Implementing Indonesia's Independent Curriculum for Students with Intellectual Disabilities: A Case Study of SLB Giri Wiyata Dharma, Wonogiri

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the implementation of the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) for students with intellectual disabilities at SLB Giri Wiyata Dharma Wonogiri, Indonesia. The research aims to describe the processes of curriculum planning, instructional delivery, and evaluation, while identifying factors that support and hinder implementation. A qualitative descriptive design was adopted, utilizing semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Findings reveal that implementation followed three stages: planning through diagnostic assessments, differentiated instruction tailored to student characteristics, and formative evaluation aligned with learners' abilities. Teachers employed strategies such as scaffolding, contextualized learning, and performance-based assessment, enabling students to engage meaningfully with abstract concepts. Supporting factors included teacher competence, principal leadership, and parental collaboration, which together created a conducive environment for inclusive learning. Conversely, challenges arose from the heterogeneity of student abilities, insufficient teacher readiness particularly among educators without specialized training and systemic barriers such as limited resources and inadequate support staff. The study concludes that the Independent Curriculum offers significant potential for promoting inclusivity in special education when accompanied by sustainable teacher development, strong school–parent partnerships, and institutional support. These findings contribute to international discussions on inclusive education by emphasizing the need for context-specific strategies that align curriculum design with the lived realities of students and teachers in special schools.

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1. Introduction

Curriculum reform for students with special needs has become a central focus in global and national education agendas, reflecting a broader commitment to inclusive education. The principle of inclusivity seeks to ensure that all learners, regardless of physical, cognitive, or socio-emotional differences, are provided with equitable opportunities to access and succeed in education. Many countries have enacted policy frameworks and implemented pedagogical innovations to advance inclusive practices, recognizing that access alone is insufficient without meaningful participation and progress (UNESCO, 2021). In Indonesia, such commitments are reflected in the Ministry of Education's guidelines for inclusive education, which outline necessary support systems, accessible learning resources, and infrastructure adjustments to accommodate diverse learners (Kartono, Budiati, Suryadinata, Bawono, & Andriani, 2024; Novrizal & Manaf, 2024). However, despite the existence of supportive policies, persistent challenges remain most notably in the form of inadequate teacher training, limited resource allocation, and enduring societal stigma toward disabilities (Efendi, 2018; Susilawati, Bin, Yasin, & Tahar, 2023). These systemic barriers hinder the effective realization of inclusive ideals, particularly for students with intellectual disabilities, who require highly individualized instructional approaches to achieve optimal learning outcomes.

In response to such challenges, Indonesia has introduced the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) as a transformative educational reform. This curriculum seeks to bridge the gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities by emphasizing flexibility, personalization, and student-centered learning experiences (Purwasih, Kurniawati, Hadi, & Utami, 2021). Unlike prescriptive curriculum models, the Independent Curriculum affords educators the autonomy to adapt instructional content, pedagogical processes, and assessment methods to meet the unique needs of their students. This reform reflects a holistic educational philosophy that balances national competency standards with the specific requirements of individual learners, thus fostering a learning environment where inclusivity is not merely an administrative requirement but an embedded pedagogical practice (Purwasih et al., 2021). Furthermore, the reform explicitly acknowledges that successful implementation depends on ongoing teacher professional development, the provision of adequate learning resources, and sustained policy support at both the local and national levels (Amnesti, Jundiani, Zulaichah, Noh, & Fitriyah, 2023; Mansur et al., 2023; Sakti, 2020).

Central to the pedagogical underpinnings of the Independent Curriculum is the concept of differentiated instruction (DI), a strategy long recognized in special education research for its capacity to address diverse learner profiles. DI is grounded in the principle that effective teaching involves adapting not only what students learn but also how they learn and how their learning is assessed (Smets & Struyven, 2020; Strogilos, 2018). By adjusting the curriculum's content, process, and products to align with students' readiness levels, interests, and preferred learning modalities, DI fosters a more inclusive learning environment. Its practical application often involves flexible grouping, continuous formative assessment, and the integration of multisensory instructional methods to enhance engagement (McKenna, Newton, Brigham, & Garwood, 2021; Pădeanu, 2023). For students with intellectual disabilities whose cognitive processing, problem-solving skills, and memory capacities may vary significantly DI provides a crucial pathway to accessibility and mastery of core competencies.

