

# Beyond Administration: How Continuous Quality Improvement Transforms Professional Collaboration and Student Engagement in Elementary Schools

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## Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the implementation of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) in strengthening the culture of academic quality in elementary schools during the Independent Curriculum era. This study uses a qualitative case study design, with data collected from the principal, vice principal, teachers, administrative staff, and students through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The study was conducted in an elementary school implementing CQI, with data credibility ensured through triangulation and member checks. The results show that CQI strengthens the culture of academic quality through three main mechanisms: (1) the development of a collaborative teacher professional learning community; (2) the systematic use of academic data (attendance, grade recap, and learning portfolio) in learning decision-making; and (3) the transformation of supervision into a coaching-based formative process. These practices result in more structured learning, increased student engagement, and more consistent monitoring of learning progress. This study contributes by positioning CQI as a cultural and pedagogical framework, rather than simply an administrative system. In addition, this study recommends strengthening collaboration, data-based evaluation, and formative supervision to sustain academic quality in elementary schools.

**Keywords:** *Continuous Quality Improvement, Academic Quality Culture, Independent Curriculum*

## Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis implementasi Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) dalam memperkuat budaya mutu akademik di sekolah dasar pada era Kurikulum Merdeka. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif dengan pengumpulan data dari kepala sekolah, wakil kepala sekolah, guru, tenaga administrasi, dan siswa melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, serta studi dokumentasi. Penelitian dilakukan di sebuah sekolah dasar yang menerapkan CQI, dengan kredibilitas data yang dipastikan melalui triangulasi dan pengecekan anggota (member check). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa CQI memperkuat budaya mutu akademik melalui tiga mekanisme utama, yaitu: (1) pengembangan komunitas belajar profesional guru yang kolaboratif; (2) pemanfaatan data akademik (absensi, rekap nilai, dan portofolio belajar) secara sistematis dalam pengambilan keputusan pembelajaran; serta (3) transformasi supervisi menjadi proses formatif berbasis pembinaan. Praktik-praktik tersebut

berdampak pada pembelajaran yang lebih terstruktur, peningkatan keterlibatan siswa, serta pemantauan kemajuan belajar yang lebih konsisten. Penelitian ini berkontribusi dengan memosisikan CQI sebagai kerangka kerja kultural dan pedagogis, bukan sekadar sistem administratif. Selain itu, penelitian ini merekomendasikan penguatan kolaborasi, evaluasi berbasis data, serta supervisi formatif untuk mendukung keberlanjutan mutu akademik di sekolah dasar.

**Kata Kunci:** *Continuous Quality Improvement, Budaya Mutu Akademik, Kurikulum Merdeka*

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## INTRODUCTION

Education quality has become a strategic indicator of national progress in the global era, as countries increasingly rely on competent and innovative human resources to compete internationally. The success of an educational system is no longer measured solely by access to schooling, but by its ability to continuously improve instructional processes and learning outcomes. Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) is widely recognized across sectors as a systematic, sustainable approach to enhancing organizational quality by prioritizing long-term progress and collective responsibility (Antony et al., 2021; Shankar et al., 2022; Stalmeijer et al., 2023). Evidence from OECD reports and international learning assessments indicates that school systems that apply structured quality-management cycles consistently achieve higher student performance and teacher professionalism. Therefore, improving the academic quality culture in elementary schools is not only an institutional priority but also a national urgency, as early schooling forms the foundation for students' lifelong learning skills (Flentje et al., 2022; Harvey et al., 2020; Putro et al., 2024). Strengthening continuous improvement within education is thus vital for societal development and future competitiveness.

