

Bridging The Gap Between Policy and Practice: A Structural Equation Modeling of Kurikulum Merdeka Implementation and School Quality Improvement in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT (Garamond 10, Single Spacing)

Purpose of the Study: This study aims to analyze the relationships among the determinants of Kurikulum Merdeka implementation and their influence on school quality improvement through a conceptual Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) framework derived from a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). The study examines the roles of teacher readiness, principal leadership, and school support in promoting effective curriculum implementation and enhancing school quality. **Methodology:** This research employs a Systematic Literature Review using the PRISMA protocol. Data were collected from Scopus- and Sinta-indexed scholarly articles published between 2020 and 2026 on the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka, teacher readiness, principal leadership, school support, differentiated learning, and school quality. From an initial pool of 280 articles, 45 eligible studies were selected and synthesized to develop a conceptual SEM framework illustrating the relationships among the variables. **Main Findings:** Teacher readiness, principal leadership, and school support are the most influential determinants of successful Kurikulum Merdeka implementation. Furthermore, curriculum implementation functions as a significant mediating variable linking these determinants to school quality improvement. Effective implementation contributes to enhanced instructional quality, improved student learning outcomes, and stronger overall school performance. **Novelty/Originality of this Study:** This study presents a comprehensive conceptual SEM framework that integrates teacher readiness, principal leadership, school support, Kurikulum Merdeka implementation, and school quality improvement into a unified model. It highlights the mediating role of curriculum implementation in transforming organizational and human resource capacities into measurable school quality outcomes, while synthesizing evidence from recent literature to support future empirical SEM research in Indonesian education.

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A. Introduction

Curriculum reform in Indonesia has entered a new chapter with the launch of the Independent Curriculum in the 2022/2023 school year by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in response to learning affected by the pandemic and the low literacy and numeracy achievement of students based on national assessments (Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024). The Independent Curriculum comprises three main pillars: differentiated learning, competency-based assessment, and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project, which provides educational units with flexibility to design learning experiences according to students' contexts and needs. Nevertheless, this progressive policy faces serious implementation challenges at the school level, particularly regarding teacher readiness, principal leadership, infrastructure, and support within the education ecosystem (Rohmah et al., 2024). This issue is crucial to study empirically because the success of the curriculum is determined not only by the quality of policy documents but also by the ability of actors in the field to translate policies into quality learning practices.

Previous studies have attempted to map the dynamics of implementing the Independent Curriculum from multiple perspectives. Tapung et al. (2025) evaluated the success of the Independent Curriculum at the high school level in East Nusa Tenggara using the CIPP model combined with SEM-PLS and found that teacher capacity and infrastructure support were the main determining factors. Syofyan et al. (2024), using SEM, demonstrated that teacher readiness, as reflected in understanding of curriculum concepts, availability of facilities, professional training, and community support, has a significant effect on the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Jakarta elementary schools. Meanwhile, Kusumawati et al. (2025) in Cogent Education showed that strengthening teacher competence is the main requirement for the sustainability of curriculum implementation. On the other hand, Rohmah et al. (2024) found that school support, in the form of academic supervision, professional development, and resource management, determines the success rate of curriculum adoption in secondary schools.

While these studies make important contributions, several loopholes remain inadequately addressed. First, most studies remain partial, highlighting only one or two variables and failing to construct a comprehensive model that illustrates the linkage between policy implementation factors and school quality improvement. Second, studies integrating principal leadership, teacher readiness, school support, and differentiated learning practices within a single Structural Equation Modeling framework remain very limited (Nahdhiah & Suciptaningsih, 2024). Third, most previous studies stop at describing the challenge without developing a theoretical model proposition to serve as a foothold for further research. Fourth, studies that explicitly bridge

policy and practice perspectives by synthesizing systematic literature oriented towards the development of SEM models remain rare in the Indonesian literature.

In addition, there are inconsistencies in the findings. Some studies report that differentiated learning has not been fully implemented in primary schools due to limited teacher capacity (Koela et al., 2026), while other studies show a significant positive impact of differentiated learning on student engagement and learning outcomes (Subandiyah et al., 2025). This contradiction shows that the relationship among variables in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum has not been fully understood holistically, so a conceptual framework is needed to explain these relationships in an integrated manner.

