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The readiness of kindergarten teachers in implementing the independent curriculum based on deep learning: A case study in East Kalimantan

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the readiness of kindergarten (TK) teachers in East Kalimantan to implement the Independent Curriculum based on deep learning, focusing on both conceptual understanding and technical application. A qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design was used. Five teachers from two kindergartens were selected purposively. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model (reduction, display, conclusion). All teachers demonstrated a strong conceptual grasp of the Independent Curriculum and deep learning, understood as meaningful and reflective learning. However, the technical readiness varied. Teachers at Handayani 1 Kindergarten, who had attended training, were more capable of designing learning tools aligned with deep learning principles. In contrast, Handayani's two teachers relied mainly on intuitive practices owing to limited access to training and facilities. Nevertheless, classroom observations revealed practices consistent with the curriculum, including exploratory, experience-based activities, and flexible lesson implementation. This study identifies the phenomenon of teachers' "intuitive readiness" in curriculum reform, contributing to the theory of teacher preparedness. This suggests the need for continuous reflective training, stronger professional learning communities, and systemic support to enhance deep learning implementation in early childhood education.

Keywords: independent curriculum, teacher readiness, deep learning, early childhood education

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is the main foundation for building a nation's future. Education in a nation plays an important role in forming a generation that is able to adapt, think creatively, and compete in the midst of the rapid flow of globalization. Entering the 21st century, the world of education has undergone major changes, moving from a passive learning method to a more comprehensive, student-centered approach, and focusing on the development of essential skills such as critical thinking, creativity, cooperation, and communication (Efendi and Arijanto 2025; Partnership for 21st Century Learning 2019). This change is not only a global trend but also a necessity that needs to be adopted by education systems in various countries, including Indonesia.

In Indonesia, efforts to address global challenges in the world of education can be seen from the various curriculum reforms that have been implemented. One of the most recent steps is the introduction of the Independent Curriculum by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in 2022 (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi ,2022). This curriculum is presented as a solution to the learning system that has been too rigid and focuses on the content of the material. This new approach emphasizes flexibility, relevance, and favors the needs of students (Lestari and Margana 2024). The essence of the Independent Curriculum is to provide space for schools and teachers to design a learning process that is tailored to the character, needs, and unique potential of each student, in harmony with the spirit of differentiated and personalized learning, as demanded in today's education (Santiani, et al., 2024).

Early Childhood Education (PAUD), especially at the Kindergarten (TK) level, plays an important role in shaping the basis of children's development, both cognitively, emotionally, physically, and linguistically. This period is often referred to as the golden age, because the development of the child's brain takes place very rapidly and becomes an important foundation for the learning process throughout life (Rahman and Cahyawati 2025). Therefore, the quality of education at the kindergarten level greatly determines the success of children in the next stage of education. The Merdeka Curriculum, with its approach that encourages fun, exploratory, and project-based learning, is a perfect fit for the way early childhood learners learns. In this case, teachers are required to play the role of facilitators who are able to create a learning atmosphere that is rich in stimuli and experiences.

The Merdeka Curriculum holds great potential in improving the learning system; its implementation in the field still faces many challenges. One of the main challenges comes from the readiness of kindergarten teachers in accepting and implementing this new paradigm. The readiness in question is not only about understanding the basic concepts of the curriculum, but also includes the ability to apply a learning approach that is in accordance with the values carried. As the direction of education changes, the deep learning approach is becoming increasingly important. However, various studies show that there are still many obstacles faced by teachers, ranging from limited resources, inadequate facilities to a lack of supportive training (Rahayuningsih and Hanif 2024). Teachers in areas with limited access, in particular, often find it difficult to fully understand the concept of the Independent Curriculum and how to implement it appropriately. As a result, many of them are not pedagogically or technically ready, including in designing teaching tools that are in line with the.

The gap in teachers' competencies in implementing the Independent Curriculum, to bridge it, a capacity-building strategy is needed that is not only effective but also sustainable. The old approach that relies solely on one-way delivery of information is often not enough to create profound behavioral and mindset changes. Therefore, this study focuses on exploring the readiness of kindergarten teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum through the integration of deep learning approaches. In the context of education, deep learning refers to a way of learning that emphasizes understanding the meaning and relationships between concepts as a whole. This approach also involves critical reflection and relating new knowledge to experience. Unlike surface learning, which tends to rely on memorization, deep learning encourages deeper understanding, the application of knowledge in various situations, and the development

of level-thinking skills. That way, teachers not only know "what" the Independent Curriculum is, but also "how" to implement it effectively with an in-depth pedagogical approach so that learning really feels meaningful for students.

