

Challenges of implementing the independent curriculum in Islamic Religious Education learning at Junior High School

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Abstract This study aims to describe the implementation of the independent learning curriculum, the problems faced, and the form of assessment of Islamic religious education learning based on the independent curriculum at SMP Negeri 24 Medan. This qualitative descriptive study is assisted by interviews, observations and documentation. The results of the study indicate that Islamic Religious Education learning in the Independent Learning Curriculum at SMP Negeri 24 Medan is completely left to teachers and students. Teachers are given the freedom to make learning plans, such as using strategies, methods, media and learning approaches. The problems faced by Islamic Religious Education teachers are the development of learning methods that are in accordance with the principles of independent learning, limited facilities and infrastructure, the tendency of teachers to be comfortable with the 2013 curriculum, and limited human resources that can affect the effectiveness of the learning process.

Keywords: *Curriculum, Independent Curriculum, Islamic Education*

Abstrak Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan implementasi kurikulum merdeka belajar, problematika yang dihadapi, hingga bentuk penilaian pembelajaran pendidikan agama Islam berdasarkan kurikulum merdeka di SMP Negeri 24 Medan. Penelitian ini kualitatif deskriptif ini dibantu dengan wawancara, observasi dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam dalam Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar di SMP Negeri 24 Medan sepenuhnya diserahkan kepada guru dan peserta didik. Guru diberikan kebebasan dalam membuat perencanaan pembelajaran, seperti menggunakan strategi, metode, media dan pendekatan pembelajaran. Problematika yang Guru PAI hadapi adalah pengembangan metode pembelajaran yang sesuai dengan prinsip-prinsip kemandirian belajar, keterbatasan sarana dan prasarana, kecenderungan kenyamanan guru terhadap kurikulum 2013, serta keterbatasan sumber daya manusia yang dapat memengaruhi efektivitas proses pembelajaran.

Kata Kunci: *Kurikulum, Kurikulum Merdeka, Pendidikan Agama Islam*

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Introduction

Recently, the implementation of the independent learning curriculum has always been a matter of concern for educational thinkers, so it has always been very interesting material to discuss for students, teachers, lecturers or educational experts. Changes in the education curriculum certainly have their own reasons and certainly have the aim of advancing the education system. Because a good curriculum is a curriculum that is developed according to the lives of students. According to Soetopo and Soemanto, one of the reasons for changes in the curriculum is due to the liberation of parts of the world from colonialism, the rapid development of science and technology, and the increase in population in each region (Gani, 2023).

The development of science and technology has significantly changed the educational landscape in Indonesia, with a focus on preparing graduates who are competitive on the global stage. The positive impact of technological developments is not only felt by a few people, but also by the entire community, enabling increased access and efficiency in the learning process (Ngafifi, 2014). The development of the digital era demands adaptability in utilizing various technology-based media and information. These advancements allow individuals to work remotely via a variety of devices such as computers, cell phones, and similar tools, reducing dependence on physical presence in the office. More than that, the positive impact of the technological revolution facilitates communication and exchange of information across regional borders more easily, both locally and globally (Aranggere, Dian Mohammad Hakim 2022).

The role of schools as centers for implementing the independent learning curriculum emphasizes the need for progress in educational institutions in Indonesia. This requires schools to continue to innovate, collaborate, and maintain a balance between the education system and the dynamics of global development in the era of globalization. Nadiem Makarim, Indonesian Minister of Education, stated that the concept of independent learning education which is integrated in the education curriculum, responds to the demands of the evolution of the education system from the 4.0 era to the 5.0 era. The adoption of the independent learning curriculum by the Ministry of Education aims to enable each student to learn according to their own potential and expertise. In implementing this independent learning curriculum, students will be trained and supported to be able to think critically, have skills, create students who are creative, innovative, and have the ability to use various technological and information media as supporting media in the learning process (Mulyasa, 2021).

In the past, school was a place of learning and teachers were the only source for seeking knowledge. However, in the digital era, the role of schools and teachers has begun to shift due to the impact of technological developments and advances, making it possible for everyone to obtain various knowledge without space and time (Fadhli 2022). Even though currently the role of teachers has begun to shift due to technology, of course the role of teachers is very important in making learning a success in the digital era. Therefore, in implementing the independent learning curriculum concept, every teacher must have a good understanding of using technological media professionally. Teachers must be able to design learning using various strategies, methods and even effective approaches in carrying out the teaching and learning process.

The implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum represents a significant change in the way education is carried out. Previously, many teachers believed that learning should occur in the classroom with an emphasis on the knowledge they conveyed to students. However, with the Independent Learning Curriculum, this paradigm shifts. Teachers are no longer just transmitters of information, but also facilitators who encourage students to develop skills, explore and solve problems outside the boundaries of the classroom. This allows learning to occur anywhere, not just in the classroom environment, according to students' needs and interests. This makes room for more open-ended and real-world relevant learning experiences, allowing students to develop their critical thinking and creativity. As a result, students are only considered as passive recipients of information whose role is to listen to the teacher's explanations and record the material presented by them. In implementing the Independent Learning Curriculum, teachers are expected to act as drivers and providers of facilities so that students are more active and creative. The basic principle of the Independent Learning Curriculum is that learning does not have to be limited to the classroom, but can take place in the field or in the library (usilowati 2022).

The government's efforts to implement the independent learning curriculum are to complement the previous curriculum by using an active learning approach and based on religious values, Pancasila and national culture. Based on this, the government has given freedom to educational institutions to develop an independent learning curriculum that is centered on students' interests and abilities based on Pancasila values (Muharrom, Aslan, 2023). However, if you look at the current reality, there are still many schools that are not ready to implement the independent learning curriculum in 2023. This is because there are still some teachers who do not fully understand the concept of the independent learning curriculum. So there are differences in carrying out the learning process up to the assessment (Aslan 2023).

The implementation of the Independent Learning curriculum at SMP Negeri 24 Medan shows an ambitious first step in implementing this new approach. Even though this school has started implementing the independent learning curriculum, it should be noted that the implementation of this curriculum is not evenly distributed in all classes. Especially, in the context of Islamic Religious Education, development efforts are still not evenly distributed at all levels. Currently, the implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum has only started in grades 1 and 2. Based on the results of initial interviews with PAI teachers at SMP Negeri 24 Medan, it shows that there are still challenges in fully understanding and implementing this program. Teachers are still in the learning process to fully understand how the Independent Learning Curriculum can be implemented better. This shows that there is room for further development and ongoing efforts to increase the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum across the school curriculum.

Therefore, implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is an important challenge for all teachers, especially Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, to continue to improve their understanding of this concept. Therefore, this research is very relevant because it allows a deeper understanding of the extent of implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum at SMP Negeri 24 Medan. Apart from that, this research also aims to identify the obstacles faced in implementing this curriculum, especially in Islamic religious education subjects. By deepening understanding and identifying emerging barriers, this research can provide a more

comprehensive view of how the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum can be improved in the school environment.

Methods

This research uses qualitative research methods with a descriptive approach. The qualitative approach functions to explain phenomena that exist in society and find out what problems are often encountered and then find out how to find solutions to these problems (Asrori 2021).

This research was conducted in 2023 for 4 months, starting from preparation to reporting results. Research conducted in Medan 24 Public Junior High School. Specifically, this research focuses on PAI teachers and students as research subjects.

The method used in collecting data in this research is the observation method (Sidiq and Choiri, 2019). This method can be used to obtain data, either verbally or written. Apart from that, data collection is equipped with interview and documentation methods.

The data analysis technique used in this research follows the concept offered by Miles and Huberman. The steps in the data analysis technique are: the first step, data reduction, the stage where the researcher will classify and simplify the data to be used and filter the data. - unnecessary data (Hardani, 2020). After carrying out data reduction, the researcher will get a clear picture regarding the challenges of implementing the independent learning curriculum in PAI learning Medan 24 Public Junior High School.

The second step, data presentation, is presenting data regarding the concept of implementing the independent learning curriculum in Medan 24 Public Junior High School which has been obtained from the reduction stage. The third step, the data verification stage, is the establishment of theoretical truth and facts related to the challenges of implementing the independent learning curriculum in Islamic religious education learning in Indonesia Medan 24 Public Junior High School.