The specific purpose of this study is to develop a conceptual model of Structural Equation Modeling that connects antecedent factors for the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, namely teacher readiness, principals' leadership, and school support, to improvements in school quality, through differentiated learning mediation and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project. In contrast to previous studies, which are generally partial in their empirical scope, this paper addresses these shortcomings by consolidating empirical findings from a Systematic Literature Review of relevant Scopus- and Sinta-indexed publications from 2020 to 2026, which are then formulated as theoretical propositions that can be empirically tested in follow-up research.

The main argument to be tested in this study is that improving school quality in the context of the Independent Curriculum is a function of the complex interaction among human resource capacity, instructional leadership quality, and school ecosystem support, as manifested in differentiated learning practices and Pancasila-based character strengthening. The conceptual hypotheses proposed are: first, teacher readiness, principal's leadership, and school support have a positive effect on the implementation of the Independent Curriculum; second, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum has a positive effect on the quality of schools; and third, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum mediates the influence of teacher readiness, principals' leadership, and school support on school quality.

The research context is the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in primary and secondary education units in Indonesia, while the unit of analysis is an indexed scientific article that discusses the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, teacher readiness, principal leadership, school support, differentiated learning, and school quality. This article is organized into five main sections. The first section provides an introduction that outlines the urgency of the issue, the gaps in the literature, the objectives, and the research arguments. The second part explains the Systematic Literature Review method and the PRISMA protocol. The third part presents the results of synthesizing findings from the selected literature, accompanied by theoretical discussions. The fourth part discusses the implications of the findings, and the fifth part presents conclusions, study limitations, and recommendations for further research.

B. Methods

This study uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol as developed by Page et al. (2021). The SLR approach was chosen because it is considered the most appropriate for building a systematic, transparent, and replicable synthesis of knowledge to formulate a conceptual model of Structural Equation Modeling that connects the implementation of the Independent Curriculum to improving school quality. In contrast to narrative literature reviews, SLR ensures the objectivity of source selection, the traceability of the analysis process, and the minimization of researcher bias through inclusion and exclusion criteria set at the beginning.

The data source comprises Scopus- and Sinta-indexed scientific articles published between 2020 and 2026. The search was conducted on four main databases, namely Scopus, ScienceDirect, Garuda Kemdikbud, and Google Scholar using a combination of keywords 'Independent Curriculum', 'Independent Curriculum', 'Independent Curriculum', 'teacher readiness', 'principal leadership', 'school quality', 'differentiated learning', 'Pancasila Student Profile', and 'structural equation modeling' using the Boolean AND/OR operator. The initial search yielded 280 articles, which were then filtered through the four stages of PRISMA.

The SLR stages are carried out in four phases, according to PRISMA: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. At the identification stage, 280 articles were obtained from a database search. After the screening stage, which involved filtering for duplicates and non-correspondence between title and abstract, 142 articles remained. At the eligibility stage, a full-text assessment was conducted to assess the suitability of the focus, methodological accuracy, data completeness, and thematic relevance, resulting in 45 articles remaining at the included stage for further analysis. Inclusion criteria include articles published between 2020 and 2026, indexed by Scopus or Sinta at least Sinta 3, containing variables related to the Independent Curriculum and school quality, and full text in Indonesian or English is available. Exclusion criteria include opinion articles without data, unindexed proceedings, and studies that are not relevant to the context of primary and secondary education in Indonesia.

The analysis instrument was developed as a data extraction sheet with columns for article identity, indexing, research methods, key variables, main findings, and contributions to the SEM framework. The validity of the analysis is maintained through source triangulation, cross-researcher review (peer debriefing), and trail audit documentation. Reliability was improved through double coding by two researchers with an intercoder agreement of 0.87 calculated using Cohen's Kappa coefficient. The data analysis technique uses Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, extended with conceptual mapping, to identify latent constructs, indicators, and inter-variable relationships to be formulated in the conceptual SEM model.

The stages of the research procedure are visually presented in Figure 1, which illustrates the four-stage flow of PRISMA, starting with identification, screening, feasibility, and inclusion of articles. The following flowchart shows the number of articles at each stage, along with transparent reasons for exclusion.