This research is very relevant to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 on Quality Education. More specifically, the study contributes to two main targets: SDG 4.2, which emphasizes the importance of access to quality preschool education for all children, and SDG 4, which aims to increase the number of qualified teachers (Pertiwi et al., 2022). Challenges related to the readiness of kindergarten teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum based on deep learning, as found in the research, Optimizing the Application of Deep Learning-Based Learning in Early Childhood and the Challenges Faced by It Rahman and Cahyawati (2025), shows that there are major obstacles in realizing truly independent and meaningful learning. Without adequate understanding and skills from teachers, this innovative curriculum and pedagogical approach will only stop at discourse.

East Kalimantan? To answer this question, this study aims to analyze the extent to which kindergarten teachers are ready to implement the Independent Curriculum combined with a deep learning approach. It is hoped that this study can make a theoretical contribution by enriching the study of teacher professional development and the effectiveness of the deep learning approach in the implementation of the new curriculum. From a practical perspective, the results of this research are expected to be a reference for policy makers, teacher training providers, and kindergarten principals in designing teacher capacity development programs that are more targeted and sustainable, so that the goal of the Independent Curriculum to present learning that is truly on the side of students can be realistically achieved.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research will use a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach is strategically chosen to understand the phenomenon of teacher "readiness" in depth and holistically, explore the internal perspectives of teachers, and capture the complexity of educational experiences in the context of new curriculum implementation. This approach allows researchers to explore participants' meanings, interpretations, and subjective experiences, which cannot be quantitatively measured (Creswell, 2014). The case study design, on the other hand, allows for a detailed investigation of some of the strategically selected Kindergartens (TK) in East Kalimantan. Through case studies, researchers can gain rich contextual insights into how teacher readiness manifests in real practice in a specific environment, as well as identify unique factors that influence it (Yin, 2018)

This research was carried out in several Kindergartens (TK) located in Kutai Kartanegara Regency and Samarinda City, East Kalimantan. The selection of this location is based on the consideration of geographical representation and the diversity of characteristics of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the region, including kindergartens that may be in the early stages or those that are more established in its implementation. The research subjects will include kindergarten teachers and school principals, or curriculum coordinators, selected through purposive sampling techniques. The criteria for selecting subjects include teachers who have implemented the Independent Curriculum for at least one year, so that they have sufficient practical experience, and have an interest or initial understanding of the concept of deep learning. In addition, the Independent Curriculum Implementation (IKM) companion will also be involved as a subject to get perspectives from parties who provide external support and guidance.

This research stage begins with the process of identifying and selecting subjects through purposive sampling techniques, which is focused on PAUD teachers in East Kalimantan who have been involved in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Selection criteria include teaching experience at the PAUD level, involvement in curriculum training, and willingness to actively participate in research. Once the subjects have been determined, the next stage is data collection, which is carried out through three main techniques, namely in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentation. Teachers' conceptual understanding of the Independent Curriculum and deep learning approaches were explored through interviews, while learning practices in the classroom and interactions with students were observed

through observations. Documentation is used to obtain supporting data in the form of teaching modules, assessments, and teacher training records (Patton, 2015).

After the data was collected, the researcher conducted an analysis using an interactive model from Miles and Huberman (1994), which included three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion. Data reduction is carried out through the process of selection, categorization, and focusing on information that is relevant to the focus of research, namely, the readiness of teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum based on deep learning. The reduced data is then presented in the form of a thematic matrix to facilitate the identification of patterns and relationships between categories. The final stage in the form of drawing conclusions is carried out inductively, considering the relationship between the field data and the theoretical framework used. To increase the credibility of the findings, triangulation was carried out between data sources, and member checks were carried out to participants. The entire research process is carried out by paying attention to the ethical principles of research, including maintaining identity confidentiality and obtaining written consent to the information.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research involved five teachers from two different kindergartens. At Handayani 1 Kindergarten, the respondents consisted of three teachers with teaching experience between 15 and 23 years. Meanwhile, at Handayani 2 Kindergarten, the respondents consisted of two teachers with substantial teaching experience, namely 11 and 29 years. All respondents have completed their S1 PGPAUD education. This profile provides important context for understanding the study's findings. Mature teaching experience and relevant educational background indicate that teachers already have a strong theoretical and practical foundation in the field of early childhood education. The existence of this foundation is a significant capital for them to adapt and navigate the new paradigm offered by the Independent Curriculum, as well as an important starting point to evaluate their readiness.