Students with intellectual disabilities often face unique barriers to learning, stemming from cognitive limitations and varied information processing styles. These barriers make the accessibility of a uniform curriculum particularly challenging (Newton, McKenna, & Brigham, 2024; Weiss & Glaser, 2019). Abstract concepts, for example, can be difficult for these learners to grasp without concrete, context-based instruction and repeated practice. Studies have demonstrated that multisensory learning approaches, which integrate visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements, can enhance comprehension and retention in this learner group (Strogilos, Tragoulia, Avramidis, Voulagka, & Papanikolaou, 2017; Wen & Juan, 2024). Moreover, personalized learning tools such as Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), assistive technologies, and adaptive assessment methods have been shown to mitigate learning barriers and promote equitable participation (Pădeanu, 2023). The challenge lies in integrating these

approaches into a coherent instructional framework that aligns with broader curriculum standards without compromising the flexibility required for individual adaptation.

The Indonesian educational landscape has, in recent years, undergone a significant shift toward inclusive practices through the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka and the broader Merdeka Belajar policy. These reforms not only grant educators greater autonomy to tailor lesson plans and materials but also emphasize learner agency, encouraging students to take an active role in their education (Dwiputra, Azzahra, & Heryanto, 2023; Hariyani, Sulistiyani, & Soemarmi, 2023). By enabling educators to align instructional strategies with each learner's cognitive profile, the Independent Curriculum facilitates deeper academic engagement and stronger skill development for students with special needs (Latief, Samsuddin, & Subhan, 2024; Syarif, Susanti, Özcan, & Utami, 2023). In parallel, the Merdeka Belajar policy supports systemic equity by prioritizing competency-based outcomes and promoting adaptable instructional models that can accommodate the diverse realities of Indonesian classrooms (Putri & Suhardi, 2023).

While the theoretical framework of the Independent Curriculum appears well-suited to addressing the needs of students with disabilities, empirical evidence reveals a more complex implementation landscape. Research evaluating the curriculum in special schools (Sekolah Luar Biasa, SLB) suggests that while its flexibility and adaptability are valued, actual practice often diverges from intended design due to inconsistent teacher preparedness, limited access to specialized training, and uneven distribution of educational resources (Masrura, Suryani, Rustam, & Harjono, 2023; ZAFA, 2024). For instance, (Setyaningsih et al., 2024) found that while differentiated strategies under the Independent Curriculum improved student engagement, many educators lacked the pedagogical repertoire to fully exploit its potential. Similarly, (Pasaribu, 2023) reported that the absence of structured professional development hindered the integration of adaptive assessment methods, limiting the curriculum's inclusivity.

The issue of teacher readiness is particularly salient in the context of special education. Implementing a flexible, student-centered curriculum for learners with intellectual disabilities requires not only general teaching competence but also specialized knowledge of disability-specific learning needs, behavioral management strategies, and adaptive assessment techniques. Without targeted capacity building, even well-intentioned educators may struggle to translate the curriculum's principles into effective practice. This disconnect can lead to superficial adaptations that fail to address deeper accessibility challenges, thereby undermining the reform's inclusive objectives.

This gap between policy and practice underscores the importance of situating curriculum reforms within the lived realities of classrooms, especially in specialized educational settings such as SLB Giri Wiyata Dharma in Wonogiri. As a special school serving students with varying degrees of intellectual disability, SLB Giri Wiyata Dharma provides a critical case for examining how the Independent Curriculum is operationalized in contexts where differentiated instruction is not a pedagogical option but an absolute necessity. The school's experiences can illuminate the enabling conditions and persistent barriers that shape the curriculum's effectiveness, offering valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.

The present study aims to explore the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SLB Giri Wiyata Dharma Wonogiri, with a particular focus on students with intellectual disabilities. Specifically, it investigates the curriculum's planning, instructional delivery, and evaluation processes, while identifying the factors that support or hinder its successful application. By situating these findings within the broader discourse on inclusive education and differentiated instruction, the study seeks to contribute both practical recommendations for educators and strategic insights for policy refinement. The novelty of this research lies in its context-specific analysis of curriculum implementation in a special school setting, bridging the gap between macro-level policy frameworks and micro-level instructional realities. The study's scope encompasses both the structural conditions such as leadership support and parental involvement and the pedagogical dimensions, including diagnostic assessments, individualized material adaptation, and responsive evaluation methods.