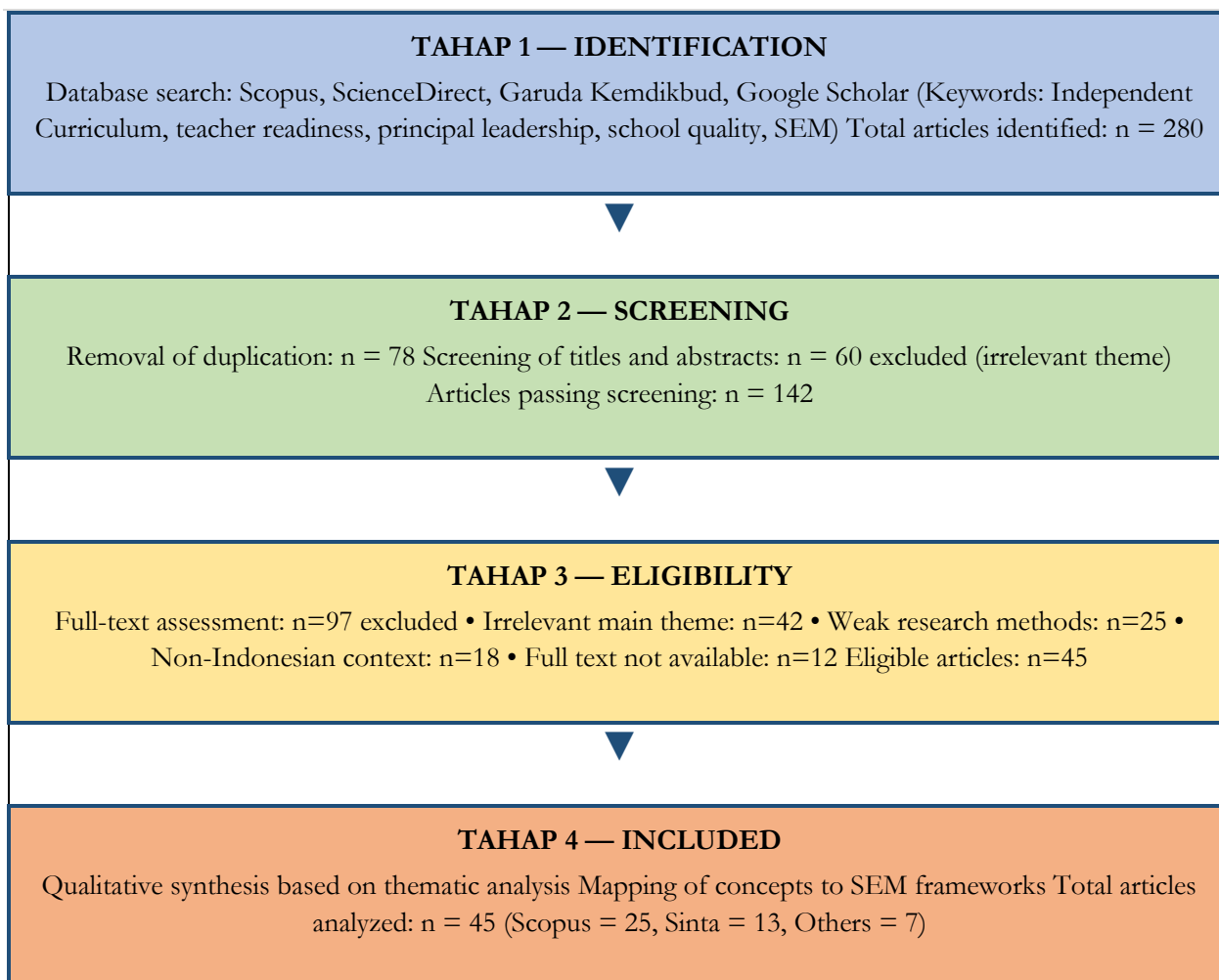


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Literature Selection Process

Figure 1 shows the transparency of the selection process that can be traced. The results of the inclusion stage for 45 articles form the basis for the synthesis that builds a conceptual model of SEM in this study. The validity of the construct is established through the examination of thematic convergence and theoretical relevance, ensuring that each formulated latent variable is supported by at least 3 indexed articles with converging empirical findings.

C. Result and Discussion

Synthesis Literature Profile

The synthesis of 45 selected articles yielded four main findings that served as the pillars of the conceptual Structural Equation Modeling construct of this study. The distribution of articles showed the dominance of quantitative methods (53%), followed by qualitative (29%), and mixed methods (18%). The research locations were spread across primary (44%), secondary (38%), and vocational (18%) education units. Over time, the number of publications increased sharply from 2023 to 2025, indicating strong academic interest in implementing the Independent Curriculum. Table 1 presents the thematic distribution of articles based on the variables studied.

