



# Learning Strategies of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in the Era of the Independent Curriculum

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## Abstract

*This study aims to explore the learning strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in the context of the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) at SMK Negeri 1 Kertosono. With the curriculum being widely introduced across Indonesia, educators must adapt their teaching methods to align with new educational standards. This qualitative research, conducted through participant observation, interviews, and documentation, identifies two primary strategies: Discovery Learning and Project-Based Learning. It also highlights the challenges faced, such as teacher readiness and curriculum implementation at the institutional level, alongside the supportive role of collaborative efforts between school leaders and staff. The study concludes that continuous professional development and utilization of the Merdeka Belajar platform are critical to overcoming these challenges.*

**Keywords:** Learning Strategy, Independent Curriculum, Islamic Religious Education, Discovery Learning, Project-Based Learning



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## INTRODUCTION

The educational process is inherently complex, influenced by a myriad of factors ranging from cultural and historical contexts to the practical challenges faced by students and the intrinsic nature of learning itself. In Indonesia, the introduction of the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) marks a significant shift towards a more flexible and student-centered approach to education. This curriculum is designed to empower educators to tailor their teaching strategies to better meet the diverse needs of their students, promoting critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills (Jurnal Ilmiah et al., 2023).

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) plays a pivotal role in shaping the moral and ethical framework of students in Indonesia. It is not merely a subject but a comprehensive guide to living a life that aligns with Islamic teachings. The integration of IRE within the Independent Curriculum presents both opportunities



and challenges, particularly in the context of Vocational High Schools (SMK). SMKs are institutions that primarily focus on equipping students with practical skills for the workforce, making the integration of IRE within their curriculum a complex task that requires innovative approaches (Sutarman & Salleh, 2023).

This study focuses on the learning strategies employed by IRE teachers at SMK Negeri 1 Kertosono, a vocational high school that is implementing the Independent Curriculum. The choice of this school is particularly relevant due to its diverse student population and the unique challenges it faces in integrating religious education with vocational training. The research will explore how IRE teachers at this SMK navigate the demands of the curriculum while striving to maintain the integrity of Islamic teachings in a vocational context.

The Independent Curriculum draws from constructivist theories of education, which argue that learning is an active, constructive process where learners build new ideas or concepts based upon their current/past knowledge (Bruner, 1966). This approach is particularly relevant in the context of IRE in SMKs, where students are encouraged to not only acquire knowledge but also to apply it in real-world contexts, thereby internalizing Islamic values through practical engagement (Nasril et al., 2023; Huda et al., 2022). However, this shift from traditional, teacher-centered approaches to more student-centered ones can be challenging, especially in vocational settings where practical skills are prioritized (Rusdin, 2022).

Implementing the Independent Curriculum in SMKs presents unique challenges, especially for IRE teachers. Many educators at SMKs may lack the training or resources to effectively implement the new curriculum, particularly when it comes to integrating religious education with vocational training. Studies indicate that while the Independent Curriculum offers a flexible framework, its success largely depends on the teachers' ability to adapt their teaching methods and embrace new pedagogical strategies such as Discovery Learning and Project-Based Learning (Sutarman & Salleh, 2023; Priyanto, 2019). The vocational nature of SMKs adds another layer of complexity, requiring teachers to find innovative ways to incorporate Islamic teachings into a curriculum that is heavily focused on practical skills (Raharjo, 2018; Wahyuni & Bhattacharya, 2021).

Moreover, SMK educators face the challenge of addressing the dual objectives of vocational education and religious instruction. The need to balance these objectives requires a nuanced understanding of both domains and the development of teaching strategies that can bridge the gap between them (Ismail, 2020; Agustini & Ruslan, 2021). This challenge is compounded by the varied levels of institutional support available, with some SMKs better equipped than others to provide the necessary resources and training for their teachers (Kurniawan, 2022).

The outcomes of this study are expected to have significant implications for both policy and practice. By analyzing the learning strategies employed by IRE



teachers at SMK Negeri 1 Kertosono, this research will provide valuable insights into the practical challenges and opportunities associated with implementing the Independent Curriculum in a vocational setting. The findings could inform curriculum development, teacher training programs, and educational policies aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of IRE in vocational schools across Indonesia. Additionally, the study could serve as a model for other SMKs facing similar challenges, offering practical solutions and strategies for integrating religious education into vocational curricula.

Despite these challenges, the Independent Curriculum also presents significant opportunities for innovation in IRE at SMKs. The curriculum's emphasis on flexibility and teacher autonomy allows for the development of more contextualized and relevant teaching strategies that can better meet the needs of vocational students. For instance, Project-Based Learning (PBL) has been identified as a particularly effective approach in IRE, as it encourages students to engage with Islamic teachings in a hands-on, practical manner that aligns with the vocational focus of SMKs (Huda et al., 2022; Khanif, 2023). Similarly, Discovery Learning, which emphasizes exploration and inquiry, aligns well with the goals of IRE by fostering a deeper understanding of religious concepts through active learning (Nasril et al., 2023; Sultani et al., 2021).