Results and Discussion

The Independent Learning Curriculum is an educational approach that aims to give students more freedom in determining their interests, talents and needs in the learning process. This approach encourages students to be more active and independent in exploring areas of their interest and developing their potential according to personal interests and talents (Light, 2022). The Independent Learning Curriculum concept emphasizes the idea that learning does not have to be limited to traditional classrooms or conventional learning structures. Instead, students are given greater autonomy in determining how, when, and where they learn. They can choose the topics they want to study, the most appropriate learning methods, and can even engage in learning experiences outside the school environment.

The idea of independent learning sets learning goals based on the circumstances that students have to face. As a result, teachers who teach in each class will create unique learning objectives for each learning session. Because when implementing the independent learning curriculum, learning can be increased and decreased according to the context of the students in the class. Then the independent learning curriculum provides teachers with greater freedom in choosing teaching techniques and approaches that can be adapted to the individual interests and

needs of each student. This approach recognizes that each student is a unique individual with different interests, abilities, and learning styles (Amalia and Achadi, 2023).

Every child, according to Jean Piaget, has the capacity to develop his own knowledge. This implies that each student can adapt their learning according to the qualities of their own uniqueness during the implementation of the independent learning curriculum, and the teacher only functions as a mediator and moderator. There are several criteria for independent learning. First, there is curiosity. Second, there is motivation from within the students. Third, actively search, find, manage and solve problems. Fourth, do not depend on the teacher (Sahnan and tri Wibowo, 2023).

Teachers are the main component in ongoing education, thus before teaching learning in the independent learning curriculum to students, teachers should first understand independently as part of the independent learning curriculum. Teachers who understand this concept will be able to create a more dynamic classroom environment, integrate relevant projects or learning activities, and encourage students to be active in the learning process (Anbarjon Egamova 2021). In other words, teachers' strong understanding of the independent learning curriculum is the key to creating more meaningful, relevant and effective learning experiences for students. With a good understanding of this concept, teachers can identify differences in the way students learn and respond to them with appropriate methods. This ensures that every student has an equal opportunity to succeed (Hudri dan Umam 2022).

The aim and objective of Islamic religious education is to create students who have a religious spirit and are obedient in carrying out the commands of Allah SWT in the context of independent learning which is applied in subjects. Responding to the "freedom of learning" policy, learning Islamic Religious Education has become a required subject in the educational curriculum from elementary school to university level. Students in the context of the Independent Learning Curriculum are expected to have the ability to think critically, develop a rational attitude, and understand and apply the principles of Islamic teachings in everyday life. This hope is made possible by the inclusion of policies in the independent learning curriculum (Sukmawati, 2022).

Therefore, planning based on independent learning is needed to maximize learning in Islamic religious education based on the independent learning curriculum. Based on research findings, PAI teachers and students in the classes of SMP Negeri 24 Medan are fully entrusted to the teachers and students in implementing the lessons they teach. Such as in using strategies, methods, media and using approaches in learning.

The results of an interview with an Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teacher show that in the learning planning design process, the initial step taken by the teacher was to collect all material related to PAI subjects in the curriculum. Next, the teacher makes a selection to determine the materials that are considered important to be provided in class learning sessions, while other materials are selected for direct practice. For example, the material "fardhu kifayah" would not be enough, if the material was only limited to delivery, but here the students, after knowing and understanding the material about fardhu kifayah, the teacher invites students to practice everything necessary in caring for the corpse. Such as: practicing washing, shrouding and praying over the corpse.

The learning steps for subjects at SMP Negeri 24 Medan consist of:

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the learning session, the Islamic Religious Education teacher and students together carry out a series of: sessions with joint prayer, asking for guidance and blessings in the learning process. Teachers check students' attendance and ensure their readiness to take part in the lesson. The teacher explains the benefits and objectives of the learning material that will be delivered to students, helping them understand the relevance and objectives of learning. The teacher asks initial questions related to material that has been previously studied or related to the material that will be discussed. After that, the teacher and students together draw up an agreement containing rules that will support the smooth teaching and learning process. This agreement can include class norms, learning ethics, as well as the responsibilities of each party in the learning environment.