Despite the strategic importance of educational quality, many elementary schools continue to struggle to ensure consistent academic excellence. Common challenges include fragmented supervision systems, inconsistent implementation of curriculum policies, insufficient evaluation mechanisms, and limited collaboration among teaching staff (Rizki, 2022; Susilo, 2023). These issues often hinder schools from achieving sustainable improvement, especially as curriculum reforms demand adaptive learning designs, data-driven decision-making, and high levels of teacher competence. Without structured quality management, elementary schools tend to rely on short-term solutions rather than on systematic problem-solving aimed at the continuous improvement of instructional practices (Hadi et al., 2023; Ndari, 2023). As a result, learning services may fail to align with students' needs, teachers' professional growth may stagnate, and academic accountability may weaken. These conditions highlight a significant gap between expected quality standards and actual school performance, raising concerns about whether elementary schools can effectively create learning environments that cultivate long-term mastery, creativity, and competitiveness.

Field observations across multiple elementary schools indicate the emergence of contrasting phenomena in the implementation of the Independent

Curriculum. On the one hand, schools are granted broader autonomy to design differentiated, student-centered learning; on the other hand, many educators experience uncertainty in translating curricular flexibility into clear, measurable instructional practices. Teachers report difficulties in designing assessment systems based on competency progress, while school leaders struggle to sustain consistent academic supervision (Ainissyifa et al., 2024; Riansyah et al., 2025). Collaboration among teachers also remains highly dependent on individual motivation rather than institutional standards, resulting in uneven teaching performance. Furthermore, evaluation cycles are often conducted administratively rather than used as evidence for instructional improvement (Amalia et al., 2024; Amon, 2021). These phenomena indicate that although policy reforms promote innovation and flexibility, schools still require systematic quality-improvement mechanisms to ensure that curriculum implementation contributes to cultural and academic excellence rather than increasing complexity and workload without meaningful impact on learning quality.

Previous studies on Continuous Quality Improvement and school quality have primarily focused on secondary and higher education institutions. Marmoah et al. (2024) and Hardiansyah (2022) demonstrated the effectiveness of CQI in raising academic standards in vocational schools. Alghazali. (2024), Izzah et al. (2024), and Faizah (2023) emphasized the role of structured evaluation systems in improving instructional supervision at the university level. Amiruddin et al. (2024) and Silviah (2023) found that quality-improvement cycles strengthen professional learning communities among teachers in secondary schools, while Aldi et al. (2023) and Afiqah et al. (2025) highlighted the importance of Leadership commitment in sustaining school-wide improvement. Although these studies offer valuable insights, they focus on older learners and well-resourced institutions, limiting their relevance to elementary schools operating under different developmental, pedagogical, and structural conditions. Consequently, the literature does not yet explain how CQI principles adapt to school contexts involving young learners, curriculum flexibility, and varying levels of teacher readiness in the Independent Curriculum era.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on how Continuous Quality Improvement strengthens academic quality culture, unlike previous studies that conceptualize CQI as an administrative compliance mechanism in elementary schools during the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Rather than analyzing CQI as a technical managerial system, this study explores how CQI influences teacher professionalism, collective decision-making, and shared values among school members (Sauri, 2025; Sholeh, 2022). It highlights how improvement cycles, ranging from planning, implementation, evaluation, and follow-up, translate into daily pedagogical routines and collaborative work structures, producing cultural change rather than temporary compliance. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the interdependence between participatory Leadership, academic supervision, and professional learning communities as key enablers of sustainable quality improvement (Marini, 2024). This perspective is distinct from prior research that focused primarily on administrative compliance, as it conceptualizes CQI as a cultural driver that integrates quality assurance with

teachers' and students' lived classroom experiences.

Based on the identified gaps, the central problem of this research is to understand how CQI principles are operationalized to strengthen the academic quality culture in elementary schools during the Independent Curriculum era. Addressing this issue is crucial because an inconsistent academic culture has been widely recognized as a barrier to effective curriculum implementation and teacher professionalism (Efendi, 2022; Musthofa & R., 2022). This study argues that CQI can function not only as a managerial technique but also as a transformative pedagogical framework that guides learning improvement through systematic collaboration, reflective supervision, and evidence-based evaluation. The preliminary assumption is that when CQI is applied consistently, it enhances teaching quality, supports teacher autonomy with accountability, and aligns school services with students' developmental needs. Thus, this research contributes theoretically by refining CQI concepts in the context of early education and practically by demonstrating their applicability to daily instructional practices.

