Comparative analysis of primary education curriculum in Indonesia and China in the implementation of independent learning

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Abstract
Education as the main foundation in the development of a nation requires joint efforts from various parties to achieve its goals. Independent learning is one of the essential skills in the era of globalization, encouraging students to learn independently, creatively, and critically. This study aims to compare the implementation of independent learning in the primary education curriculum in Indonesia and China. The research uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach through a literature review of various scientific sources related to the implementation of independent learning in both countries. The results show that in Indonesia, the Merdeka Curriculum introduced in 2021 emphasizes contextual and project-based learning, giving students the freedom to develop their independence. Meanwhile, in China, independent learning focuses on mastering material individually with the support of technology, where students are required to have high self-management abilities. Although both prioritize the development of independence, the challenges faced in each country are different, particularly related to teacher readiness, infrastructure, and the applied curriculum approach. This study provides insights into the supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of independent learning and its implications for educational policies in both countries.

Keywords:
Curriculum Structure; Primary Education; Independent Learning

1. Introduction

Education, as the primary foundation in nation-building, is an invaluable long-term investment. Achieving this goal certainly requires solid efforts and hard work from all parties, including the government, educational institutions, educators, parents, and the community. Schools, as educational institutions, play a significant role in this by preparing a generation with broad knowledge, the ability to adapt to changing times, and 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, innovation, and independent learning.

Independent learning refers to the self-awareness to learn without relying on others and having the responsibility to achieve desired goals. According to Hendikawati et al. (2019) in Putra & Syelitiar (2021), independent learning is a skill possessed by individuals to conduct learning activities independently without depending on others. Independent learning arises from the inner drive of the individual. It is a trait accompanied by the capability of students to engage in active learning activities, driven by the desire to master a certain skill. According to Arifin & Herman (2018) in Masitoh & Herman (2024), independent learning is the ability of students to fulfill their own desires or needs without relying on others. This includes the skills to learn independently, choose the most effective learning methods, and carry out learning activities autonomously.

Self-directed learning has become an increasingly popular approach in various countries due to its proven effectiveness in equipping students with problem-solving skills and lifelong learning abilities. Self-directed learning is a process where individuals learn independently without direct assistance from others, supported by digital technology and mobile devices, or technological applications specifically

designed to support this concept (Walsh, 2017; Curran et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2014 in Asep & Jaelani, 2022).

Indonesia and China, as two countries with vast and diverse education systems, are making efforts to reform their education systems to integrate self-directed learning approaches. In Indonesia, the Merdeka Curriculum launched in 2021 aims to provide more freedom for schools and teachers to design learning processes according to the needs of students, including in terms of developing their independence. On the other hand, China, known for its highly structured education system focused on exam results, is also undertaking reforms by emphasizing more student-centered learning and encouraging students to develop their independent learning skills.

Indonesia and China have different cultural and educational contexts; however, both share a common effort to shift the traditional education paradigm towards a more student-centered approach emphasizing independent learning. Nevertheless, implementing self-directed learning faces various challenges, including the readiness of students and teachers, educational infrastructure, and differences in curriculum approaches.

This study aims to compare the implementation of self-directed learning in the primary education curricula of Indonesia and China. By examining how both countries integrate this approach into their curricula, the study hopes to provide insights into the effectiveness of the strategies employed by each country and the challenges they face in fostering student independence. The study will also explore the supporting and hindering factors in implementing self-directed learning in both countries, which can serve as considerations for future educational policy improvements.

2. Method

This study is qualitative research with a descriptive approach. This approach was chosen because the study aims to deeply describe the phenomenon of independent learning implementation in the primary education curricula in Indonesia and China. The study employs a literature review method, using data sources from nationally accredited scientific journals from SINTA, comprising three articles, Google Scholar with nine articles, and internationally indexed journals from Scopus, consisting of two articles. In searching for articles, keywords such as Merdeka Curriculum, Independent Learning in China, Self-Directing in China, Curriculum System in China, and Independent Learning were used.