Analysis of the interview data showed that there was a solid and uniform conceptual understanding among teachers from the two schools regarding the essence of the Independent Curriculum. They consistently define it as a learning approach that is "centered on the wants and needs of the child," "flexible," and "gives autonomy" to schools and teachers. They were also able to articulate the fundamental differences between the Independent Curriculum and the previous 2013 Curriculum (K13), highlighting that K13 is more "structured" and "focused on achieving academic competence," while the Independent Curriculum emphasizes more on character development and is tailored to the needs of children.

This strong conceptual understanding also extends to the concept of deep learning. All teachers, both those who have participated in the training and those who have not, consistently define deep learning as "an approach to learning that emphasizes a deep understanding of concepts rather than memorization". They understand that this approach aims to create learning that is "meaningful and enjoyable for children". On the topic of switching to training experience, a significant gap was identified. Teachers at Handayani 1 Kindergarten collectively stated that they had "Ever" participated in deep learning training. On the other hand, at Handayani 2 Kindergarten, one of the teachers stated that he was "hesitant," and the other teacher emphasized that he had "never followed" the training. This disparity creates a phenomenon that can be described as "two-level readiness" in the field: one group of teachers has been equipped with a formal theoretical foundation, while the other group relies on intuitive understanding that is still in the development stage.

This gap in training experience is not directly proportional to basic conceptual understanding. A uniform understanding of the philosophy of deep learning among all teachers indicates that practical experience and a strong academic foundation have formed a kind of intuitive pedagogy that is inherently aligned with the principles of deep learning. This proves that teacher readiness does not solely depend on formal training. The main gap lies precisely in the ability to translate this intuitive understanding into a structured and systematic pedagogical strategy. Therefore, future professional development policies should not start from scratch, but rather are designed to help teachers systematize and reinforce good practices that they already intuitively do. The following table presents a concise comparison of teacher readiness in both schools.

Table 1. Comparison of Teacher Readiness of Handayani Kindergarten 1 and Handayani Kindergarten 2

Aspects	TK Handayani 1	TK Handayani 2
Understanding the Independent Curriculum	Deep and uniform	Deep and uniform
Deep Learning Training Experience	Have participated in training	Never have or are hesitant
Understanding Deep Learning Concepts	Understanding, as deep learning, not memorization	Understanding as deep learning, not memorization (intuitively)
Key Challenges	Teacher readiness, availability of APE, and lack of deep learning training	Paradigm adaptation, limited resources and infrastructure, and lack of training
Supporting Factors	ICT utilization, involvement of other parties, and teacher competence	ICT utilization, involvement of other parties, and teacher competence
Professional Needs	Relevant, effective, and ongoing training & mentoring	More intensive training & mentoring integrated with practice

Table 1 shows that although both groups of teachers had good conceptual understanding, there were significant differences in terms of training experience. Teachers at Handayani 1 Kindergarten had the advantage of formal training, potentially making them better prepared to develop RPPH (Lesson Plans) aligned with deep learning principles. In contrast, teachers at Handayani 2 Kindergarten faced obstacles in adapting to the new paradigm and limited infrastructure, indicating that teacher readiness is not only determined by conceptual understanding but also significantly influenced by access to training and support from the educational ecosystem.

Field observations provided empirical evidence that corroborated and complemented the interview data, demonstrating how teachers' conceptual understanding in both schools translated into classroom learning practices. Despite differences in *deep learning training experiences*, the observed practices demonstrated an intuitive alignment with the Merdeka Curriculum philosophy and deep learning principles.

The teacher's role as a facilitator, not a dominator, is clearly evident in learning activities. Teachers facilitate and encourage children to learn independently, as seen when playing with blocks at Handayani 1 Kindergarten. Furthermore, teachers actively ask "reflective questions" at the end of learning sessions, a practice that encourages children to think critically about what they have done. This approach is an important foundation for creating in-depth learning, where the focus is on the thinking process and not just the end result. Student activities directly reflect the spirit of child-centered learning and concrete exploration. Observations show that students "actively ask questions and discuss" and engage in "exploration of the real environment/concrete materials." At Handayani 1 Kindergarten, children learn to recognize various food ingredients such as sugar, coffee, and salt by "tasting or mixing them," creating a powerful multisensory experience. Meanwhile, at Handayani 2 Kindergarten, children learn to recognize the shape of blocks by "holding and naming their shapes," linking abstract concepts to physical experiences. These practices directly represent the essence of *deep learning* in early childhood, which emphasizes the connection between new knowledge and real experiences.

One of the most significant findings from the field notes was an observation at Handayani 1 Kindergarten, where, after the planned activities were completed, several children spontaneously took blocks to build structures not included in the Daily Learning Implementation Plan (RPPH). The success of the Independent Curriculum is not only reflected in how well teachers follow the plan, but also in how well the learning environment created allows children to explore freely, in accordance with the philosophy of "student-centered learning." These spontaneous moments are the strongest indicator of the curriculum's success, demonstrating that it has permeated the classroom culture. The following table will

present a synchronization matrix between observed learning practices and relevant curriculum principles and learning theories.