2. Core activities

Core activities are a very crucial stage in the learning process. At the core activity stage, there are several steps, one of which is the exploration stage. In this stage, the Islamic Religious Education teacher delivers material regarding Hajj and Umrah using a projector, then asks students to pay attention to the video which explains the procedures for carrying out Hajj and Umrah.. After that, the teacher invites students to observe and identify differences in procedures for performing Hajj and Umrah, after which students ask questions related to the material they have just learned or convey things they understand.

3. Closing

In this stage, there are three steps taken by the teacher to complete the learning session. The following is a more detailed explanation of each step: First, the teacher reflects on the learning material that students have just studied. The teacher evaluates how students respond to the material and whether the learning objectives have been achieved. In addition, teachers provide feedback to students by asking them about the material that has been discussed. These questions can focus on the student's understanding, critical thinking, or reflective thinking about the material. Second, the teacher exemplifies moral education values that can be applied in everyday life according to the learning material. For example, if the learning material is related to helping each other in kindness, the teacher can provide concrete examples of how this value of helping can be applied in real situations. The aim is to help students relate the material to values that can be applied in everyday life. Third, the teacher gives assignments to students. This assignment can be in the form of a task, exercise, or reflection that must be completed by students as part of learning. After giving an assignment, the teacher usually closes the learning session by praying together. This is a moment to reflect and be grateful, and ask for blessings for the learning that has been done.

Therefore, learning within the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum framework promotes a very flexible type of learning. This means that schools, especially teachers, have greater freedom and creativity in designing and delivering learning. They are not limited to certain methods and approaches, so they can adapt their teaching to their students' needs, interests, and learning styles. Teachers have a role as learning facilitators who support students in exploring topics or learning materials according to their needs. This means teachers strive to understand each student's individual interests, abilities and challenges and structure learning accordingly. So, the

essence of this sentence is that the Independent Learning Curriculum gives schools and teachers the opportunity to make learning more appropriate to students' needs. This allows teachers to further innovate their learning approaches, which in turn can create more engaging, meaningful, and effective learning experiences for students.

PAI Teacher Strategies in Learning the Independent Learning Curriculum

There are several teacher strategies that can be used in independent learning-based learning, namely:

1. Teachers must be able to understand the growth and development of students.

During the learning process, teachers must be able to understand the meaning of growth and development. Growth is a change that can be seen physiologically as a result of the maturation of students' functions which takes place gradually and over an indeterminate time. Meanwhile, development is a change that can be measured qualitatively and quantitatively in the process of human maturation. In the context of an independent curriculum, teachers are facilitators and students are the center of learning. At this stage, teachers must be able to accompany students so that they can achieve understanding that is appropriate to the students' growth and development (Nurzila, 2022).

2. Teachers must be able to know students' learning styles

In the 21st century, of course it is different from the previous century. For students who live and develop in the digital and technological era like today, teachers can provide learning related to things that students like. In the independent learning curriculum, schools must be able to become a second home for students. Schools must be able to create a learning atmosphere that is not scary and makes students not stressed. However, teachers must be able to understand students' learning styles so that the subject is enjoyable (Bako, Siregar, and Hasanah 2024).

3. Helping students to discover interests and talents

The implementation of the independent learning curriculum must be able to be addressed by teachers by understanding each student's interests and talents. Because, in the Independent Learning Curriculum Framework, students are given the freedom to be actively involved in the learning process. They have the ability to determine what they learn, how they learn, and how they explore their own interests and talents. The freedom given to students allows them to choose subjects or topics that suit their personal interests. This means they can pursue learning that they find interesting and relevant to them, which in turn can increase motivation and engagement in the learning process (Sukardi and Inayati 2024).

4. Make maximum use of technology

It cannot be denied that nowadays everyone has entered the digital era. To compensate for students growing up in the digital era, the teacher's understanding in designing learning uses technology as a figure who is not left behind and can be present in the midst of students' lives. The presence of technology today allows teachers to deliver material through technology, such as showing presentations, videos/films that contain educational values, and using games in the learning process at school.