Table 1
Comparison of Curriculum Implementation and Independent Learning in Indonesia and China

Country	Curriculum Structure	Independent Learning	Inhibiting Factors	Supporting Factors
Indonesia	- Based on the flexible Merdeka curriculum with independent pathway choices according to learning phases. - Integrated with Pancasila values. - The curriculum summarizes the objectives, content, methods, and learning evaluation. - Project-based approach - The Merdeka curriculum structure includes intramurals, Pancasila student profile strengthening projects, and	- Conducted through project activities and individual assignments. - Supported by digital media and e-learning. - Emphasizes character development, critical thinking skills, and independence through contextual and project-based learning. - *Merdeka Berpikir* (Freedom to	- Uneven internet access. - Lack of teacher training to facilitate independent learning.	- Programs like BOS (School Operational Assistance) funds and PIP (Smart Indonesia Program) funds expand access to education. - Government policy support (Merdeka Curriculum). - Initiatives for online learning platforms.

Country	Curriculum Structure	Independent Learning	Inhibiting Factors	Supporting Factors
	extracurricular activities. - The curriculum enhances literacy, numeracy, and knowledge. - The curriculum promotes quality learning without the pressure of minimal passing grades, to create competent students who are ready to face global challenges.	Think) means giving freedom to students and teachers to innovate in learning. - *Merdeka Berinovasi* (Freedom to Innovate) means allowing educational institutions to develop unique learning programs. - Independent and creative learning emphasizes the importance of students being active in the learning process. - *Merdeka untuk Kebahagiaan* (Freedom for Happiness) means making learning an enjoyable experience.		
China	- Focus on knowledge, technology, and character-based education to produce high-achieving generations. - Emphasize cultural and character values. - There is a difference between the curriculum in urban and rural primary schools; rural students learn additional subjects such as agriculture alongside core subjects.	- Focus on independent research and collaborative projects. - Out-of-class learning through excursion activities. - Emphasize academic achievement and intensive preparation for highly competitive secondary school and university. entrance exams. - Teaching methods	- High focus on national exams that limits creativity - High academic pressure - Learning environment in China is very competitive, especially in terms of achieving academic excellence - Students are required to have high	- Full support from schools for independent research. - Well-structured education system. - Government support and attention to the availability of good infrastructure, such as modern laboratories, air-conditioned classrooms,

Country	Curriculum Structure	Independent Learning	Inhibiting Factors	Supporting Factors
		emphasize deep and comprehensive understanding of the material to grasp information.	discipline in their studies and follow school rules.	libraries, and sports fields. - Rural Primary School Distance Education Project provides technological facilities in remote areas, enabling access to online learning.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

Structure of Primary Education Curriculum in Indonesia

A curriculum is a set of plans and arrangements concerning the goals, learning materials, and methods used in a learning process to achieve educational objectives. In a narrow sense, a curriculum is a collection of subjects that students must follow to complete their education. In a broader sense, a curriculum can be defined as the learning experiences provided by the school to students during their education at a certain educational level (Nurfitri & Noviani, 2023). According to Said Hamid Hasan (2020), the role of the curriculum as public policy is an educational policy in the form of a design that aligns with the learning process. The curriculum is considered as a set of plans and arrangements regarding the objectives, content, methods, and evaluation of learning formulated to achieve specific educational goals. This includes various aspects such as the subjects taught, the teaching methods used, and the ways to evaluate students' understanding and skills (Ledia et al., 2024).

In the field of education, the curriculum moves dynamically, with its concepts evolving according to the needs of the times. Ghozil Aulia et al. (2022) state that the curriculum must be developed and adapted to the needs of the times and society. Each update is made with the aim of aligning the curriculum with ongoing developments. Chairunnisa et al. (2024) mention that changes in the education curriculum in Indonesia over time reflect the dynamics occurring in society and the country. Factors such as political developments, social and cultural changes, and economic considerations play a significant role in the development of the education curriculum. Meanwhile, Ledia et al. (2024) state that the changes in the curriculum that occur from year to year aim to improve the quality of the educational process. With these curriculum updates, it is hoped that the quality of education and its relevance to societal needs and global challenges can be enhanced.

In Indonesia, the curriculum has undergone approximately eleven revisions, starting from the 1947 curriculum and the latest being the Merdeka Curriculum. The Merdeka Curriculum was officially introduced in 2022 and its broader implementation began in 2024. This curriculum is intended to bring about better educational changes by using a more flexible and contextual approach. The main focus of this curriculum is on character development, critical thinking skills, and student independence, achieved through contextual and project-based learning. The Merdeka Curriculum is designed with a more flexible structure, allowing teachers to select and adapt learning materials according to the needs and characteristics of their students in their respective environments.

