also on understanding social, cultural, and local factors. Therefore, they advocate for comparative education as an independent discipline with its approaches and methods, making it more effective in creating relevant learning and strengthening global education systems.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing the literature study method, to compare the implementation of the Cambridge curriculum in public schools and religious-based schools. The analysis was conducted on books, academic journals, and policies regulating the integration of the Cambridge curriculum in both types of educational institutions. Data collection techniques include document analysis, gathering data from previous journals, and thematic coding to identify patterns and differences in curriculum implementation systematically. This research was conducted in two main stages. First, the identification of the characteristics of implementation involved reviewing how the Cambridge curriculum is adapted in public schools and religion-based schools. Public schools that use the Cambridge curriculum combine elements of national and international curricula. In contrast, Islamic-based schools add specific Islamic religious subjects alongside both curricula, including differences in teaching methods, assessment, and the integration of moral and religious values in the curriculum. Second, an analysis of differences and challenges focuses on the advantages and constraints that arise in both education systems, in terms of policy, school readiness, and public acceptance of international curricula within the local context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of an education system that refers to the international curriculum requires active involvement from various parties, especially educators. Without the support and readiness of educators, achieving optimal results in adapting to global standards will be difficult (Wardani & Kusuma, 2020). International curricula, such as those offered by Cambridge, not only introduce different methods and content but also require teaching approaches that demand mastery of modern pedagogy, critical thinking skills, and

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multicultural understanding. Therefore, the active participation of teachers in understanding and internalizing the values in the curriculum is the key to the successful implementation of the international curriculum at the local level. The success of this implementation is also greatly influenced by the institutional context in which the curriculum is applied. In this regard, the application of the Cambridge curriculum in the local education system reveals different approaches, depending on the type of school and the value orientation adhered to.

Cambridge Curriculum in Public Schools

The application of the Cambridge Curriculum in public schools in Indonesia demonstrates a range of strategies and approaches, influenced by institutional factors, available resources, and the diverse needs of students. Public schools that adopt this curriculum generally seek to integrate international standards within the local context, while also considering the effectiveness of educational management and student readiness. This mapping illustrates how each public school adapts the Cambridge Curriculum according to its capacity and objectives.

Table 1. Public Schools with Cambridge Curriculum

No.	School Name	Character Studies Cambridge
1	SMPS Golden Christian School (GCS) Palangka Raya	The implementation of the Cambridge Curriculum is carried out through three main management stages, namely planning, implementation, and evaluation.
2	Sekolah Mutiara Harapan (SMH) Riau	The interest of students is relatively high, but the number of participants in the Cambridge Examination is still limited.
3	Singapore Intercultural School (SIS) Semarang	The Cambridge curriculum not only emphasizes the academic aspect but also fosters character development and upholds the noble values of the Indonesian nation.
4	Private Elementary School X in Surakarta	The application of the Cambridge Curriculum, especially in the aspects of student readiness and pedagogical approach. Teachers face obstacles such as longer preparation durations, easily distracted students, and students' lack of confidence when using English.
5	Lower Secondary X di Palembang	The Cambridge Lower Secondary English Curriculum is implemented comprehensively through three stages: program development, learning implementation, and evaluation.

Source: Previous research analysis 2025

This mapping (in **Table 1**) confirms that the implementation of the Cambridge Curriculum in public schools in Indonesia is adaptive and responsive to the needs of institutions and students. Although each school has a different approach, the common thread remains the

same, bridging the quality of national education with global standards, while maintaining the local relevance and contextual needs of each school. At SMPS Golden Christian School (GCS) Palangka Raya, the implementation of the Cambridge Curriculum is carried out through three main management stages, namely planning, implementation, and evaluation. This procedure lays a crucial foundation for ensuring the smooth delivery of the curriculum and achieving the expected learning outcomes. However, the research also highlights the importance of the organizational leadership dimension as an additional aspect in curriculum management, in order to strengthen its implementation patterns and structures. This shows that the success of the international curriculum depends not only on managerial techniques but also on the vision and leadership of the institution (Lestari et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, at Sekolah Mutiara Harapan (SMH) Riau, the application of the Cambridge Curriculum, particularly in the subject of Chemistry As/A Level, attracts quite a high interest from students, although the number of Cambridge examinees is still limited. Factors such as cost, individual interests, academic ability, and external influences are the primary obstacles to implementing the exam. However, in substance, the subject *Chemistry As/A Level* It is considered to be able to prepare students for higher education with an approach that balances conceptual knowledge, deep understanding, and scientific thinking skills. This curriculum strengthens students' academic foundations, enabling them to better prepare for the challenges of global education (Olensia & Kurnia Sari, 2017).

