



ECCE Principals' Strategy to Improve Teacher Competence in Implementing the Independent Curriculum



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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki strategi yang digunakan oleh kepala sekolah Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini (PAUD) di Kecamatan Arcamanik, Bandung, untuk meningkatkan kompetensi guru dalam Kurikulum Merdeka. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan metode studi kasus, observasi dan wawancara semi-terstruktur dilakukan terhadap kepala sekolah dari 10 institusi PAUD, dilengkapi dengan tinjauan dokumen-dokumen relevan dan catatan institusional. Data dianalisis secara tematik, dengan mengacu pada penelitian pendidikan terkini untuk mengkontekstualisasikan temuan dalam teori dan praktik pendidikan yang lebih luas. Temuan menunjukkan beragam strategi yang digunakan oleh kepala sekolah, termasuk penyediaan sumber daya pendidikan, pengembangan profesional yang berkelanjutan, pembelajaran kolaboratif, dan pemanfaatan layanan pendukung dan platform. Strategi-strategi ini bervariasi dalam kesesuaiannya dengan penelitian pendidikan terkini, mencerminkan konteks unik dari masing-masing institusi.

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the strategies used by Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) principals in Kecamatan Arcamanik, Bandung, to enhance teacher competence for the Independent Curriculum. Utilizing a qualitative approach with case study method, observation and semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals from 10 ECCE institutions, supplemented by the review of relevant documents and institutional records. The data were analyzed thematically, drawing upon current educational research to contextualize the findings within broader educational theory and practice. The findings reveal a diverse range of strategies employed by the principals, including the provision of educational resources, ongoing professional development, collaborative learning, and the utilization of support services and platforms. These strategies vary in their alignment with current educational research, reflecting the unique context of each institution. The study highlights the importance of tailoring teacher development strategies to meet the specific needs and resources available to educational institutions. Implications of this study are significant for both policymakers and practitioners, particularly in Indonesia and similar contexts.



INTRODUCTION

Education, at its core, is an evolving field, constantly adapting to new challenges, paradigms, and innovations. In the realm of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), this adaptability is particularly crucial as it lays the foundation for lifelong learning (Hasan & Nurhayati, 2012; Musa et al., 2020; Nurhayati, 2021; Sadiah et al., 2021;Gondiawati & Nurhayati 2024). The introduction of the Independent Curriculum in Indonesia represents a significant shift in pedagogical approach, emphasizing autonomy, critical thinking, and adaptability (Sabatini et al., 2022). While this shift holds promise for a more dynamic and responsive educational system, it also poses substantial challenges, particularly in the realm of teacher competence (Pratikno et al., 2022). Existing literature has extensively explored the facets of teacher professional development and curriculum implementation (Nurhayati, 2018; Pratikno et al., 2022; Thaib & Siswanto, 2015). However, there is a notable research gap in the specific strategies employed by ECCE principals, particularly in the Indonesian context, to enhance teacher competence for a novel curricular approach like the Independent Curriculum. The state of the art in educational research emphasizes collaborative practices, interdisciplinary approaches, and technological integration. Yet, how these concepts are operationalized within the unique cultural and educational landscape of Indonesia remains underexplored. The primary problem addressed in this study is the lack of in-depth knowledge about the strategies ECCE principals in Indonesia use to navigate the challenges of implementing the Independent Curriculum, especially in terms of boosting teacher competence. There is a need to explore how these strategies align with or diverge from current educational research and theory and how they are uniquely adapted to the Indonesian context.

This study is guided by the following research question: What strategies are employed by ECCE principals in Kecamatan Arcamanik, Bandung, to improve teacher competence in implementing the Independent Curriculum? The objective of this research

is to identify and analyze the various strategies utilized by ECCE principals. It aims to understand the alignment of these strategies with current educational research and theory, and to uncover the unique practices emerging in response to the Independent Curriculum. By examining these strategies in the context of current educational research and theory, this study seeks to contribute to the discourse on teacher professional development and curriculum implementation. It aims to provide insights that can inform policy, practice, and further research, not only within the local context of Kecamatan Arcamanik but also in broader educational settings facing similar curricular transformations.