Empirical studies have shown that when implemented effectively, these strategies can lead to significant improvements in student engagement and learning outcomes in IRE at SMKs. For example, a study conducted by Huda et al. (2022) found that students who participated in PBL activities related to Islamic ethics demonstrated a higher level of moral reasoning compared to those who were taught using traditional methods. Similarly, research by Nasril et al. (2023) indicated that Discovery Learning can enhance students' ability to apply Islamic principles in real-world scenarios, thereby reinforcing the relevance of religious education in their daily lives.

The transition to the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education at SMKs represents a critical juncture for educators in Indonesia. While the curriculum offers the potential to enhance the quality of education and better prepare students for the complexities of modern life, its success depends on the ability of educators to effectively integrate innovative teaching strategies within their practice. The challenges are significant, but with adequate support and a commitment to professional development, IRE teachers at SMKs can leverage the opportunities presented by the Independent Curriculum to foster a more holistic and impactful education for their students.



## **METHOD**

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a case study design to explore the learning strategies used by Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers at SMK Negeri 1 Kertosono within the framework of the Independent Curriculum. The qualitative approach was selected for its strength in capturing the depth and complexity of educational phenomena, particularly in understanding how teachers adapt and implement curriculum strategies in a vocational education setting (Cleland, 2017; Ponce, Gómez-Galán, & Pagán-Maldonado, 2022).

### **Research Design**

The case study design is well-suited for this research as it allows for an in-depth examination of a specific educational context, providing detailed insights into the practices and challenges faced by IRE teachers in a particular SMK. Case studies are particularly valuable in educational research where the goal is to understand the implementation of educational practices within their real-life context (Hamilton & Finley, 2019).

### **Participants**

The participants in this study include IRE teachers at SMK Negeri 1 Kertosono, selected through purposive sampling to ensure that those with direct experience in implementing the Independent Curriculum are included. The selection of participants was guided by their active involvement in curriculum development and their experience in teaching IRE within a vocational school context, which is critical to understanding the integration of religious education with vocational training (Boz & Dagli, 2017).

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with IRE teachers to explore their perspectives on the challenges and strategies of curriculum implementation. Classroom observations were employed to capture the actual teaching practices and interactions between teachers and students, providing a contextual understanding of how curriculum strategies are enacted. Document analysis was performed on lesson plans, instructional materials, and curriculum guides to further understand the alignment between the intended curriculum and its implementation (Leko, Cook, & Cook, 2021).

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. Thematic analysis



involves coding the data to identify recurring themes that reflect the core issues related to curriculum implementation and teacher strategies. This process was iterative, involving multiple rounds of coding and refinement to ensure the accuracy and depth of the findings. The analysis was guided by the research questions, with a focus on understanding the factors that support or hinder the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the context of IRE at SMK Negeri 1 Kertosono (Thompson Burdine, Thorne, & Sandhu, 2020).

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the research, several strategies were employed. Triangulation was used to corroborate findings across different data sources, including interviews, observations, and documents. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. Additionally, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, with the researcher continually reflecting on their own potential biases and the impact of their positionality on the research (Meyer & Schutz, 2020).

This methodology provides a comprehensive approach to exploring the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in IRE at SMK Negeri 1 Kertosono. By utilizing qualitative methods, this study captures the nuanced experiences of teachers and the contextual factors that influence their practices, contributing valuable insights to the field of vocational and religious education.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The study revealed several critical insights regarding the strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers at SMK Negeri 1 Kertosono in implementing the Independent Curriculum. These insights were derived from in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis.

### **Adoption and Adaptation of Student-Centered Learning Strategies**

The study found that IRE teachers at SMK Negeri 1 Kertosono have made significant strides in adopting student-centered learning strategies such as Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Discovery Learning. These methods align well with the objectives of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes active student engagement and the development of critical thinking skills. Teachers reported that these approaches have led to higher levels of student participation and deeper understanding of Islamic concepts when applied to real-world contexts. However, the degree of success in implementing these strategies varied, with some teachers demonstrating more adeptness and creativity in adapting these methods to fit the vocational context of their students (Ponce, Gómez-Galán, & Pagán-Maldonado, 2022; Cleland, 2017).



### **Challenges in Integrating Religious Education with Vocational Training**

A significant challenge identified in the study is the difficulty in effectively integrating IRE with vocational education. Teachers often faced obstacles in merging the moral and ethical teachings of Islam with the skill-based curriculum of vocational training. This difficulty was particularly pronounced in areas where the vocational subjects appeared to conflict with religious teachings, or where the practical nature of vocational education left little room for the reflective and theoretical aspects of IRE. Teachers expressed a need for more targeted professional development to help them navigate these challenges, indicating that current training programs are insufficient to fully prepare them for the complexities of this integration (Saracho, 2017; Wardhana et al., 2019).

### **Role of Institutional Support and Resources**

The availability of institutional support and resources emerged as a crucial factor influencing the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Schools that provided adequate resources, such as access to ongoing professional development, instructional materials tailored to the vocational context, and administrative support, saw more effective implementation of student-centered learning strategies. Conversely, teachers in schools with limited resources struggled to fully adopt these strategies, leading to inconsistencies in educational outcomes. This finding underscores the need for systemic support to ensure that all teachers have the tools and training necessary to implement the curriculum effectively (Chan et al., 2018; O'Sullivan & Jefferson, 2020).