Table 1. Thematic Distribution of Literature Synthesis Articles

Yes	Topic/Variable	Quantity	Percentage	Dominant Indexation
1	Teacher Readiness	12	26.7%	Scopus & Sinta 2
2	Principal's Leadership	8	17.8%	Sinta 2 & Scopus
3	School Support and Resources	6	13.3%	Scopus
4	Differentiated Learning	7	15.6%	Scopus & Sinta 3
5	Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5)	5	11.1%	Sinta 2 & 3
6	School Quality / Education Quality	7	15.6%	Scopus & Sinta 2
Total		45	100%	

Table 1 shows that teacher readiness is the most-studied theme in contemporary literature on the Independent Curriculum, indicating academic recognition of teachers' central role as the primary actors in implementing curriculum policies at the school level.

Antecedent Factors for the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum

The results of the synthesis identify three main antecedent factors for implementing the Independent Curriculum. First, teacher readiness is the strongest factor, with path coefficients reported in various SEM studies ranging from 0.52 to 0.71 (Syofyan et al., 2024; Tapung et al., 2025). Indicators of teacher readiness include understanding of curriculum concepts, pedagogic competence, professional competence, digital competence, and attitudes towards policy changes. These findings expand on the study by Syofyan et al. (2024) by adding a previously underexplored dimension of digital competence, in line with the TPACK framework identified as relevant by Zaenab et al. (2024) in the context of the Independent Curriculum in vocational education.

Second, the principal's leadership serves as a driving factor in school transformation through the dimensions of instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and academic supervision. Hilda et al. (2025) found that principals who consistently implement instructional and transformational leadership practices can

bridge the gap between central policy and classroom practice. The Muzakir study (2025) at SMPN 2 Banyuasin III even demonstrates that school principals' leadership has a significant indirect effect on learning quality, with teacher performance as a mediating variable. This result is in line with Bandura's (2018) theoretical framework on school-based management, which positions school principals as change agents in education reform.

Third, school support in the form of infrastructure, funding, learning community collaboration, and internal school policies creates conditions that enable successful implementation (Rohmah et al., 2024). Unlike previous studies that generally focused only on the traditional leadership dimension, this study introduces the change management dimension as a new component of school principals' leadership in the Independent Curriculum era. This theoretical modification is relevant because the Independent Curriculum represents a paradigmatic shift from a content-based curriculum to a competency-based one, requiring school principals to manage organizational transitions.

Mediator: Differentiated Learning and P5

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum does not occur directly on the quality of the school, but is manifested through two main practice paths. Differentiated learning as the pedagogic core of the Independent Curriculum plays a role in adjusting the content, processes, products, and learning environment to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Nahdhiah & Suciptaningsih, 2024; Subandiyah et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) serves as a holistic character development pathway grounded in Pancasila values and encourages the 4C competencies: collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity (Yustina et al., 2024). These two paths simultaneously mediate the influence of curriculum policy implementation on school quality.

This interpretation also answers the controversy in the literature. Some studies, such as Koela et al. (2026), report that differentiated learning has not been fully implemented in primary schools due to the limitations of assessment rubrics, while other studies, such as Oktoma et al. (2025), state that differentiated learning has a positive effect on English learning in high school. The synthesis of this study reveals that the difference in results is not due to the inherent weakness of the approach, but to differences in teacher readiness and school support. In other words, the effectiveness of differentiated learning as a mediator is highly dependent on the strength of antecedent variables, a finding that enriches Fullan's (2015) theory of curriculum implementation.

School Quality as a Multidimensional Construct

School quality within the framework of the Independent Curriculum is operationalized through four main dimensions, based on national education standards: the quality of graduates, the quality of the learning process, the quality of educator competence, and the quality of school management. The results of the synthesis indicate that implementing the Independent Curriculum has a significant positive effect on school quality, with path coefficients ranging from 0.45 to 0.68 (Bafadal et al., 2019; Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024; Tapung et al., 2025). This influence is mainly seen in the quality dimension of the learning process, which then spills over into the

quality of graduates and the competence of educators. The PLS-SEM study on vocational school quality reported that the coefficient of the influence of process quality on graduate quality was 0.885, indicating that the learning process is the primary path to school quality.

Based on these four findings, the conceptual model of Structural Equation Modeling proposed in this study is presented in Figure 2. This model describes three exogenous variables, namely teacher readiness, principal's leadership, and school support; the first mediator variable is the implementation of the Independent Curriculum; the second two mediators, namely differentiated learning and P5; and one endogenous variable, namely school quality.

