

# Teacher Challenges in Implementing the Independent Curriculum: Strengthening HOTS in Religious Learning

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## Abstract:

*This research aims to identify the challenges teachers face in implementing the Independent Curriculum, especially in strengthening higher-order thinking Skills (HOTS) in religious learning at School. The research uses a qualitative research method with the type of case study research. Data is collected through direct observation, in-depth interviews with Islamic boarding school caregivers, principals, and teachers, and analysis of related documents. The study results show that the readiness of teachers and school staff, the change in mindset from teacher-centric to student-centric, and the application of varied learning methods are the main challenges in implementing the Independent Curriculum. However, there has been an increase in students' critical thinking skills since the implementation of this curriculum. This research emphasizes the importance of ongoing support and intensive training for teachers to ensure the successful implementation of a more interactive and student-centered curriculum. The implications of this research are the need to develop educational policies that are more adaptive and responsive to the needs in the field, as well as the importance of continuous assistance to improve the quality of religious education in Indonesia.*

**Key Words:** Challenges, Independent Curriculum, HOTS, Religious Learning

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is the main pillar in nation building, and the curriculum is a key element that determines the quality of education (Suwito et al., 2020; Ansori et al., 2023; Norman & Paramansyah, 2024). In Indonesia, curriculum changes are often made to adapt to global dynamics and local needs (Garira, 2020; Glavič, 2020; Hamidah, 2023). The curriculum is designed to provide students with freedom of thought, enhancing critical, analytical, and creative thinking skills known as Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) (Lo & Feng, 2020; Aytaç & Kula, 2020; Chen, 2021). This topic is interesting to research because it combines aspects

of educational innovation with practical challenges faced by teachers in its implementation.

The importance of this research lies in its relevance to the urgent need to develop an education system capable of producing critical, creative, and adaptive individuals (Turner & Baker, 2020; Green et al., 2020; Holman & Švejdarová, 2023). In the midst of the demands of global change, religious education is often considered monotonous and less challenging (Saleem et al., 2021; Rusdi et al., 2022; Wijaya & Khoir, 2022). In this context, the strengthening of HOTS in religious learning is expected to overcome this problem. According to constructivist learning theory, knowledge is built through the interaction between individuals and their environment (Feyzi Behnagh & Yasrebi, 2020; Arik & Yilmaz, 2020; Chuanchen, 2023). In this context, the Independent Curriculum encourages students to actively interact with learning materials, so that they can develop higher-level thinking skills. In addition, the project-based learning theory proposed by Blumenfeld et al. (1991) supports this approach by emphasizing the importance of hands-on experience in learning.

The main problem in this study is the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum, especially in strengthening HOTS in religious learning. Based on initial observations at Ar-Rofi'iyah Probolinggo, East Java, there are several main problems faced by teachers in implementing this curriculum. The readiness of teachers and school staff is still a significant obstacle. Many teachers are not ready for the change in learning paradigm brought by this curriculum. In addition, changing the mindset from teacher-centered to student-centered is a big challenge. Teachers must be able to change their perspective from being a provider of knowledge to a facilitator who supports students in the learning process. Varied learning methods are also a challenge, as many teachers are still accustomed to traditional methods that do not provide space for students to develop critical thinking skills.

Previous research has discussed the implementation of HOTS in various educational contexts. Umi Hanik, Mardiyana, and Rosid (2020) found that HOTS training for teachers successfully improved their understanding of HOTS-based learning and the development of appropriate learning tools. Kurnia Dwi Putri et al. (2022) showed that strengthening character education through learning planning for Islamic Religious Education was successfully integrated into the objectives, materials, methods, and learning activities designed in the syllabus and lesson plans. Irfan Fadholi, Sukiman, and Fadilah (2022) stated that the scientific approach to learning Islamic Religious Education is by using scientific methods, such as observing, asking, gathering information, reasoning, and communicating.

Although previous research has provided valuable insights into the strengthening of HOTS and character education, there have been no studies that specifically address the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum for the strengthening of HOTS in religious learning.

This research aims to fill the gap by focusing on the identification of challenges and efforts made by teachers at Ar-Rofi'iyah Semampir Middle School, Kraksaan, Probolinggo.

The novelty of this research lies in its holistic and contextual approach in examining the challenges of implementing the Independent Curriculum, especially in strengthening HOTS in religious learning. The research not only identifies challenges but also offers practical solutions based on real-life experiences in the field. In addition, this research combines constructivist learning theory and project-based learning with curriculum implementation in schools, providing a unique and in-depth perspective on learning dynamics in the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0.