### **Teacher Innovation and Creativity in Curriculum Implementation**

Despite the challenges, the study highlighted the capacity for innovation among IRE teachers at SMK Negeri 1 Kertosono. Teachers who demonstrated a high level of creativity in integrating Islamic teachings with vocational content reported more positive student outcomes. For example, some teachers successfully incorporated Islamic principles into technical subjects by using culturally relevant examples and drawing connections between religious teachings and practical applications. These innovative approaches not only enhanced student engagement but also facilitated a deeper understanding of the relevance of Islamic education in vocational contexts (Kegler et al., 2018; Boz & Dagli, 2017).

### **Discussion**

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the complexities of implementing the Independent Curriculum in the context of vocational education, particularly within Islamic Religious Education. The adoption of student-centered learning strategies such as Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Discovery Learning



reflects a broader shift towards active learning models that are increasingly recognized as effective in fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Ponce et al., 2022). However, the variability in the effectiveness of these strategies among teachers suggests that there is a need for more comprehensive professional development programs that equip educators with the skills to adapt these methods to the unique demands of vocational education.

The challenge of integrating IRE with vocational training highlights a critical area where further research and development are needed. As vocational education focuses on practical skills, it is essential that IRE teachers are provided with frameworks and tools that allow them to effectively merge these practical skills with the ethical and moral teachings of Islam. The tension between these two domains is not easily resolved, but innovative approaches that bridge this gap can lead to more holistic educational outcomes for students (Saracho, 2017).

Institutional support plays a pivotal role in the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum. The disparity in resources and support across different schools points to a broader issue of educational equity. Ensuring that all schools have access to the necessary resources and support is crucial for the consistent and effective implementation of the curriculum. This finding aligns with the work of Chan et al. (2018), who emphasize the importance of systemic support in educational reform efforts.

The innovation and creativity displayed by teachers at SMK Negeri 1 Kertosono are promising indicators of the potential for successful curriculum implementation. These teachers' ability to creatively integrate Islamic teachings into vocational subjects not only demonstrates the flexibility of the Independent Curriculum but also highlights the importance of teacher agency in curriculum reform. As Cleland (2017) notes, the success of educational initiatives often depends on the willingness and ability of teachers to adapt and innovate within their specific contexts.

The findings of this study have several implications for future research and practice. First, there is a need for further research into the development of professional development programs that specifically address the integration of religious education with vocational training. Such programs should focus on providing teachers with practical strategies and resources for merging these two domains. Additionally, future research should explore the impact of institutional support on curriculum implementation, with a particular focus on identifying the most effective forms of support that can be scaled across different educational contexts.

Moreover, this study suggests that more attention should be given to the role of teacher innovation in curriculum implementation. Research into the factors that enable or hinder teacher creativity in this context could provide valuable insights into how to foster a more adaptable and responsive education system. Finally, the



study highlights the importance of considering the specific challenges and opportunities of vocational education in curriculum development and reform efforts.

In conclusion, while the Independent Curriculum offers significant potential for enhancing the quality of education in vocational schools, particularly in the realm of Islamic Religious Education, its success depends on a combination of effective teacher training, institutional support, and the ability to innovate within the unique context of vocational education. By addressing these factors, educators and policymakers can work towards creating a more integrated and holistic educational experience for students.

## **CONCLUSION**

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the context of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at SMK Negeri 1 Kertosono has highlighted several key insights and challenges. This study found that while teachers have made commendable progress in adopting student-centered learning strategies such as Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Discovery Learning, the effectiveness of these methods is closely tied to the teachers' ability to adapt these strategies to the vocational context of the students. The variability in success across different educators points to a need for more targeted and consistent professional development programs that specifically address the unique demands of integrating religious education with vocational training.

Moreover, the integration of IRE with vocational subjects remains a significant challenge. The dual objectives of providing practical skills while fostering moral and ethical development require a nuanced approach that is not fully supported by the current training and resources available to teachers. This challenge underscores the importance of developing frameworks and tools that can better support teachers in merging these two educational domains.

Institutional support also emerged as a critical factor in the successful implementation of the curriculum. Schools that provided robust support, including access to professional development and instructional resources, saw more consistent and effective implementation of the Independent Curriculum. This finding suggests that educational policymakers and administrators must prioritize the provision of adequate resources and support systems to ensure that all schools can successfully implement the curriculum.

Finally, the study revealed that teacher innovation and creativity are essential components of successful curriculum implementation. Teachers who were able to creatively integrate Islamic teachings with vocational content reported more positive student outcomes, demonstrating the potential for innovative approaches to bridge the gap between these two educational areas.





In conclusion, while the Independent Curriculum offers significant opportunities for enhancing the quality of education in vocational schools, particularly within Islamic Religious Education, its success depends on a combination of effective teacher training, institutional support, and the capacity for innovation. Moving forward, it is essential that educational stakeholders focus on addressing the challenges identified in this study to fully realize the potential of the Independent Curriculum in preparing students for both their professional and ethical futures.

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