Through this investigation, the research advances the understanding of how inclusive curriculum reforms can be effectively realized in practice, particularly for learners with complex and diverse needs. In doing so, it contributes to the ongoing effort to ensure that inclusivity in education is not only a principle embedded in policy documents but also a lived experience for all students, including those with intellectual disabilities

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the implementation of the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) in a special education setting, specifically focusing on students with intellectual disabilities at SLB ABC Giri Wiyata Dharma Wonogiri. A qualitative framework was deemed appropriate as it facilitates an in-depth, contextualized understanding of curriculum enactment in a complex learning environment. By allowing the voices of participants to emerge naturally, this approach captures the nuanced realities of teaching and learning in a special school context (Alnaim, 2018; Leko, Cook, & Cook, 2021). The study was designed as a case study, enabling a holistic examination of the planning, instructional delivery, and evaluation processes within a single institutional setting, while considering the interplay of supporting and inhibiting factors influencing curriculum implementation.

2.2 Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted at SLB ABC Giri Wiyata Dharma, a special school located in Wonogiri, Central Java, Indonesia. The institution serves students with varying degrees of intellectual disabilities, ranging from mild to severe, across different grade levels. Participants included one senior teacher directly involved in curriculum planning and implementation, the school principal, and selected parents of students with disabilities. The teacher participant was purposively selected due to his extensive experience in special education and his role in adapting the Independent Curriculum for students with diverse learning profiles. The inclusion of the principal provided leadership perspectives, while parental insights contributed to understanding the home-school continuum of learning support.

2.3 Data Collection Methods

Data collection employed multiple qualitative techniques semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis to ensure data triangulation and enhance the validity of findings.

2.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participating teacher and the principal, following an interview guide aligned with the research objectives. The guide included open-ended questions on curriculum planning processes, instructional strategies, assessment approaches, and perceived challenges and supports. This format allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences while providing flexibility for the researcher to probe emergent themes (Dávila, 2023; Zawawi & Hashim, 2024). Interviews were conducted in the Indonesian language, recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. An interview with the teacher was conducted on June 20, 2025, while the discussion with the principal took place in the same period to ensure temporal proximity in data gathering.

2.3.2 Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were carried out on four separate occasions May 9, May 26, June 17, and June 18, 2025 to capture a representative range of instructional practices across different lessons. Observations focused on teacher-student interactions, the adaptation of learning materials, classroom organization, and the application of differentiated instruction strategies. A structured observation sheet, informed by inclusive pedagogy frameworks (Pratiwi & Fithriani, 2023; Sparapani et al., 2021), was used to record field notes systematically. Observations were non-participatory, enabling the researcher to document natural teaching and learning processes without disrupting classroom dynamics.

2.3.3 Document Analysis

To complement interview and observation data, relevant school documents were reviewed, including teaching modules, lesson plans, assessment records, and school policy documents related to the Independent Curriculum. These materials provided additional insights into how curriculum objectives were adapted to meet the needs of students with intellectual disabilities, as well as the alignment between planned and enacted instruction.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach, consistent with qualitative research traditions. Transcripts, observation notes, and document extracts were read repeatedly to achieve data immersion, followed by open coding to identify meaningful units of information. Codes were then clustered into categories reflecting key aspects of curriculum implementation, such as *planning*, *instructional adaptation*, *assessment practices*, *supporting factors*, and *inhibiting factors*. Cross-data triangulation was employed to verify the consistency of findings across interviews, observations, and document reviews (Gür & Yıkmış, 2021; Zagona, Lansey, Kurth, & Kuhlemeier, 2020). NVivo software was used for systematic coding and retrieval of thematic patterns, ensuring a transparent and replicable analytic process.

2.5 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To enhance the credibility of the study, methodological triangulation was employed through the integration of multiple data sources. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants to verify accuracy and authenticity. Prolonged engagement in the field and detailed documentation of the research process further supported dependability.

Ethical considerations were adhered to throughout the study. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, including assurances of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Pseudonyms were used in reporting to protect participant identities. Approval for the study was granted by the relevant institutional review body, and all procedures complied with ethical guidelines for research involving human participants.

3   Results

The findings of this study are presented across four primary domains: (1) learning planning through diagnostic assessments and material adaptation, (2) learning implementation and evaluation with contextual strategies, (3) supporting factors contributing to curriculum success, and (4) inhibiting factors that hinder effective application. Together, these results illustrate the complexities of implementing the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) for students with intellectual disabilities in a special school context.