This study aims to identify and analyze the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum to strengthen HOTS in religious learning at Ar-Rofi'iyah Semampir Middle School, Kraksaan, Probolinggo. This research is important considering that education has a crucial role in shaping the future of the nation, and the curriculum is a vital instrument that determines the quality of the teaching and learning process. The Merdeka Curriculum, which was recently introduced in Indonesia, aims to accommodate global changes and local needs by providing students with freedom of thought and improving their critical, analytical, and creative thinking skills (Higher Order Thinking Skills, or HOTS). This research also offers practical solutions to overcome the challenges of implementing the new curriculum, which is urgently needed to achieve educational goals that are more adaptive and relevant to the demands of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 era.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach with the type of case study research. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to deeply understand the phenomenon being researched, namely the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in strengthening Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in religious learning. The case study was chosen because it provides the flexibility to explore specific details at Ar-Rofi'iyah Semampir Middle School, Kraksaan, Probolinggo. This approach allows researchers to obtain rich and in-depth data through various sources of information (Tomaszewski et al., 2020; Renjith et al., 2021; Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022).

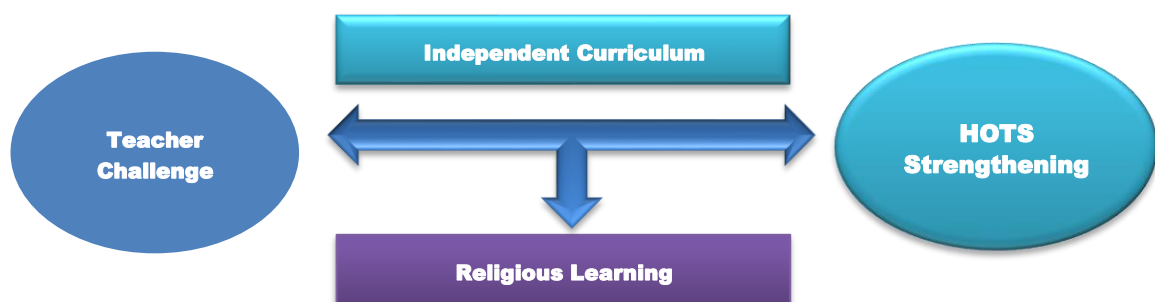
The data collection technique in this study involves direct observation at school, in-depth interviews with Islamic boarding school caregivers, principals, and junior high school teachers, as well as analysis of related documents. Observations were made to see firsthand how the Independent Curriculum is implemented in the school. The interview was conducted with three key speakers, namely the caretaker of the Islamic boarding school (F1), the principal (F2), and a teacher (F3). The location of the research is Ar-Rofi'iyah Semampir Middle School which is located at Jl. Semampir No. 45, Kraksaan, Probolinggo.

In addition, data is also obtained from documents that support and strengthen the research results.

The data analysis technique uses an interactive analysis model which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. The validity of the data is checked through triangulation of sources and methods, ensuring that the data obtained is consistent and reliable. The data that has been collected are classified, taxonomized, and reduced as needed by the research (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). The results of the analysis are presented systematically to provide a clear picture of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum and the challenges faced in strengthening HOTS in religious learning in the school.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research aims to identify the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum, especially in strengthening Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in religious learning at Ar-Rofi'iyah Semampir Middle School, Kraksaan, Probolinggo. The findings of this study are based on interviews with teachers, principals, and caregivers of Islamic boarding schools that are directly related to the implementation of this curriculum. Data were obtained through observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis as follows in Figure 1:



**Figure 1. Merdeka curriculum, teacher challenges, strengthening HOTS, and religious learning.**

### Readiness of Teachers and School Staff

One of the main findings of this study is the readiness of teachers and school staff which is still a significant obstacle in implementing the Independent Curriculum. Many teachers admit that they are not fully ready for the change in learning paradigm brought by this curriculum. Some of the findings related to the research were conveyed by several speakers in the following interview activities.