This study specifically aims to: (1) examine how Continuous Quality Improvement principles are applied in instructional practices, academic supervision, and evaluation processes in elementary schools within the Independent Curriculum framework; and (2) identify supporting and inhibiting factors affecting CQI implementation in strengthening academic quality culture. Through an in-depth qualitative exploration, this research aims to develop a practical implementation model that schools can adopt to sustain continuous learning improvement. The expected theoretical contribution is a context-based understanding of CQI that integrates cultural, managerial, and pedagogical dimensions. Meanwhile, the practical contribution is to provide school leaders and teachers with a roadmap for achieving high-quality learning services through collaborative decision-making, structured supervision, and systematic evaluation. Ultimately, the study aims to promote sustainable excellence in elementary-school education by cultivating a culture that values academic integrity, continuous improvement, and professional growth.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the implementation of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) in elementary school management and its role in strengthening the academic quality culture. A case-study design was selected because it enables an in-depth, contextual examination of the phenomenon in its natural setting, allowing the researcher to understand the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of school stakeholders directly involved in the CQI process (Sarfo et al., 2021). This approach aligns to reveal how managerial strategies translate into practical pedagogical improvements and professional collaboration.

The research was conducted in an elementary school that has formally implemented CQI principles across its academic and managerial systems. The school was chosen purposively based on three considerations: (1) it demonstrates a strong institutional commitment to improving academic quality; (2) it possesses

formal documents, evaluation mechanisms, and structured quality-assurance cycles; and (3) it was willing to participate and provide access to relevant programs, activities, and data. This selection ensured that the research site represented an authentic and sustained CQI implementation rather than a temporary or symbolic application.

Informants were selected purposively based on their roles and involvement in academic quality assurance. The Table below summarizes the informants, their backgrounds, and the rationale for their inclusion.

**Table 1. Informants Data**

<b>Informant Category</b>	<b>Number of Informants</b>	<b>Educational Background</b>	<b>Rationale for Selection</b>
Principal	1	Master's in Educational Management	Strategic leader and CQI decision maker
Vice Principal for Curriculum	1	Bachelor's in Education	Coordinator of academic supervision and quality program execution
Teachers	8	Bachelor's in Elementary Education	Direct implementers of learning, assessment, and instructional improvement
Administrative Staff	2	Vocational/Bachelor's in Administration	Managers of documentation and academic data supporting CQI
Students	10	Elementary level	Direct beneficiaries of instructional and evaluation improvements

The selection of informants reflects a strategic representation of stakeholders who play essential roles in the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) cycle within the school community. The principal, holding a master's degree in educational management, was included as a key informant because of their strategic Leadership position and authority in determining CQI policies and decisions. The vice principal for curriculum, with a bachelor's degree in education, provided insights into coordinating academic supervision and implementing high-quality programs. Eight teachers with bachelor's degrees in elementary education served as the primary implementers of learning innovations, assessment improvements, and classroom implementation of CQI. Two administrative staff members with vocational or bachelor's backgrounds in administration represented the managerial support system responsible for academic documentation and data management. Ten elementary students were also included to capture firsthand experiences as direct beneficiaries of instructional enhancement efforts. Collectively, this composition ensures a holistic understanding of CQI practices from the perspectives of policy, implementation, and outcomes.

Data collection was carried out using three complementary techniques: (1) semi-structured in-depth interviews to obtain detailed information regarding CQI implementation and its perceived impact; (2) participatory observations of classroom practices, academic supervision, teacher collaboration meetings, and evaluation activities; and (3) document study of quality-assurance guidelines, school action plans, internal evaluation reports, and coordination meeting

minutes. These techniques were applied simultaneously to ensure comprehensive and contextual findings (Priya, 2021).