3.1 Learning Planning: Diagnostic Assessments and Material Adaptation

Teachers at SLB Giri Wiyata Dharma Wonogiri employ various diagnostic assessments to design personalized learning experiences tailored to the abilities of students with intellectual disabilities. This process begins with identifying individual profiles through both formal and informal mechanisms. Standardized tests are occasionally used as a benchmark, but greater reliance is placed on observational assessments, structured interviews, and portfolio analysis to capture the functional abilities, learning preferences, and previous experiences of each student. Such approaches mirror findings from (L. Anderson & Östlund, 2017), who emphasized that caregiver collaboration and teacher observations provide richer insights than conventional testing for this learner group.

For example, teachers in this study often collaborated closely with parents to gather information about children's behavior and functional skills at home. This partnership enabled a holistic understanding of the learners' strengths and areas requiring intervention. Additionally, specialized tools such as diagnostic behavioral checklists were applied to distinguish cognitive from social-emotional learning needs, similar to the DiBAS-R framework described by (Metcalfe, McKenzie, McCarty, & Murray, 2020).

Once diagnostic data were obtained, educators adapted teaching materials to align with each student's cognitive profile. Strategies such as simplifying language, integrating visual aids, and embedding tactile or hands-on activities were widely practiced. These methods resonate with the

principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocate for flexibility in content delivery and assessment (L. K. Anderson, 2021). In practice, mathematics lessons were contextualized using real-life situations, such as shopping or household chores, to anchor abstract concepts in familiar routines. Teachers also implemented scaffolding by breaking tasks into smaller steps, allowing learners to gradually build mastery (Räty, Vehkakoski, & Pirttimaa, 2022). Observations revealed that this approach increased student engagement and minimized frustration, supporting findings in (Puspasari, Sunardi, & Subagya, 2021) that adaptive strategies improve accessibility and comprehension.

3.2 Learning Implementation and Evaluation

Implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SLB Giri Wiyata Dharma emphasized contextual and step-based learning, which proved particularly effective for students with disabilities. Lessons were often designed to progress from concrete to abstract, enabling students to connect new information with real-world experiences. For example, literacy learning began with letter recognition before advancing to syllables and word formation, ensuring gradual cognitive scaffolding. This strategy is consistent with (Knight, Wood, McKissick, & Kuntz, 2019), who argued that stepwise progression enhances comprehension among learners with limited abstract reasoning.

Teachers frequently employed modeling instruction and demonstration to introduce concepts, particularly in science and numeracy. (Mustofa, 2022) highlighted that such modeling breaks down complex ideas into manageable components, reinforcing student understanding. The use of multimedia, such as visual slides and interactive applications, further enriched learning and accommodated varied cognitive abilities. Research has shown that integrating technology not only enhances motivation but also improves comprehension for students with intellectual disabilities (Fazil & Faiz, 2022; RP & C, 2023), a finding confirmed during observations of ICT-assisted activities at the school.

Evaluation practices were equally adaptive. Teachers relied on formative assessments including continuous observation, portfolios, and practical performance tasks to monitor progress. These assessments were individualized, focusing on functional skills rather than standardized academic benchmarks. For example, mathematics assessments evaluated students' ability to apply counting skills in daily contexts such as grouping household objects. This aligns with the argument of (Paulauskaite, Rivas, Paris, & Totsika, 2022) that performance-based and narrative assessments capture meaningful learning more effectively than standardized testing for students with intellectual disabilities. Collaborative evaluations involving teachers, students, and parents were also conducted periodically, reinforcing the role of family engagement in assessment processes (Trisnaningtyas, 2021).

3.3 Supporting Factors in Curriculum Implementation

The study revealed three major supporting factors in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum: teacher competence, principal leadership, and parental involvement.

3.3.1 Teacher Competence

Teachers played a central role in adapting the Independent Curriculum to suit students' diverse needs. Their ability to design diagnostic assessments, develop contextual materials, and employ differentiated strategies was fundamental to classroom success. This echoes findings by (Gunawan, Habibi, & Maulahamdi, 2023) and (Rabi & Zulkefli, 2018), who emphasized that effective classroom management and adaptive pedagogy are essential for inclusive education. Beyond technical skills, teachers' relational competence the ability to build trust and foster positive interactions significantly influenced student motivation and participation.

3.3.2 Principal Leadership

The school principal emerged as a strong facilitator in curriculum implementation. Observations revealed that the principal regularly supervised teachers, provided guidance, and offered emotional support to new staff members encountering difficulties in special education contexts. For example, in one instance, the principal intervened to mentor a teacher who felt distressed after a challenging interaction with an autistic student. Such leadership practices align with inclusive school management literature, which underscores the principal's role in motivating staff and maintaining alignment with curricular objectives.