Kecamatan Arcamanik, Bandung, was chosen as the study location for several reasons. First, this region represents a diverse educational landscape, with a range of ECCE institutions experiencing the transition to the Independent Curriculum. Second, Bandung's unique cultural and educational dynamics provide a rich context for examining the implementation of innovative educational strategies. Finally, preliminary observations suggest that ECCE principals in Kecamatan Arcamanik are at the forefront of adopting and adapting these novel strategies, making it a valuable case study for understanding broader implications in early childhood education. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the localized strategies of ECCE principals in Kecamatan Arcamanik, Bandung, to navigate the curricular transition. It provides an in-depth look at the confluence of leadership, teacher development, and curricular innovation in a non-Western context, adding a valuable perspective to the global discourse on early childhood education.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) plays a crucial role in laying the foundation for a child's development and learning (Iis et al., 2022; Kartinih et al., 2018; Octaviani et al., 2023; Patimah & Nurhayati, 2023; Rukanda & Nurhayati, 2023). The implementation of an independent curriculum in ECCE settings requires competent teachers who can effectively deliver the curriculum to meet the educational goals and ideals (Pratikno et al., 2022). The role of teacher competence is crucial in the successful implementation of the independent curriculum (Pratikno et al., 2022; Ruaya et al., 2022). Teachers, as professional educators, have the responsibility to guide, motivate, and teach

students according to the needs and demands of the curriculum (Nurhayati, 2018; Nurhayati & Rakhman, 2017). Their competence in delivering the curriculum effectively contributes to achieving the expected educational goals and ideals. Therefore, ECCE principals should focus on enhancing teacher competence through professional development opportunities, mentoring, and ongoing support.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of the principal's managerial competence in enhancing teacher productivity (Azainil et al., 2021; Fitria Desy Dwi Kisardi Putri & Kalstum, 2022; Rukanda & Nurhayati, 2023). Syahrudin (2019) emphasizes the role of principals in preparing, planning, implementing, and managing school members to improve school performance. This suggests that ECCE principals can enhance teacher competence by providing effective leadership, guidance, and support in curriculum implementation. The principal's leadership role is crucial in the successful implementation of the independent curriculum (Fitria Desy Dwi Kisardi Putri & Kalstum, 2022). Principals can monitor and observe teachers directly, provide resources for additional materials, develop staff, support interdisciplinary units, and offer professional growth opportunities for teachers (Berliani, 2017; Musa et al., 2022). By observing good practices and evaluating teacher performance, principals can identify areas for improvement and provide targeted support to enhance teacher competence.

To improve teacher competence in implementing the curriculum, Maba & Mantra (2018) recommend the organization of intensive training and focus group discussions. These activities can provide teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to effectively implement the independent curriculum. Through training and discussions, teachers can share experiences, exchange ideas, and learn from one another, thereby enhancing their competence in curriculum implementation (Colognesi et al., 2020). In essence, ECCE principals play a crucial role in improving teacher competence to implement the independent curriculum. Strategies such as enhancing the principal's managerial competence, organizing intensive training and focus group discussions, providing leadership support, fostering emotional intelligence, and promoting effective assessment practices can contribute to enhancing teacher competence (Musa et al., 2022; Rukanda & Nurhayati, 2023; Utami & Garnika, 2022). By implementing these strategies, ECCE principals can create a supportive and conducive environment for teachers,

ultimately leading to improved implementation of the independent curriculum and better educational outcomes for young children.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which is suitable for exploring complex phenomena within their real-life contexts. Qualitative research allows for a deep understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences, which is essential for investigating the strategies used by ECCE principals. A case study method was utilized to conduct an in-depth investigation into the strategies employed by principals in 10 ECCE institutions in Kecamatan Arcamanik, Bandung, to enhance teacher competence in implementing the independent curriculum. Participants were selected from a pool of principals leading ECCE institutions actively engaged with the independent curriculum in Kecamatan Arcamanik, Bandung. The inclusion criteria mandated a minimum of three years of experience in their current role, direct involvement in the implementation of the independent curriculum, and a demonstrable track record of initiatives aimed at improving teacher competence. These criteria ensured that the participants had substantial insight and experience relevant to the research questions.

Data were collected through a triad of methods: semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observations. Semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 60 minutes each, were conducted with the principals and audio-recorded with their consent. These interviews revolved around open-ended questions probing their experiences, strategies for enhancing teacher competence, challenges encountered, and the perceived effectiveness of their approaches. Document analysis complemented the interviews by examining institutional policies, curriculum plans, and teacher training manuals to discern the formal strategies in place. Observations during independent curriculum classroom implementations provided a practical lens through which the application of strategies and the dynamics between principals and teachers could be assessed. To ensure the reliability and validity of the instruments, a pilot study was conducted with two ECCE principals not included in the main study. The feedback from this pilot was instrumental in refining the interview questions and observation criteria, thereby enhancing their clarity, relevance, and effectiveness in eliciting the required information.