The data analysis employed thematic analysis, comprising data condensation, data display, and verification of conclusions (Rivera-Chang, 2021). In the condensation stage, information from interviews, observations, and documents was selected, grouped, and coded according to indicators of CQI implementation. The data display stage involved organizing findings into thematic matrices and visual charts to reveal emerging patterns related to collaboration, supervision, and academic quality culture. Finally, verification of the conclusion was achieved through continuous comparison of the coded data with the research questions to identify the final themes and theoretical propositions.

To ensure data credibility, sources and techniques were triangulated across interviews, observations, and document reviews. Member checking was conducted by confirming the interpretation of findings with selected informants to verify accuracy and avoid researcher bias. Ethical procedures were strictly followed throughout the research, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring participants' confidentiality and anonymity, and using the collected data solely for academic purposes.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

This section presents the main findings of the study derived from observations, documentation, and interview data. The results highlight how Continuous Quality Improvement is implemented in daily school practices, focusing on collaborative professional culture, data-driven evaluation, and instructional supervision. These findings illustrate the practical mechanisms by which CQI strengthens academic quality in elementary education.

### **Collaborative Culture Strengthens Professional Learning Communities**

This sub-finding points to a shift in teacher work culture toward more intensive, structured collaboration oriented toward continuous professional learning. In this research, collaborative culture is understood as a pattern of collaborative work among teachers in lesson planning, reflective practice, problem-solving in the classroom, and evaluating academic achievement, supported by mechanisms such as regular coaching, pedagogical discussions, and learning community meetings. This culture reflects not only administrative cooperation but also teachers' active involvement in sharing experiences, providing feedback, and aligning strategies to improve the quality of learning. Therefore, this sub-finding reflects the level of professional cohesion among teachers and the extent to which they perceive the learning community as a space for collective growth.

One teacher stated, "We do not work alone anymore; every week we have a small meeting to discuss learning issues and find solutions together." This

statement indicates a significant shift from individual work patterns to ongoing, reflective collaboration. The teacher described how the weekly forum provided a space for them to express challenges, share strategies, and develop better lesson plans. The researchers interpret this forum as a catalyst for the formation of a more mature professional culture, as teachers felt they had a safe space to discuss and collectively develop their pedagogical skills.

Another teacher explained that “we give each other feedback on teaching methods, and there are even sessions where teachers practice new models, and other colleagues provide comments.” These data indicate that collaboration extends beyond discussions and has evolved into a systematic peer-coaching practice. This practice allows teachers to receive constructive feedback directly from their colleagues, thereby significantly improving the quality of learning. Researchers interpret this interaction as demonstrating a growing collective awareness that quality improvement is not merely an individual task but a shared responsibility within a professional learning community.

Observations indicate that teachers actively engage in collaborative meetings, characterized by regular discussion sessions, learning design discussions, and reflections on classroom issues raised by members. Researchers observed a natural two-way communication pattern, with each teacher contributing to the formulation of solutions and strategies for quality improvement. The conclusion from these data is that collaborative activities are not merely an administrative formality but a substantive endeavor driven by a shared commitment to enhancing the quality of teaching. The DESCRIPTION of the data pattern indicates that this collaboration is consistent, participatory, and focused on improving learning practices, indicating the development of a productive and sustainable professional learning community.

### **Data-Driven Evaluation Improves Instructional Decision-Making**

This sub-finding refers to the systematic use of documented academic data, including student assessment records, attendance sheets, and learning portfolios, as the primary basis for instructional and managerial decision-making. In the field, data-driven evaluation is characterized by the presence of structured documentation that is routinely collected, reviewed, and used by teachers and school leaders to monitor learning progress and determine follow-up actions. These documents function not merely as administrative records but as active tools for guiding instructional planning and academic supervision.