5. Teachers must have the ability to understand students' learning psychology.

Some of the challenges and roles faced by a teacher in teaching, especially in the context of implementing the independent learning curriculum, include: Teachers are faced with various unique characteristics of each student. Every student has different needs, interests, talents and learning styles. The main challenge for teachers is how to accommodate these differences in the learning process, so that each student can reach his or her potential. Teachers are encouraged to provide special treatment and assistance to students who experience problems in learning. This could be in the form of extra support, guidance or tailored learning strategies. In the context of the Independent Learning Curriculum, it is important for teachers to get to know individual students better, understand their needs and potential, and design learning accordingly. In this way, teachers can create an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students, maximize their potential, and help them overcome the various challenges they may face in their learning.

The strategies used by teachers in implementing the Independent Learning Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education learning in Medan 24 Public Junior High School involves the following steps:

a. The teacher first formulates the learning objectives of Islamic religious education

Plans that have been prepared by Islamic Religious Education teachers in Medan 24 Public Junior High School includes aspects of determining learning achievement, competencies that must be mastered, material to be taught, and learning objectives. Planning activities in Islamic Religious Education subjects includes several elements, including: determining the subjects to be taught, determining the material that will be presented to students, determining the class and semester in which learning will be carried out, determining the duration of time allocated for learning material, identifying what competencies students are expected to achieve after completing learning, setting goals to be achieved through learning. Apart from that, planning also includes assessments that will be carried out in accordance with the policies and authority of Islamic Religious Education teachers.

b. Determining teaching and learning strategies

The learning strategies carried out by PAI teachers in Medan 24 Public Junior High School applied by first determining the model of teaching and learning activities. Then the teacher collaborates with the principal and the teachers who teach at the school. Such as involving economic education teachers with Islamic religious education teachers to determine a project that is promoted by the independent learning curriculum, namely joint project-based learning. An example of carrying out buying and selling practices contained in Islamic religious education material is by observing students when buying an item in the school canteen.

c. Determine tools and materials for learning

The PAI teacher's strategy in determining Islamic religious education learning tools and materials in the classroom is by looking at the material first, after that determining what media can support the delivery of the learning material. For example, Hajj and Umrah material. PAI teachers not only explain how the Hajj and Umrah are carried out, but

teachers can show videos via the big screen regarding the procedures and implementation of the Hajj and Umrah and can practice them outside the classroom.

- d. Plan a learning evaluation that is appropriate to the material being taught

Learning evaluation is a very crucial element in assessing the success of the educational process. The quality of a school is also reflected in the quality of the evaluation used. This evaluation is a vital tool for measuring the extent to which students have understood and accepted the lesson material that has been delivered by the educator (Muhartono and Sri Wahyuni 2023).

Assessment process in Islamic religious education subjects in Medan 24 Public Junior High School, involves some form of assessment. One of them is a daily assessment, which can take the form of questions or written assignments. This means that students are assessed regularly in each meeting or learning session. Then the results of the re-discussion, or remedial, are then re-assessed. The teacher will evaluate students' understanding after the discussion. This aims to ensure that each student has an adequate understanding of the learning material. Thus, this assessment process supports the aim of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum to create a learning experience that is inclusive and appropriate to student needs.

Challenges of Learning Islamic Religious Education in the Context of the Independent Learning Curriculum

The implementation of a relatively new curriculum requires students, especially teachers, to adapt to the latest curriculum changes. In the process of implementing this latest curriculum, a teacher often faces several challenges when teaching new subjects. One of the obstacles commonly felt by teachers and students today is a lack of understanding regarding the concept and implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum (Basri, 2023).

Generally, the problems with implementing the independent learning curriculum are:

1. Human resources are inadequate, one of the successes in implementing the independent learning curriculum is human resources. It can be seen that there are still many teachers who do not fully understand the implementation of the independent learning curriculum and there are still many teachers who do not have the competence to teach professionally and still use observant and boring teaching methods. In fact, every teacher must be able to process learning that can stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning.
2. Inadequate learning facilities and resources. Currently, the complaint of teachers in Indonesia is that they are required to become professional teachers, even though school institutions have not provided sufficient learning resources. Especially in the independent learning curriculum program, which uses digital media to balance the demands of the times with subjects. Even though digital-based media definitely requires supporting facilities, such as internet networks, laptops/cellphones and teachers who must understand digital media.
3. Teachers are too comfortable with the previous curriculum and have to start from scratch to understand the new curriculum. In reality, currently there are still many teachers who do not have the enthusiasm to develop independent learning curriculum learning (Suja'i 2023).