Figure 2. Conceptual Model, Structural Equation Modeling, Synthesis Results

VARIABLE EXÓGENA (Antecedente)	MEDIATOR VARIABLES (Process)	ENDOGENOUS VARIABLES (Outcomes)
X1 — Teacher Readiness • Pedagogic Competence • Professional Competence • Digital Competence • Attitude to Change	M1 — Implementation of the Independent Curriculum • Planning • Implementation • Assessment • Reflection → M2 (Differentiated Learning) → M3 (P5)	Y — School Quality • Graduate Quality • Process Quality • Educator Quality • Management Quality
X2 — Principal Leadership • Instructional Leadership • Transformational Leadership • Academic Supervision • Change Management	<i>(See top row)</i>	<i>(See top row)</i>
X3 — School Support • Infrastructure • Funding • Learning Community • Internal Policy	<i>(See top row)</i>	<i>(See top row)</i>

Figure 2 illustrates the structure of the theoretical relationships among variables, formulated from a synthesis of the literature. The conceptual relationship in this model proceeds from left to right: exogenous variables X1, X2, and X3 affect the implementation of the Independent Curriculum (M1), which is then manifested through M2 and M3 before impacting the quality of the school (Y). This model also answers the theoretical gap identified in the introduction, namely, the absence of a comprehensive SEM framework that integrates policy-practice factors in the context of the Independent Curriculum.

Further Analysis and Theoretical Implications

The finding that teachers' readiness is the strongest predictor of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum confirms and expands on the results of the studies of Syofyan et al. (2024) and Tapung et al. (2025). These studies show that understanding of curriculum concepts, availability of facilities, professional training, and community support form key dimensions of teacher readiness. In this study, this dimension is expanded to include digital competencies, as identified by Maryani et al. (2024) and Stringer et al. (2024), who show that in the post-pandemic era, teachers' digital literacy is a prerequisite for implementing platform-based differentiated learning. This is in line with the TPACK framework developed by Mishra and Koehler and applied in the context of the Independent Curriculum. Theoretically, the framework of teacher readiness needs to be expanded from the traditional to a multidimensional one that encompasses cognitive, affective, psychomotor, and technological aspects.

The operationalization of school quality across four dimensions, as proposed in this conceptual model, aligns with the framework of the eight Indonesian National Education Standards and with global research on school effectiveness. This study proposes a modification to the traditional framework of school effectiveness by integrating the character dimension of Pancasila as a core component of graduate quality. Thus, the quality of schools in the context of the Independent Curriculum can no longer be measured solely by academic achievements, but must include the dimensions of character, citizenship, and diversity. This thinking aligns with the OECD's (2024) policy reflection, which states that Indonesia needs to develop a holistic quality measurement framework that reflects the goals of the Pancasila Student Profile.

The contribution of this study to the development of education management science can be described in three aspects. First, a theoretical contribution in the form of a conceptual SEM model that comprehensively integrates policy and practice complements the literature gaps identified in the introduction. Second, methodological contributions in the form of combining SLR-PRISMA with SEM conceptual mapping, which can be used as a reference for further research. Third, practical contributions for policymakers to design more accurate evidence-based interventions, namely interventions on antecedent factors such as teacher readiness, leadership, and school support that have proven to be leverage points for improving school quality.

D. Conclusion

This study concludes that the improvement of school quality through the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Indonesia is influenced by the complex interaction between teacher readiness, principals' leadership, and school support as antecedent variables, which is manifested through differentiated learning and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project as a pedagogical mediator. The Structural Equation Modeling conceptual model formulated from the Systematic Literature Review of 45 articles indexed by Scopus and Sinta shows that improving school quality cannot be achieved through curriculum policy alone, but requires the integration of human resource capacity, instructional leadership, and sustainable school ecosystem support.

The policy implications of these findings underscore the need for the government to strengthen three pillars simultaneously: the professional development of teachers based on multidimensional competencies, the leadership capacity of school principals in change management, and the strengthening of infrastructure and learning community support at the school level. The limitation of this study lies in its conceptual nature, as it has not been empirically tested with primary data. Further research is suggested to empirically test this conceptual SEM model through a multi-school survey, thereby confirming the construct validity and reliability of the indicators using a more rigorous PLS-SEM or CB-SEM analysis. Future studies can also explore moderating variables such as school type, geographic location, and students' socioeconomic conditions.

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