The data-driven evaluation process begins with teachers’ daily attendance recording, followed by documentation of formative and summative assessment results. These data are then compiled into class-level recapitulation sheets and complemented by student learning portfolios. The compiled information is reviewed during instructional planning and academic supervision sessions to identify learning gaps, attendance-related issues, and instructional priorities. This flow indicates that decision-making is sequential, evidence-based, and embedded in routine school practices rather than conducted sporadically.



**Figure 1. Teachers Consistently Recorded Student Attendance at the Beginning of Each Lesson**

Figure 1 shows that teachers consistently recorded student attendance at the beginning of each lesson using printed attendance sheets, which were later stored as official academic records. Teachers were also observed reviewing assessment recapitulation documents and student portfolios as they prepared lesson plans and during evaluation meetings. These activities demonstrate that instructional decisions, such as adjusting teaching strategies or providing additional support to students, were directly informed by documented evidence rather than intuition alone. The presence of organized documents and their repeated use reflects an institutionalized evaluation practice.

Restating the findings, instructional decisions in the school are guided by three primary sources of documented data: attendance records, academic scores, and learning portfolios. Attendance data help teachers identify patterns of participation, assessment records indicate learning achievement levels, and portfolios provide qualitative evidence of student progress. Together, these documents support targeted instructional adjustments and supervisory feedback. The consistent use of these records confirms that evaluation processes are integrated into daily teaching routines. The overall data pattern shows a stable cycle of documentation, review, and instructional adjustment. Data are collected regularly, organized systematically, and reused across instructional planning and supervision activities. This pattern demonstrates a shift toward sustained evidence-based practice, in which instructional quality improvement is driven by documented learning data rather than by temporary or incidental evaluation efforts.

### **CQI Enhances Academic Performance and Supervision**

This sub-finding operationally refers to observable improvements in students' academic performance and the strengthening of formative supervision practices within the daily instructional process. In the field, CQI is identified through visible behavioral and procedural changes in classrooms, such as more structured lesson implementation, consistent monitoring of student progress, and supervisory activities that focus on coaching rather than inspection. These observable indicators demonstrate how CQI principles manifest directly in

learning activities and school routines.

**Table 2. Table Structure Description (Observation & Indicators)**

Observed Activity	Indicator of CQI Implementation
Teachers conducting structured lesson delivery	Improved instructional clarity and alignment to learning goals
Routine formative assessments during class	Continuous monitoring of student progress
Supervisors entering classrooms with observation tools.	Formative supervision focused on improvement.
Students actively responding to guided tasks.	Increased academic engagement and performance
Use of learning portfolios displayed in classrooms	Evidence-based instructional adjustments

The observations indicate that improvements in academic performance result from structured and consistent instructional practices. Teachers deliver lessons with clearer sequencing, allowing students to engage more actively. Restating the Table, the presence of routine formative assessments, visible portfolios, and structured learning tasks indicates that learning progress is continuously and systematically monitored. Likewise, supervisors' use of observation tools during visits indicates that supervision is intended to support instructional improvement rather than merely to conduct administrative checks. These observed patterns collectively reveal that both teaching quality and academic outcomes have improved through operational CQI practices integrated into daily instructional routines.

Overall, the observational data show a consistent pattern of instructional tightening, formative monitoring, and supportive supervision. The activities revolve around structured teaching, continuous assessment, and evidence-based decision-making, indicating a stable shift from reactive to proactive approaches to academic quality. The alignment between teacher actions, student behaviors, and supervisory roles demonstrates that CQI has been internalized as a routine system rather than an isolated program.

## Discussion

The findings of this study align with a growing body of educational management literature, which emphasizes that Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) is most effective when it operates simultaneously across instructional practice, professional culture, and evaluation systems. The emergence of a collaborative teacher culture as a professional learning community confirms previous studies that argue quality improvement is not merely a technical process but a social one, rooted in shared reflection, peer feedback, and collective responsibility for learning outcomes (Rahminawati, 2023; Syafika, 2024). Unlike traditional school management models that emphasize individual teacher autonomy, the findings here demonstrate a clear shift toward structured collegiality, consistent with contemporary theories of collaborative professionalism, and a stronger integration of collaboration into routine school practices.