*A teacher from the school stated that, "We still have a lot to learn to adapt to this new curriculum, especially in terms of administration and preparation of lesson plans" (F3).*

*The principal also added, "We face a big challenge in ensuring that all teachers understand and are able to implement the Independent Curriculum well. Many of them still have difficulties in compiling learning modules that are in accordance with the principles of HOTS" (F2).*

*This is in line with the opinion of the caretaker of the Islamic boarding school who said, "The teachers here still need a lot of training and assistance to really be able to carry out this curriculum effectively" (F1).*

From several interviews conducted above, it was found that the Independent Curriculum at Ar-Rofi'iyah Semampir Middle School, Kraksaan, Probolinggo, faces various significant challenges, especially related to the readiness of teachers and school staff. Teachers are still in the process of learning to adapt to this new curriculum, especially in the administrative aspects and preparation of lesson plans. The biggest challenge lies in ensuring that all teachers understand and are able to implement the Independent Curriculum well, with many of them still struggling to develop learning modules that are in accordance with the principles of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). In addition, a lot of training and mentoring is still needed to help teachers implement this curriculum effectively. These findings highlight the importance of continuous support and intensive training to improve teachers' readiness and competence in implementing the Independent Curriculum optimally, so that they can develop students' critical and creative thinking skills in accordance with the demands of the new curriculum.

### **Mindset Change from Teacher-Centric to Student-Centric**

Another significant finding is the challenge of changing the mindset from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning.

*This was conveyed by one of the teachers where he said that, "It is difficult for us to change the way of thinking that has been oriented towards the delivery of material by teachers to more active and participatory learning for students." (F3).*

*The principal also highlighted this, "There are still many teachers who use traditional methods, such as lectures, which do not provide space for students to think critically and creatively." (F2).*

*This is reinforced by the statement of the caregiver of the boarding school which says, "We need to ensure that our teachers really understand the importance of providing space for students to actively participate in the learning process." (F1).*

From the results of the interview above, the Independent Curriculum that is implemented faces a big challenge in changing the learning paradigm from one oriented to the delivery of material by teachers to more active and participatory learning for students. One teacher stated that it was difficult for them to switch from traditional methods to a more dynamic and student-centered approach. The principal also acknowledged that many teachers still use lecture methods that do

not provide space for students to think critically and creatively. This was reinforced by the caregivers of Islamic boarding schools who emphasized the importance of teachers' understanding of the need to provide space for students to actively participate in the learning process. These difficulties show that the transformation towards more interactive and student-centered learning requires strong support, ongoing training, and a profound mindset change among educators to be able to effectively achieve the goals of the Independent Curriculum.

### **Varied Learning Methods**

The implementation of varied learning methods is also a big challenge for teachers. Many teachers find it difficult to apply learning methods that are in accordance with the principles of HOTS. A teacher stated that,

*"We are often confused in choosing the right method to teach religious material with the HOTS approach." (F3).*

*The principal added, "We have tried several methods such as project-based learning, but the results are still not optimal due to time and resource constraints." (F2).*

*This was reinforced by the caretaker of the Islamic boarding school who said, "A variety of learning methods are indeed needed, but we still need further guidance to really be able to implement them." (F1).*

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Ar-Rofi'iyah Semampir shows that teachers experience confusion in choosing the right method to teach religious materials with the Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) approach. One teacher revealed that they are often confused in determining an effective method for religious learning. The principal added that although they have tried several methods such as project-based learning, the results obtained are still not optimal due to time and resource limitations. This was reinforced by the caregivers of Islamic boarding schools who emphasized that although varied learning methods are very necessary, they still need further guidance to be able to implement them properly. These findings highlight that in addition to continuous support, there is a need for intensive training and more in-depth mentoring for teachers to be able to adopt and apply innovative and varied learning methods, so that the goals of the Independent Curriculum in improving students' critical and creative thinking skills can be achieved more optimally.

### **Strengthening HOTS in Religious Learning**

The strengthening of HOTS in religious learning at Ar-Rofi'iyah Semampir Middle School showed mixed results. This is as expressed by one of the teachers where he said that,

*"We saw some improvements in students' critical thinking skills, but there is still a lot we need to improve." (F3).*

*The principal also added that, "There has been an improvement in the way students analyze and evaluate information, but there are still many students who lack confidence in expressing their opinions." (F2).*

*The caregiver of the Islamic boarding school added, "We need to continue to encourage and support students to be more active and critical in the learning process." (F1).*

Through the results of the interview above, it shows that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum has brought several improvements in students' critical thinking skills, although there are still many aspects that need to be improved. A teacher revealed that although there has been an improvement in students' critical thinking skills, there is still much to be further improved. The principal added that there has been progress in the way students analyze and evaluate information, but many students still lack confidence in expressing their opinions. This is reinforced by the caregivers of Islamic boarding schools who emphasize the need to encourage and support students to be more active and critical in the learning process.