From the results of observations and interviews with an Islamic religious education teacher in Medan 24 Public Junior High School It can be seen that in implementing the independent learning curriculum in Islamic religious education subjects, teachers face several challenges and obstacles. Some of the problems faced by teachers in carrying out Islamic Religious Education learning in the context of the Independent Learning Curriculum include:

- a. Teachers have the responsibility to independently develop learning objectives, especially in the context of Islamic Religious Education. Even though teachers are given freedom and independence in planning lessons, in reality there are still a number of teachers, especially those who have experience in Public Junior High School 24 Medan, faces difficulties in developing learning objectives. In fact, many teachers are not fully ready to develop optimal learning implementation plans. This is caused by a lack of understanding of the concept of the Independent Learning Curriculum in Public Junior High School 24 Terrain and the lack of in-depth training provided by the government to implement the Independent Learning Curriculum in Public Junior High School 24 Medan.
- b. PAI teachers still have difficulty adapting learning methods and techniques to the independent learning curriculum. Becoming a teacher is not just about teaching, but being a teacher requires thorough preparation, is required to have qualified teaching competencies and teachers are required to be able to follow the development of students in the world of education (Qomaruddin 2022). As for learning methods used by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in Public Junior High School 24 Medan in the context of implementing the Independent Learning Curriculum still follows the same methods as those used in the previous curriculum, namely the 2013 Curriculum. These methods include lectures, discussions, questions and answers, and practice. However, teachers give students the freedom to carry out learning when carrying out learning on religious practice material by giving students the freedom to use various thoughts and media to support when learning the religious practice. Therefore, it can be understood that the implementation of the independent learning curriculum has not been fully understood by teachers and sufficient time is needed for teachers to understand methods that are appropriate to the subject matter.
- c. Incomplete facilities, When the necessary facilities and infrastructure are incomplete or inadequate, this can become an obstacle in implementing a curriculum that relies on the use of technology and a more flexible learning approach. Therefore, to achieve success in implementing the Independent Learning Curriculum, it is important to ensure that schools have sufficient facilities and supporting technology so that the learning process can run well in accordance with the principles of this curriculum (Pillawaty, 2023).

The results of observations and interviews also stated that in Public Junior HighSchool 24 Medan also does not fully facilitate learning media in every class, such as not all classes use a big screen when the teacher wants to show a video containing moral education values in a film. Even schools do not facilitate Wi-Fi to support learning in the digital era as expected by the Indonesian education minister. Lack of awareness or understanding from students about the importance of playing an active and creative role in the learning process. This indicates that students may not fully understand their role in learning or lack motivation to actively participate. In fact, there are still a number of students who still experience confusion or difficulty in

choosing subjects or learning topics that suit their personal talents and interests. This indicates that some students may face challenges in identifying what they really like and are good at. In the context of the Independent Learning Curriculum, it is hoped that students will have the freedom to choose what they want to learn based on their own interests and talents. However, these challenges may arise if students do not yet have sufficient understanding of their interests and talents or if they feel pressured by the expectations of their peers.

Conclusion

The independent learning curriculum brings positive changes to the learning process, provides freedom to teachers and students, and allows better adaptation to the needs of each individual in learning. At SMP Negeri 24 Medan, they have started implementing this curriculum, showing the school's commitment to adopting a learning approach that is more inclusive, focuses on students, and leads to the development of individual interests and talents. The implementation process took place in stages, showing awareness that curriculum changes require time and adaptation, especially when they involve learning experiences that are different from previous ones. Lack of understanding of the concept of an independent learning curriculum among teachers and students is a challenge faced. More in-depth training and understanding of the principles of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is required to ensure effective implementation. Apart from that, facilities and infrastructure, especially IT equipment, are important factors in supporting the implementation of this curriculum. The success of independent learning is closely related to the availability of adequate facilities.

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