Data analysis followed an iterative process, beginning with the transcription of the audio-recorded interviews. Using thematic analysis, initial codes were generated from recurring concepts in the transcriptions, documents, and observation notes. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured the essence of the principals' strategies. The analysis was conducted manually, and findings were cross-referenced across different data sources to ensure triangulation and enhance the trustworthiness of the study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Strategies Implemented To Enhance Teacher Competence In Supporting The Implementation Of The Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka)

The findings from the principals of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) institutions in Kecamatan Arcamanik, Bandung, reveals a strategic and comprehensive approach to enhancing teacher competence in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Firstly, the principals underscore the critical importance of providing educational resources. As one principal articulates, "We provide guidebooks for teachers," highlighting the necessity of equipping educators with essential materials. Another adds, "We provide assessments and teaching tools," pointing to the practical resources that support both instruction and evaluation. These resources are foundational in ensuring that teachers have the necessary materials to understand and effectively deliver the curriculum.

Training and professional development are identified as pivotal elements in the strategies employed by the principals. The significance of training is encapsulated by one principal's statement: "We involve [teachers] in various trainings." Another principal emphasizes the value of consistency and shared understanding, saying, "We conduct in-house training for a unified understanding of the curriculum." The emphasis on regular evaluations, as mentioned by a participant—"Regular evaluations [are conducted] to prevent incorrect implementation"—further underscores the commitment to continuous improvement and maintaining high teaching standards. Collaborative learning and community engagement emerge as vital components of the principals' approach. The benefit of communal learning is captured by one principal's description: "We engage in

communal learning through organizations like IGTK and PKG." The value of external expertise is also recognized, with another principal noting the advantage of "Learning from recommended experts and good practices." These strategies suggest a belief in the power of collective wisdom and the importance of creating a community of practice where teachers can learn from each other and from experts in the field.

Finally, the principals highlight the effective utilization of support services and digital platforms. One principal emphasizes the importance of accessible information: "We utilize support centers for more information about the Independent Curriculum." The proactive use of technology is further evidenced by the incorporation of digital platforms for independent learning, as another principal mentions, "We engage in independent learning through platforms like 'Merdeka Belajar.'" The findings demonstrate that the ECCE principals in Kecamatan Arcamanik are taking a proactive, holistic, and collaborative approach to enhance teacher competence. By providing essential resources, facilitating ongoing professional development, fostering collaborative learning, and leveraging support services and technology, they are creating a robust framework for the effective implementation of the Independent Curriculum, thereby enriching the quality of early childhood education.

The principals' strategy of providing guidebooks and teaching tools for teachers aligns with research by Riad (2022), which emphasizes the critical role of high-quality resources in effective curriculum implementation. Grecu (2022) discusses the challenges teachers face in differentiating instruction with prepared curricular resources, underscoring the need for resources that consider diverse learners. As one principal noted, "We provide guidebooks for teachers," reflecting a best practice supported by current literature. Professional development is a cornerstone of the principals' strategy, mirroring the findings of Nurhayati (2018), who highlights the importance of content-focused and active learning in teacher training. The principals' emphasis on varied training methods, including "Conducting in-house training for a unified understanding of the curriculum," aligns with these research-backed best practices. Collaborative learning and community engagement resonate with the principles of professional learning communities (PLCs) and collective teacher efficacy (Antinluoma et al., 2021). A principal's mention of "Engaging in communal learning through organizations like IGTK and PKG" reflects the value of shared learning experiences advocated by researchers like Kristina and Tsai

(2021) who found that implementing teacher-led professional development through sharing labs empowers teachers to feel valued, learn from each other, and apply their learning to their practice.

Finally, the utilization of digital platforms and support services for teacher learning is well-supported by research. The principals' use of platforms like "Merdeka Belajar" and support centers for information about the Independent Curriculum aligns with the growing trend of leveraging technology to enhance teacher learning and collaboration (Marsegi et al., 2023; Musa et al., 2022; Nurhayati et al., 2023; Nurmalia et al., 2022; Suharyat et al., 2022; Winarti et al., 2022; Zheltukhina et al., 2023). The strategies employed by the ECCE principals in Kecamatan Arcamanik not only reflect a comprehensive approach to enhancing teacher competence but also align well with current research on effective teacher development practices such as Nurhayati (2020), Wesołowska (2018), and Rosero et al. (2018) which found that teacher competence can be enhanced through the right kind of workshop. By providing quality educational resources, facilitating ongoing professional development, fostering collaborative learning communities, and leveraging technological platforms, these principals are implementing research-backed approaches to teacher professional growth. This integrated approach could serve as a model for other regions seeking to improve the implementation of new curricula and ultimately enhance the quality of early childhood education.