Table 2. Synchronization Matrix of Learning Practices with Curriculum Principles and Deep Learning Theory

Observed Practices (from observation)	Relevant Independent Curriculum Indicators	Reflected *Deep Learning* Principles	Example Description (from qualitative notes)
Children actively ask questions, discuss, and explore concrete materials.	Child-centered, exploratory, and project-based learning	Encourages deep understanding, connecting concepts to real experiences	Children taste sugar, coffee, and salt to recognize them.
The teacher acts as a facilitator, asking reflective questions.	The role of the teacher is a facilitator, not the sole source of knowledge	Activating metacognition, encouraging children to reflect on the learning process	The teacher asks the children to retell the activities they have done.
Children create buildings from blocks spontaneously outside the RPPH	Curriculum flexibility, learning that is relevant to children's interests	Encourage creativity, initiative, and application of knowledge in new situations	A child makes a building with blocks according to their imagination.
APE, storybooks, and thematic play corners are available	A learning environment rich in stimulation, supporting infrastructure	Presenting diverse contexts and learning materials for holistic understanding	There are various kinds of APE and reading materials for children
The teacher sticks the children's work on the display board.	Assessment that focuses on the child's process and work	Meaningful learning, respecting the creative process, and the results of reflection	Children's work is displayed and interpreted together by the teacher and children.

Table 2 empirically demonstrates how classroom learning practices align with the principles of the Independent Curriculum and *deep learning*. These practices directly demonstrate the transition from *surface learning* to *deep learning*, where teachers have consciously or unconsciously facilitated this higher-level cognitive process. Although teachers demonstrated a fairly good understanding and practice, the implementation of the *deep learning- based Independent Curriculum* still faces a number of significant challenges. The main challenges consistently mentioned by teachers from both schools were related to "teacher readiness in preparing materials and APE" and "teachers' lack of creativity in preparing learning aids." These obstacles were exacerbated by the "limited availability of education and training on the Independent Curriculum and *deep learning*," where existing training "still seems general" and does not "touch on the unique needs of educational units."

The second, equally crucial challenge is the availability of resources and infrastructure. Teachers at both schools openly identified "availability of resources and infrastructure" and "inadequate facilities and infrastructure" as major obstacles. Limited resources and a lack of relevant training directly hamper teacher creativity. A teacher without access to adequate teaching materials or appropriate teaching aids will struggle to design engaging learning activities. This problem is systemic, meaning that addressing the issue of teacher creativity cannot be achieved without first addressing the lack of ecosystem support. In another context, this study also identified several vital supporting factors in facilitating curriculum implementation. Teachers recognized that "utilization of ICT" can be a very helpful tool. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of "multi-stakeholder involvement" and "teacher competency readiness" as prerequisites for success. This demonstrates that educators understand that successful curriculum implementation requires collective effort and support from the broader ecosystem. The following is a simple conceptual graph illustrating the relationship between kindergarten teacher readiness, supporting factors, challenges, and *deep learning implementation*.

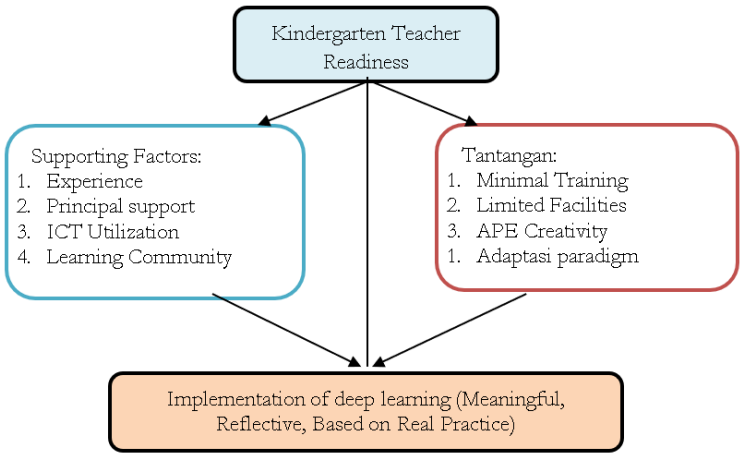

Figure I. Conceptual model (Readiness of kindergarten teachers to implement an independent curriculum based on deep learning)