It differs from the approach used at the Singapore Intercultural School (SIS) Semarang, where the application of the Cambridge Curriculum not only emphasizes the academic aspect but also strengthens character following the noble values of the Indonesian nation. This school displays the harmony between the globalization of education and the strengthening of local values. Teachers are encouraged to continue developing effective learning methods to enhance students' competence and character. The application of the international curriculum in this school demonstrates that global and local values can coexist and enrich each other (Anindya & Pamungkas, 2023).

At the elementary level, private elementary schools in Surakarta face typical challenges in implementing the Cambridge Curriculum, particularly in terms of student readiness and pedagogical approaches. Teachers face obstacles such as longer preparation durations, easily distracted students, and students' lack of confidence when using English. To overcome this, teachers employ a range of creative strategies, including intonation variations, direct instruction, songs, games, videos, and blended teaching techniques that incorporate both Indonesian and English. This approach aims to enhance student engagement and confidence while fostering a fun and interactive learning environment (Sutopo, 2024).

Meanwhile, in one of the private schools in Palembang, the implementation of the Cambridge Lower Secondary English Curriculum is carried out comprehensively through three stages, namely program development, learning implementation, and evaluation. At the program development stage, teachers adjust the learning plan based on the Cambridge Scheme of Work and the school's needs, as well as utilizing a range of relevant teaching materials. The implementation of learning emphasizes writing skills, students' reflection, and the use of English as the primary medium. Evaluation is carried out following Cambridge standards through a Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) based assessment, and students are prepared

to participate in the Cambridge Checkpoint. The results show the compatibility between learning outcomes and curriculum objectives (Holandyah et al., 2022).

Cambridge Curriculum at the Islamic Schools

In the context of Islamic schools, the application of the Cambridge Curriculum demonstrates a diversity of strategies and approaches tailored to the educational vision, local conditions, and resource readiness of each institution. Although this curriculum originated from the Western education system, many Islamic schools in Indonesia have successfully integrated it with Islamic values and the national curriculum. This demonstrates that the international curriculum can be effectively contextualized within the framework of Islamic education without compromising its local and global essence.

Table 2. Islamic Schools with Cambridge Curriculum

No.	School Name	Character Studies Cambridge
1	MAN 4 Jakarta	Students and teachers at this school demonstrate bilingualism skills classified as equivalent bilingualism, characterized by the balanced use of Indonesian and English in the learning process.
2	Budi Mulia Dua International Junior High School, Yogyakarta	The school holds regular forums, including Curriculum Day, as well as learning evaluations such as the I-STEAM Expo and the Student-Led Conference (SLC).
3	TAZKIA International Islamic Boarding School Malang	Integrated Curriculum in three main stages, namely learning planning, implementation, and evaluation.
4	Al-Azhar Islamic Junior High School 13 Surabaya	The Cambridge curriculum is implemented through a digital learning approach, particularly in science subjects.
5	MTs Muslimat NU Pucang Sidoarjo	This school showcases a model of implementing the Cambridge Curriculum through pesantren-based bilingual education.

Source: previous research analysis 2025

The overall mapping (in **Table 2**) shows that the implementation of the Cambridge Curriculum in Islamic schools in Indonesia is carried out with various contextual approaches that consider aspects of language, technology, religious values, and institutional readiness. This is an indicator that the international curriculum can not only be applied in a secular context, but also has high flexibility in adapting to an education system based on Islamic values. These contextual considerations reflect the schools' commitment to align global standards with local cultural and religious identities, making the curriculum more relevant and accessible for students from diverse backgrounds.

One interesting example of implementation is found in MAN 4 Jakarta, where Cambridge classes are applied in a learning environment that supports balanced use of language. The results of the study show that students and teachers in this school show bilingualism skills

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that fall into the category *Bilingualism Setara*, namely the balanced use of Indonesian and English in the learning process. This reflects the success of linguistic integration, which supports the achievement of academic competence in two languages without sacrificing national linguistic identity (Sutarsa, 2024). Meanwhile, at Budi Mulia Dua International Junior High School, Yogyakarta, the approach to implementing the Cambridge Curriculum is carried out in a structured and collaborative manner.

The school holds a regular forum titled Curriculum Day, a discussion forum among teachers to design, review, and evaluate the implementation of the curriculum regularly. The implementation of the curriculum in the classroom is carried out with an active approach using various sources and digital media, such as Twinkl and Grammarly. In addition to the written test, learning evaluation is also carried out creatively through activities such as the I-STEAM Expo and Student-Led Conference (SLC), which encourage students' active participation and the relevance of learning to real-world needs. This strategy demonstrates that the application of the Cambridge Curriculum in Islamic schools extends beyond the academic aspect to encompass the development of 21st-century character and skills (Mustadi & Junaidi, 2024).