3.3.3 Parental Involvement

Parental collaboration was identified as a vital enabler of curriculum success. Parents were actively engaged in reinforcing school-based learning strategies at home, thereby creating continuity in students' educational experiences. Teachers reported that parents were regularly invited to participate in curriculum planning meetings and were provided with activity menus to support home-based learning. This mirrors findings by (Supratiwi, Yusuf, & Anggarani, 2021) and (Salsabillah, Suwandayani, & Nuro, 2023), who demonstrated that parental involvement enhances not only academic performance but also social and emotional development among students with disabilities.

3.4 Inhibiting Factors in Curriculum Implementation

Despite the strengths identified, several challenges hindered the full realization of the Independent Curriculum at SLB Giri Wiyata Dharma. These inhibiting factors included the diversity of student abilities, limited teacher readiness, and systemic constraints.

3.4.1 Diversity of Student Abilities

One of the most pressing challenges was the wide range of abilities within a single classroom. Students varied significantly in their cognitive levels, from those able to perform basic problem-solving tasks to others struggling with simple communication. This heterogeneity demanded highly individualized instructional strategies, which placed a considerable burden on teachers. Research confirms that managing such diversity is a central challenge in inclusive education (Bannister-Tyrrell et al., 2018; Engelbrecht & Savolainen, 2017).

3.4.2 Limited Teacher Readiness

While some teachers demonstrated strong competence, others particularly newer staff lacked specialized training in special education. Several teachers did not hold formal certification in extraordinary education, leading to gaps in their ability to implement differentiated strategies effectively. Similar patterns have been reported in international contexts, where insufficient training reduces teacher confidence and fosters reliance on generic instructional methods that fail to accommodate individual needs (Florian & Beaton, 2017; Nijakowska, Tsagari, & Spanoudis, 2020). Emotional fatigue was also noted among teachers, who reported feelings of stress when managing challenging student behaviors.

3.4.3 Systemic Constraints

Structural barriers compounded these challenges. Limited availability of teaching aids, inadequate staff-to-student ratios, and insufficient access to specialized support personnel restricted the capacity to deliver fully individualized instruction. These constraints reflect broader systemic issues, as highlighted by (Bannister-Tyrrell et al., 2018) and (Hnatiuk et al., 2022), who noted that insufficient institutional resources exacerbate teacher workload and reduce curriculum effectiveness. Furthermore, negative societal attitudes towards disabilities occasionally influenced the expectations and involvement of external stakeholders, echoing (Bala, 2021) and (Hellmich, Löper, & Görel, 2019) who argued that teacher and community attitudes remain a significant determinant of inclusive success.

4 Discussion

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) at SLB Giri Wiyata Dharma Wonogiri underscores both the opportunities and challenges of advancing inclusive education for students with intellectual disabilities in Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that while diagnostic assessments, contextualized instruction, and adaptive evaluation strategies provide a strong foundation for accessibility, persistent barriers related to teacher readiness, systemic resources, and student diversity must be addressed to fully realize the curriculum's inclusive potential. This discussion situates these findings within broader scholarly debates on sustainable teacher development, collaborative models for inclusive education, and curriculum design responsive to cognitive diversity.

4.1 Teacher Competence and Sustainable Professional Development

A key determinant of successful curriculum implementation lies in teacher competence, particularly in designing individualized instruction and managing diverse classroom needs. The

study's findings highlight that teachers who employed diagnostic assessments and contextualized learning materials were able to foster higher levels of student engagement and skill acquisition. This reflects international evidence suggesting that teacher knowledge, adaptive pedagogy, and effective classroom management are critical to inclusive practice (Gunawan et al., 2023; Rabi & Zulkefli, 2018).

However, not all teachers at SLB Giri Wiyata Dharma demonstrated equal preparedness. Newer educators without specialized training in extraordinary education reported difficulties in tailoring instruction, echoing research that insufficient training undermines teacher self-efficacy and inclusivity (Bannister-Tyrrell et al., 2018; Engelbrecht & Savolainen, 2017). These challenges reinforce the importance of sustainable teacher development programs that go beyond short-term workshops to provide continuous, practice-based professional learning (Brennan, King, & Travers, 2019; Majoko, 2018).