Regarding the curriculum structure, in Indonesia, the curriculum is designed to meet educational needs in line with social, cultural, and scientific developments. Each level of education has subjects that need to be completed according to established graduation standards. The structure of the primary education curriculum in Indonesia is divided into two levels: Elementary School (SD) and Junior High School (SMP). Education at the SD level is conducted over 6 years, starting from grade 1 to grade 6.

The SD curriculum includes various core subjects such as Indonesian Language, Mathematics, Natural Sciences (IPA), Social Sciences (IPS), Pancasila and Civic Education (PPKn), Religious Education, Cultural Arts and Handicrafts, and Physical Education and Health. The goal of this curriculum is to provide basic knowledge and skills necessary for students to advance to higher education levels.

Meanwhile, the SMP level is conducted over 3 years, starting from grade 7 to grade 9. The SMP curriculum continues the education from SD by deepening the subjects previously learned and adding new subjects such as Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and English. SMP also emphasizes character development, critical thinking skills, and social skills to prepare students for future challenges. In the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, the structure includes intramurals, Pancasila student profile strengthening projects, and extracurricular activities. In the Merdeka Curriculum structure, the allocation of lesson hours is stated as a total per year and is accompanied by suggestions for the allocation of lesson hours provided regularly or weekly (Salamah, 2024).

Merdeka Belajar, as part of the Merdeka Curriculum, represents a transformation in education, which is a policy and strategy promoted by the government, specifically the Ministry of Education and Culture. As outlined in the Merdeka Curriculum Strategic Plan (Supriatna, 2021), it aims to provide high-quality education for all Indonesian society. Merdeka Belajar has a broad meaning, encompassing various important aspects of education.

First, *Merdeka Berpikir* (Freedom to Think) provides individuals the freedom to express ideas and innovate. Nadiem Makarim emphasizes that "the essence of freedom to think must be present in teachers; without occurring in teachers, it can't happen to students," indicating that teachers must be exemplars of independent thinking. Second, *Merdeka Berinovasi* (Freedom to Innovate) allows educational institutions to explore the potentials of teachers and students, enabling them to innovate and produce a superior human resource generation. Third, *Belajar Mandiri dan Kreatif* (Independent and Creative Learning) highlights the importance of students developing independence and creativity. Creative students can generate brilliant ideas and find unique solutions, as (Heryanti et al., 2023) stated that creativity can emerge from environmental stimuli and learning processes. Fourth, *Merdeka untuk Kebahagiaan* (Freedom for Happiness) prioritizes enjoyable learning, which can stimulate curiosity and imagination in students, motivating them to delve deeper into learning.

The advantages of the Merdeka Curriculum, as explained by the Ministry of Education and Culture (2021), focus on essential materials and the development of student competencies according to their learning phases. This allows students to learn more deeply, meaningfully, and enjoyably without rushing. Learning becomes more relevant and interactive through project activities, providing students with opportunities to actively explore current issues, such as environmental and health concerns, to support the development of character and competencies in line with the Pancasila Student Profile.

The goal of teaching in this curriculum is to strengthen students' literacy and numeracy skills, as well as their knowledge in each subject. Development phases refer to the learning achievements students must attain, tailored to their characteristics, potential, and needs. In the Merdeka Curriculum, there is no longer pressure to achieve minimal completeness scores; instead, the focus is on quality learning to produce quality students, with characters in line with the Pancasila Student Profile, and adequate competencies as Indonesian human resources ready to face global challenges.

Structure of Primary Education Curriculum in Indonesia

China, as one of the countries in Asia with one of the best education systems in the world, has shown a strong commitment to building quality human resources. The education system is structured and focuses on the mastery of knowledge and skills. Additionally, education in China emphasizes character-based education, creating a generation of high achievers and excellence (Fariha & Sassi, 2023). The primary education curriculum in China emphasizes academic achievement and preparation for highly competitive entrance exams for secondary schools and universities, so teaching methods prioritize deep and structured mastery of the material.