In the East Java region, TAZKIA International Islamic Boarding School Malang implements an Integrated Curriculum in three main stages, namely learning planning, implementation, and evaluation. In its implementation, English teachers at this school have carried out the entire process well and in a structured manner. This integration model enables students to acquire a comprehensive understanding of Cambridge content and Islamic values within a dormitory environment that fosters the development of Islamic character and discipline (Syafi'i, 2019). As for Al-Azhar 13 Islamic Junior High School Surabaya, the Cambridge curriculum is implemented through a digital learning approach, especially in science subjects. School support and student readiness are important factors in the successful implementation of Cambridge-based digital learning.

The use of technology in the teaching and learning process is not only complementary; it is also essential. However, it has become an integral part of a learning strategy that enhances student interactivity and engagement in understanding scientific concepts globally (Suryani & Widodo, 2019). Furthermore, MTs Muslimat NU Pucang Sidoarjo presented a model for implementing the Cambridge Curriculum in the form of pesantren-based bilingual education. The school aims to integrate the international curriculum with the national curriculum and Islamic values in a holistic manner. The success of implementation is determined by several factors, including the competence of teachers, particularly those who have completed S2 studies or possess a good command of English and Arabic, as well as the support of educational facilities and infrastructure. The school aims to enhance educational quality through a combination of local strengths and global standards (Yamin & Astutik, 2023).

Discussion

The Cambridge Curriculum offers various benefits for students, teachers, and institutions. For students, it promotes critical thinking, analytical skills, and independent learning. Its exploratory approach helps students gain a deeper understanding of concepts. The use of English also enhances global academic communication skills. Teachers benefit from

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internationally standardized professional training, which makes teaching methods more active and modern. For schools, this curriculum enhances their image as leading and competitive educational institutions, especially in the eyes of parents seeking globally recognized education (Maudina, 2020). The Cambridge Curriculum also prepares students for further studies abroad and equips them for challenges in the international workforce. Overall, its main benefits include improved academic quality, global readiness of students, enhanced professional capacity for teachers, and increased attractiveness of educational institutions.

The Cambridge Curriculum is recognized for its flexible and skills-based structure, which encourages students to participate actively and engage in meaningful discussions. Its evaluation methods are fair and consistent with international standards. In addition, the curriculum supports deep academic growth and promotes essential twenty-first-century skills, such as effective communication and problem-solving. However, a significant challenge is the use of English as the language of instruction, which can be particularly difficult for students who are not native English speakers. Moreover, the high cost of implementation, including teacher training, educational materials, and international assessments, makes it accessible only to schools with adequate resources. If the curriculum is not appropriately contextualized, it has the potential to marginalize existing cultural and religious values. Therefore, the integration of localized content is crucial for maintaining national identity and promoting inclusive and equitable access to quality education (Hastuti, 2024; Simanjuntak et al., 2022).

The Cambridge Curriculum has a positive impact on improving the quality of education in Indonesia. Students are trained to think analytically, creatively, and independently, while becoming accustomed to international standards of excellence. Teachers are also encouraged to apply active and reflective teaching methods. Schools that adopt this curriculum tend to be more innovative and competitive. However, its impact is not evenly distributed. Only schools with sufficient resources can implement it, potentially widening the gap between elite and regular schools. Furthermore, without integration of character, religious, and civic education, the curriculum may distance students from their local identity (Suri et al., 2024). Therefore, schools need to adapt the implementation to be not only globally oriented but also contextually grounded. With an adaptive approach, the positive impact of this curriculum can be expanded without sacrificing the national values that are vital to Indonesia's education system.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Cambridge curriculum in public schools demonstrates a strong focus on enhancing students' academic achievement to international standards, particularly in the areas of language, science, and critical thinking skills. Despite this, public schools still face challenges, such as students' readiness to follow more complex curricula and limited costs in their exams. However, the flexibility of the learning structure and its clear global orientation are the main advantages of implementing this curriculum in public schools. Meanwhile, Islamic schools show a holistic approach in adopting the Cambridge curriculum

by integrating it with Islamic values and the national curriculum. This creates a balance between global standards of academic achievement and Islamic academic values. The Islamic context is not an obstacle, but rather a basis for forming a more contextual and meaningful educational model. Through learning innovation, the use of technology, and collaboration among teachers, Islamic schools demonstrate that the international curriculum can coexist harmoniously with local values. Seeing the diverse implementation of the Cambridge curriculum in public schools and Islamic schools, there are still many spaces that can be explored in future research. One is how the long-term effectiveness of implementing the Cambridge curriculum in schools with diverse backgrounds affects students' character, 21st-century skills, and national identity. Additionally, it is essential to conduct further research on the role of teachers, school policies, and parental support in promoting the success of this curriculum across various types of schools. Future research can focus more on comparisons between schools, thereby enhancing our comprehensive understanding of the challenges and successes of implementing the Cambridge curriculum.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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