The conceptual model in Figure 1 emphasizes that kindergarten teachers' readiness to implement the *deep learning- based Independent Curriculum* does not exist in isolation, but is formed through a dynamic interaction between supporting factors and challenges. Supporting factors such as extensive experience, principal support, the use of ICT, and the existence of a teacher learning community can strengthen readiness and encourage teachers to translate curriculum understanding into meaningful learning practices. Conversely, challenges such as a lack of relevant training, limited facilities and infrastructure, a lack of creativity in providing APE, and obstacles to adapting to new paradigms have the potential to hinder optimal implementation

The interaction of these two dimensions results in different qualities of deep learning implementations. Teachers who receive greater support can deliver reflective, real-life experience-based, and student-centered learning. In contrast, teachers who face more obstacles tend to rely on intuitive understanding without systematic pedagogical strategies. Thus, this graph illustrates that the success of deep learning is not only influenced by teachers' personal readiness, but also by the conditions of the educational ecosystem that underpins their practice.

The results of this study reinforce the previous finding that teacher readiness is a determining factor for the success of the implementation of the new curriculum (Rahman & Cahyawati, 2025). In the context of the Independent Curriculum, readiness includes not only knowledge of the curriculum structure but also the skill of designing learning that encourages deep learning. This is in line with constructivist theory, which emphasizes learning as an active process of building knowledge through meaningful experience.

The difference in readiness levels between teachers shows that the success of implementation is greatly influenced by the quality of training and institutional support. Teachers who receive intensive training and guidance from school principals tend to be more adaptive in integrating deep learning into learning. In contrast, teachers who work in resource-constrained environments face obstacles that lead them back to traditional teaching patterns. Nonetheless, experienced and educated teachers can develop an intuitive understanding of modern pedagogical practices, but they need structural support to optimize them. This shows the need for a continuous training policy accompanied by academic supervision and strengthening the network of the teacher-learning community.

The phenomenon of "intuitive readiness" found in this study has important implications for professional development policy. Because teachers already have a deep philosophical understanding, an effective training program should not start from scratch. Instead, training must shift from a "passive information transfer" model that "seems general" to a model that is more oriented towards mentoring, mentoring, and validating the knowledge that teachers already have. This model must be cyclical (plan-practice-reflection-revision), not the phenomenon of "intuitive readiness" found in this study has important implications for professional development policy. Because teachers already have a deep

philosophical understanding, an effective training program should not start from scratch. Instead, training must shift from a "passive information transfer" model that "seems general" to a model that is more oriented towards mentoring, mentoring, and validating the knowledge that teachers already have. This model must be cyclical (plan-practice-reflection-revision), not one-time, and must be directly integrated with learning practices in the classroom, according to the needs expressed by the teachers themselves one-time, and must be directly integrated with learning practices in the classroom, according to the needs expressed by the teachers themselves.

4. CONCLUSION

Curriculum based on deep learning is not uniform, but at different levels. Teachers already have a philosophical understanding that is in line with the orientation of the new curriculum, but technical gaps are still visible, especially in the aspects of training experience, utilization of facilities, and institutional support. The phenomenon of intuitive readiness shows that although formal training is not evenly distributed, the practices carried out by teachers are aligned with the principles of deep learning, which encourage meaningful understanding, concrete exploration, and critical reflection in children. Thus, teacher readiness is not only determined by formal training policies but also greatly influenced by the experience, reflection, and support of the school ecosystem.

The practical implications of these findings underscore the need for strategic interventions at various levels. First, education policy should lead to teacher capacity building programs that are sustainable, contextual, and based on classroom practices with a plan, reflection, and revision cycle approach. Second, schools need to strengthen a collaborative culture through teacher learning communities and ensure access to digital resources and educational props. Third, teachers are encouraged to continue to develop professionalism through self-reflection, peer collaboration, and the use of technology in learning. The theoretical contribution of this research lies in the emphasis that teacher readiness is not a static entity, but rather a dynamic process formed through the interaction between conceptual understanding, intuitive practice, and institutional support. This enriches the study of teachers' professional readiness while affirming the relevance of constructivist theory in early childhood education. For the next direction of research, the study can focus on the development of reflective practice-based training models, longitudinal studies on the impact of deep learning on children's developmental achievements, and exploration of teacher readiness in more diverse socio-economic and geographical contexts. By expanding the scope of the study, it is hoped that more comprehensive recommendations will emerge to strengthen the quality of early childhood education in Indonesia.

Ethical Approval
Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement
Not applicable.

Authors' Contributions
KF contributed to the conceptualization of the study, research design, data collection, and manuscript drafting. LH contributed to data analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript revision. YS contributed to literature review, methodological support, and final editing of the manuscript.

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The Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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The data presented in this research are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

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