The structure and duration of education in China are not much different from Indonesia, where for primary education, preschool education (PAUD) lasts for three years, meaning formal education begins at the age of three. At the age of 6, children start elementary school (SD) with core subjects such as science, geography, history, mathematics, Chinese language, and others, which are completed over six years. Furthermore, primary education also includes political and moral education, supported by physical education, which receives significant attention. Both junior and senior secondary education are

conducted over three years each. At the junior secondary level (SMP), the curriculum includes 13 subjects, including mathematics, politics, moral education, Chinese language, and foreign languages. At the senior secondary level (SMA), which can last for 2 or 3 years starting at the age of 15, the curriculum is different from that of elementary and junior secondary levels, as students are given the freedom to tailor their subjects according to their interests. Another difference found in the Chinese curriculum system is the difference between the curriculum in urban and rural elementary schools. Rural elementary school students have additional agricultural lessons alongside core subjects like Chinese, moral education, and mathematics (Wahab Syakhrani et al., 2022).

The advancement of education in China is significantly supported by the government through the provision of excellent infrastructure and facilities. Schools in China are generally equipped with modern amenities such as fully-equipped modern laboratories, air-conditioned classrooms, well-stocked libraries, and extensive sports fields. The availability of adequate infrastructure and facilities allows students to learn in a comfortable and supportive environment, enabling them to develop their potential more optimally.

Independent Learning

Independent learning is a process of learning actively and responsibly by the individual without relying on others or direction from a teacher/tutor. Independent learning is a concept about how a person manages their learning activities. According to Khoirudin (2022), independent learning is the ability where an individual can activate and encourage thinking (cognition), feelings (affection), and actions that are systematically and repeatedly planned with the orientation to achieve learning goals. Morris & Rohs (2023) state that independent learning is one of the strategies for inequality education that can be done individually or in groups, outside of face-to-face sessions or tutorials.

The development of technology today requires 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, innovation, and creativity. Independent learning, as the key to developing these skills, is present in the curriculum. In Indonesia, the Merdeka Curriculum has a strong focus on independent learning, where contextual and project-based learning requires students to actively seek information, find solutions, and collaborate. Independent learning in Indonesia has not yet been fully effective, as the role of teachers in guiding and facilitating learning activities is still very important.

Independent learning in China is slightly different from in Indonesia as it starts early. The main focus of education on knowledge accompanied by a dense and text-based curriculum, it requires students to actively read, understand, and memorize information with minimal teacher intervention. In independent learning, students in China are required to have self-management ability by setting their own learning goals. Chongchong & Bikar Singh (2024), in their journal 'The Influence of Student Self-Management on Academic Achievement among Students in China,' explain that student management abilities, including setting learning goals, planning study schedules, time management, and self-reflection, have a significant influence on higher academic achievement because students can overcome challenges in the learning process. For instance, they set daily or weekly targets to master certain materials. In addition, students learn by managing their time efficiently, including scheduling self-study sessions and completing tasks on time. This indirectly encourages independent learning and critical thinking skills.

Thus, independent learning in China is not only about learning on one's own but also about developing self-management abilities and taking responsibility for the learning process. This shows that independent learning can be cultivated from an early age and become an important foundation for building strong character and learning abilities.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of Independent Learning

In the world of education in this fast-moving and dynamic information era, independent learning has become one of the most popular learning approaches. This approach allows students to control their own learning processes, develop critical thinking, collaborative, and innovative skills, as well as boost confidence and independence.

The implementation of independent learning is influenced by various factors that either support or hinder its effectiveness. Supporting factors such as access to learning resources, the utilization of technology in education, and support from the surrounding environment can help students achieve their learning goals. Conversely, obstacles like low motivation, limited access to technology, and a lack of

proper support and guidance can pose serious challenges for students in developing their independent learning skills.

The different education systems in Indonesia and China have a significant impact on independent learning in each country. In Indonesia, programs such as BOS (School Operational Assistance) funds and PIP (Smart Indonesia Program) funds help expand access to education. Additionally, efforts to improve teacher quality through training and competency development are carried out through programs like Guru Penggerak, Guru Pembatik, and PPM. Besides these programs, the availability of various learning platforms or applications greatly assists teachers and students in utilizing technology in education.

In China, substantial support for independent learning can be seen from the use of technology in educational infrastructure. The Chinese government has implemented various projects to ensure there is no gap in information and communication technology (ICT) in schools. Zeng (2022) mentions that one of the groundbreaking initiatives of the Chinese government in primary education is the 'Rural Primary School Distance Education Project,' which aims to provide technological facilities such as computer labs and Very Small Aperture Terminals (VSAT) used by students in rural and remote areas to access online learning and interact with teachers and classmates virtually without relying on wired or mobile network infrastructure. The implementation of this program is expected to reduce educational disparities in China so that the same quality of education can be experienced by all Chinese citizens.