This improvement can be seen from the comparison of students' critical thinking skills when using the 2013 Curriculum and the Independent Curriculum as shown in table 2.

**Table 1. Comparison of Students' Critical Thinking Abilities Between the 2013 Curriculum and the Independent Curriculum**

NO	Critical Thinking Ability Score	K-13	KMB
1	The highest score	86	90
2	Lowest Value	80	87
3	Average	84	88

Table 1 above shows that the increase is reflected in the highest score of students, which increased from 86 in the 2013 Curriculum to 90 in the Independent Curriculum, as well as the lowest score, which increased from 80 to 87, and the average score increased from 84 to 88. This data indicates that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum has succeeded in improving students' critical thinking skills, as shown by the findings of interviews that show an increase in students' analysis, evaluation, and activeness in the learning process. However, although this improvement is positive, further efforts are still needed to increase students' confidence in expressing opinions and participating actively. This emphasizes the importance of continuous support in the form of intensive training and mentoring for teachers to ensure the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum that is more student-centered

and oriented towards strengthening HOTS so that the quality of education and student learning outcomes can continue to be improved.

This study shows that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Ar-Rofi'iyah Semampir Middle School has brought an improvement in students' critical thinking skills, but there are still various challenges that need to be overcome. The improvements seen in students' highest, lowest, and average scores indicate that this new approach has great potential to improve the quality of education. These findings are consistent with previous research that shows that HOTS training can improve teachers' understanding and ability to develop HOTS-based learning tools (Hanik et al., 2020).

However, there are still difficulties in choosing and implementing the right learning method, as expressed by the principal and caregiver of the Islamic boarding school. A study by Putri et al. (2022) also shows that character strengthening and HOTS in religious learning requires good integration in learning planning. In addition, research by Fadholi et al. (2022) confirms that a scientific approach to religious learning can improve students' analytical and evaluation skills, but its implementation requires continuous support and intensive training. The results of this study confirm that although the Independent Curriculum shows positive results, further efforts are still needed to overcome the challenges faced by teachers in implementing student-centered and oriented learning methods that are oriented towards strengthening HOTS. Therefore, ongoing support in the form of intensive training and mentoring is essential to ensure the successful implementation of this curriculum and the improvement of the quality of education in Indonesia.

The contribution of this research in the field of learning management is very significant, especially in the context of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Indonesia. This research provides in-depth insight into the challenges and obstacles faced by teachers in adopting a new learning approach oriented towards Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). By identifying the need for intensive training and ongoing mentoring for teachers, the study emphasizes the importance of effective managerial support to facilitate the transition to more interactive and student-centered learning. In addition, the results of this study can be the basis for the development of education policies that are more adaptive and responsive to the needs in the field, as well as strengthen the capacity of educational institutions in designing and implementing innovative and effective learning modules. Thus, this research not only contributes to improving the quality of religious education, but also to the development of holistic and sustainable learning management strategies.

## CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that implementing the Independent Curriculum at Ar-Rofi'iyah Semampir Middle School, Kraksaan, Probolinggo, has improved students' critical thinking skills. However, there are



still many challenges to be overcome. This study shows that the readiness of teachers and school staff is crucial in successfully implementing the new curriculum. Ongoing support and intensive training are essential to help teachers adopt more interactive and student-centered learning methods. In addition, changing the mindset from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered one is crucial and requires special attention. This research provides practical insights into how schools can support teachers in overcoming these barriers and improving students' critical and creative thinking skills.

The scientific contribution of this research is to provide a new perspective on implementing the Independent Curriculum in the context of religious education and underline the importance of strengthening HOTS in learning. This research updates our understanding of practical and relevant teaching methods in a curriculum oriented toward developing higher-order thinking skills by identifying the challenges and solutions needed. However, this study has limitations, including the limited number of cases in one specific location and gender and age variations that may not be comprehensively represented. Therefore, further research covering various locations, genders, and ages is needed and using broader survey methods to get a more complete picture. This additional research can provide a more substantial basis for developing more appropriate and targeted education policies and ensure that the Independent Curriculum can be effectively implemented in various educational contexts in Indonesia.

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