The sub-finding on collaborative culture strengthens existing arguments that professional learning communities function optimally when collaboration is sustained, reflective, and problem-oriented rather than incidental or administrative (Darwanto et al., 2024; Poulimenakou, 2023). The observed peer coaching, joint lesson planning, and reflective forums resonate with literature that positions teachers as co-learners rather than isolated practitioners. However, this study extends prior work by showing that collaboration is not treated as an additional program but is embedded within CQI mechanisms, suggesting a tighter linkage between quality management systems and professional learning structures than commonly reported in earlier studies (Forsling, 2023; Kaczkó, 2023).

The data-driven evaluation findings strongly support theoretical perspectives that frame evidence-based decision-making as a cornerstone of modern educational quality assurance. The consistent use of attendance records, assessment recapitulations, and learning portfolios mirrors existing research that highlights the importance of systematic documentation in guiding instructional improvement (Korhonen et al., 2024; van Houten, 2023). What distinguishes this finding is the visible integration of documentation into daily instructional planning and supervision, rather than its use as a post hoc accountability tool. This suggests a shift from compliance-oriented evaluation to formative, improvement-oriented data use, which advances current understandings of CQI in basic education contexts.

The findings on improved academic performance and formative supervision further reinforce the literature, indicating that supervision models emphasizing coaching, feedback, and continuous monitoring are more effective than inspection-based approaches (Baharun et al., 2024). The observed alignment between structured lesson delivery, formative assessment, and supportive supervision reflects theoretical models of instructional Leadership that prioritize learning processes over administrative control. This study contributes by empirically demonstrating how CQI principles operationalize instructional Leadership in everyday classroom practice, thereby bridging the gap between abstract management theory and observable instructional behavior.

Theoretically, this study strengthens the argument that CQI should be conceptualized as an integrated system encompassing culture, data, and supervision rather than as a standalone management framework. Practically, the findings imply that school leaders should prioritize collaborative structures, establish routine data-use practices, and redesign supervision as a formative process to sustain academic quality improvement. For policymakers and practitioners, the study underscores that meaningful quality enhancement in elementary education depends not on isolated reforms but on the consistent internalization of CQI principles in daily teaching, evaluation, and professional interactions.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that implementing Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) is critical to strengthening the academic quality culture in elementary schools during the Independent Curriculum era. The most important

lesson drawn from the findings is that isolated programs do not drive sustainable academic improvement; rather, it is the internalization of continuous improvement values in daily school practices. CQI successfully fosters a collaborative professional culture among teachers, encourages systematic use of learning data for instructional decisions, and transforms academic supervision into a formative, coaching-oriented process. These three elements operate synergistically, creating a learning environment where teachers share responsibility for quality, students experience more structured and responsive instruction, and school leaders guide improvement through evidence-based practices. The findings highlight that treating CQI as a cultural framework rather than a technical requirement strengthens teacher professionalism, enhances student engagement, and supports the consistent implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Thus, CQI emerges as a practical pathway for aligning autonomy, accountability, and continuous learning in elementary education.

From a scholarly perspective, this research contributes to educational management literature by extending CQI theory to the context of elementary schools, which have been underexplored relative to secondary and higher education settings. The study's strength lies in its micro-level analysis of how CQI principles materialize in classroom practices, professional learning communities, and supervision routines, offering an integrated cultural-pedagogical perspective rather than a purely administrative one. However, this research is limited by its single-case qualitative Design, which may restrict the generalizability of findings across diverse school contexts. Future research is encouraged to employ comparative or mixed-method approaches across multiple elementary schools to examine variations in CQI implementation and outcomes. Longitudinal studies could also explore how sustained CQI practices influence student achievement, teacher identity, and organizational resilience over time.

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