Beyond primary education, the Chinese government also focuses on improving the quality of higher education through programs like the '211 Project' and the '985 Project.' According to www.chinaeducenter.com, the 211 Project, initiated in 1995, aims to develop around 100 universities for the 21st century by enhancing their research and capacity. Meanwhile, the 985 Project, initiated in 1998, focuses on creating world-class universities by supporting leading universities to become more nationally competitive. The support from this technology not only helps provide better access to learning resources but also enables students to engage in independent learning using various digital tools that facilitate more interactive and engaging learning.

3.2 Discussion

Primary education in Indonesia serves as the most fundamental foundation in character building and the development of basic skills needed to advance to higher education levels. The structure of the primary education curriculum is designed to equip students with basic abilities, knowledge, and values for the optimal development of their potential. The curriculum includes various essential subjects such as Indonesian language, mathematics, natural sciences, and social sciences, which are taught through a holistic approach.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is designed to provide students with the flexibility to determine their learning pathways according to their learning phase or developmental stage. In this context, students have the freedom to choose learning activities according to their needs. Additionally, this curriculum integrates the values of Pancasila in every aspect of learning, encompassing objectives, content, methods, and learning evaluations through a project-based approach that actively involves students in the learning process. The structure of the Merdeka Curriculum includes intramural aspects, Pancasila student profile strengthening projects, and extracurricular activities aimed at enhancing students' literacy, numeracy, and knowledge. This curriculum promotes quality learning without the pressure of minimal passing grades, thereby creating competent students who are ready to face global challenges.

Independent learning in the Indonesian curriculum is implemented through project activities and individual assignments with support from digital media and e-learning. The main focus of learning is the development of character, critical thinking skills, and independence through contextual and project-based learning. The 'Merdeka Berpikir' (Freedom to Think) approach provides freedom for teachers and students to innovate in learning, while 'Merdeka Berinovasi' (Freedom to Innovate) allows educational institutions to develop creative and unique learning programs. Additionally, independent and creative learning emphasizes the importance of students being active in the learning process, and the concept of 'Merdeka untuk Kebahagiaan' (Freedom for Happiness) makes learning activities an enjoyable experience.

In China, the primary education curriculum focuses on knowledge, technology, and character-based education aimed at producing high-achieving generations with an emphasis on cultural values.

Independent learning focuses on independent research and collaborative projects, as well as out-of-class learning through excursions where students are encouraged to observe and gain firsthand experience on the topics studied. Furthermore, there are differences between the curriculum in urban and rural primary schools, where rural students learn additional subjects such as agriculture alongside core subjects.

China's education system has undergone many reforms and changes in recent decades; however, challenges in providing quality education access still exist. The focus on national exams accompanied by high academic pressure makes Chinese students highly competitive. Students are required to have high discipline in their studies and adhere to school rules, which can limit their creativity. Despite these challenges, a positive aspect of China's education system is the extraordinary government support in creating equitable education programs between urban and rural areas through the provision of infrastructure and other educational support facilities.

4. Conclusion

The implementation of independent learning in the primary education curricula of Indonesia and China shows significant differences and similarities. In Indonesia, the Merdeka Curriculum gives greater freedom to teachers and schools to design learning activities that match the characteristics and needs of students. This approach emphasizes the development of independent learning, critical thinking, and character strengthening through project-based learning. However, challenges such as lack of teacher training and uneven internet access remain obstacles in its implementation. On the other hand, in China, the education system is more structured with a strong focus on academic mastery and preparation for national exams. Independent learning is introduced early, emphasizing discipline, deep mastery of the material, and the use of advanced technology. The Chinese government provides substantial support for independent learning in both urban and rural areas through modern technological infrastructure.

Both countries share the goal of enhancing students' independent learning, although the approaches and strategies used differ. Indonesia focuses on the development of collaborative projects and project-based assessments, while China emphasizes structured, technology-based individual learning. Supporting factors such as government policy support, digital platform initiatives, and infrastructure facilities are key to the successful implementation of independent learning in both countries. However, obstacles such as technological access disparities and teacher readiness still need to be addressed to achieve optimal results.

This study provides important insights into the strategies used by both countries in implementing independent learning, which can be considered for future improvements in educational policies in both Indonesia and China.

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