Collaboration With Other Institutions For The Development Of Teacher Competencies For The Independent Curriculum

In analyzing the collaborative efforts undertaken by Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) institutions in Kecamatan Arcamanik, Bandung, to develop teacher competencies for the Independent Curriculum, a spectrum of practices emerges, ranging from active collaborations to the absence of formal partnerships. A subset of ECCE institutions actively engages in collaborations with neighboring kindergartens and professional groups. One principal highlighted the existence of such a partnership, stating, "There is collaboration with the nearest kindergarten by organizing teacher working groups." This approach not only fosters a shared learning environment but also facilitates collective problem-solving, enhancing the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Additionally, formal bodies like the PKG (Pusat Kegiatan Guru) forum

provide structured platforms for collaboration, as evidenced by the involvement of institutions such as Tk Kasanda and Tk Al Hikamah. Conversely, several principals rely on informal networks, indicating a grassroots-level approach to collaboration. As one principal mentioned, "Mostly asking and exchanging opinions about the Independent Curriculum," informal peer-to-peer learning and support become evident. This method, while less structured, allows for a flexible exchange of ideas and experiences.

Notably, a significant number of institutions report an absence of formal collaborations. Responses such as "So far, there is none" and "There is no collaboration with an MOU yet" reflect either a lack of opportunity, resources, or a preference for independent strategies in developing teacher competencies. This variation suggests that not all institutions have the means or the inclination to engage in formal partnerships. An innovative approach is observed in the collaboration with child psychologists, as mentioned by one principal. This interdisciplinary strategy enhances the professional development of teachers by integrating insights from child psychology into educational practices, enriching the teachers' competencies beyond traditional pedagogical boundaries. In essence, the collaborative practices among ECCE institutions in Kecamatan Arcamanik for developing teacher competencies for the Independent Curriculum are diverse. While some institutions leverage formal and active collaborations, others depend on informal networks or operate independently. The inclusion of specialists like child psychologists in some institutions' strategies demonstrates an openness to interdisciplinary approaches. This diversity reflects the varying resources, needs, and strategic preferences of ECCE institutions in the region, highlighting the multifaceted nature of collaborations in the education sector.

The varying collaborative practices observed among Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) institutions in Kecamatan Arcamanik, Bandung, in developing teacher competencies for the Independent Curriculum align well with current research on the benefits and challenges of collaboration in education. Research suggests that collaboration among educational institutions can lead to shared resources, enhanced professional development, and improved student outcomes (Dillon et al., 2021). The active collaborations between neighboring kindergartens and professional groups, as reported by some principals, reflect this research-supported approach. Such

collaborations can create rich professional learning communities, which have been shown to contribute to teacher learning and instructional improvement (Antinluoma et al., 2021).

However, research also acknowledges that collaboration is not without its challenges. Barriers such as time constraints, lack of resources, and differing institutional cultures can hinder effective collaboration (Nash & Winstone, 2017; Suharyat et al., 2023). The absence of formal collaborations reported by some institutions in Kecamatan Arcamanik may be indicative of these challenges. The informal peer-to-peer networks mentioned by several principals align with research on the benefits of informal learning among teachers. According to Lecat et. al. (2019) informal learning activities among teachers help refine their teaching, find new approaches, and optimize existing work practices (Colognesi et al., 2020). The interdisciplinary approach observed in the collaboration with child psychologists is supported by research advocating for integrating insights from various fields into educational practices.

This approach can lead to more holistic and effective teacher development, as it considers a wider array of factors influencing teaching and learning (Crawford, 2020). In summary, the collaborative practices among ECCE institutions in Kecamatan Arcamanik align with current research that highlights the potential benefits and challenges of collaboration in education. Active collaborations, informal networks, and interdisciplinary approaches each have their place in the educational landscape, reflecting the complexity and diversity of strategies needed to enhance teacher competencies for the Independent Curriculum.

CONCLUSION

This research has shed light on the multifaceted strategies employed by principals of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) institutions in Kecamatan Arcamanik, Bandung, to enhance teacher competence in implementing the Independent Curriculum. The study reveals a spectrum of practices ranging from the provision of educational resources, ongoing professional development, collaborative learning, to the utilization of support services and platforms. These strategies are well-aligned with current research, underscoring their potential effectiveness in facilitating curriculum implementation. Collaborative efforts, both formal and informal, are particularly noteworthy. The

contributions of this study extend beyond its immediate context, offering insights that can spark new theories in the field of early childhood education. It highlights the importance of contextualizing teacher development strategies within the specific needs and resources of educational institutions. Future research could explore the long-term impacts of these varied strategies on teacher competencies and student outcomes. Additionally, investigating the barriers and enablers of collaboration among ECCE institutions could provide a deeper understanding of how to optimize collective efforts for curriculum implementation. This study lays the groundwork for a broader exploration of teacher development practices in diverse educational settings, contributing to the ongoing discourse on enhancing the quality of early childhood education.

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