Hands-on training that includes exposure to inclusive classroom models and direct interaction with students with disabilities significantly enhances teacher competence and belief in their ability to implement inclusive education (Jiang, Li, Ju, Kong, & Li, 2025; You, Kim, & Shin, 2019). Moreover, professional development should integrate mentoring and peer collaboration, which cultivate positive attitudes toward inclusion and promote a culture of shared responsibility (Avramidis, Toulia, Tsihouridis, & Strogilos, 2019). When such programs address both practical strategies and teacher self-efficacy, they contribute to sustainable improvements in inclusive practices (Egne, 2020; Méndez & Álvarez, 2020). As this study suggests, ongoing mentorship and institutional support are essential for teachers in special schools to maintain resilience and effectiveness in managing diverse student needs.

4.2 Collaboration Among Stakeholders

The success of the Independent Curriculum at SLB Giri Wiyata Dharma was strongly supported by the involvement of school leadership and parents. Principal leadership played a pivotal role in motivating teachers and maintaining curricular alignment, while parental collaboration ensured continuity of learning between school and home. These findings align with literature emphasizing that inclusive education is most effective when schools operate as collaborative ecosystems involving families, communities, and policymakers (Abera et al., 2025; Jaya et al., 2023).

Multi-stakeholder engagement enhances not only the quality of instruction but also the social acceptance of students with disabilities. For instance, community-based initiatives to promote disability inclusion have been shown to foster positive attitudes and facilitate student enrollment in inclusive settings (Abera et al., 2025). Similarly, partnerships between universities and schools through mentoring programs and research collaborations strengthen teacher training and provide evidence-based strategies for inclusive practice (Rasmitadila, Humaira, Prasetyo, Hasnin, & Rachmadtullah, 2023; Rasmitadila, Humaira, Rachmadtullah, Samsudin, & Nurtanto, 2022).

Policymakers are integral to sustaining such collaboration by providing supportive legislation, funding, and systemic resources. Research highlights that when governments prioritize inclusive policies and allocate adequate resources, schools are better positioned to implement curricula that meet diverse student needs (Holmqvist & Lelinge, 2020; Rad et al., 2022). In the Indonesian context, alignment between the Merdeka Belajar policy and the operationalization of Kurikulum Merdeka at special schools must be continuously reinforced to ensure that institutional capacities match curricular expectations.

4.3 Curriculum Design and Cognitive Diversity

The Independent Curriculum's flexibility allows teachers to adapt instruction to varying student abilities. Findings from this study indicate that contextual and step-based learning strategies such as linking mathematics lessons to shopping experiences or introducing literacy through syllables before words are highly effective in enabling students with intellectual disabilities to grasp abstract concepts. These approaches resonate with international literature on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocates for proactive curriculum design that incorporates multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression from the outset (Luke, 2021; Rao, 2021).

Scaffolding emerged as another critical strategy in ensuring accessibility. By breaking down complex tasks into smaller, manageable steps, educators provided a bridge between students' current

abilities and desired learning outcomes. This aligns with (Matthew & Butler, 2017) and (McConnaughey, Freeman, Kim, & Sheehan, 2018), who argue that scaffolding techniques are particularly beneficial for students with intellectual disabilities in building gradual mastery. Furthermore, embedding practical experiences within lessons not only improves comprehension but also strengthens the relevance of learning to students' daily lives, a practice also endorsed by (Shrestha, Perlman, & Shaver, 2023).

Despite these strengths, systemic constraints such as limited instructional resources and insufficient specialized staff hindered the full application of adaptive curriculum design at SLB Giri Wiyata Dharma. Addressing these barriers requires deliberate collaboration among educators, families, and policymakers to ensure that curriculum frameworks are supported by adequate resources and that teachers are empowered to adapt pedagogy effectively (Hicks, Dewey, Abebe, Kramer, & Schuchardt, 2022). The alignment of curriculum design with stakeholder collaboration is therefore essential for addressing cognitive diversity in inclusive education.

4.4 Implications for Inclusive Education in Indonesia

This study reinforces the notion that inclusive curriculum reforms, such as the Independent Curriculum, cannot succeed without strong professional development systems, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and adaptive curriculum design. For Indonesia, the findings suggest several implications. First, professional development must prioritize experiential learning and mentorship to strengthen teacher competence in extraordinary education. Second, schools must institutionalize collaboration with parents and external partners to ensure that learning is continuous and contextually relevant. Third, curriculum design must embed UDL and scaffolding principles to respond effectively to cognitive diversity among students with intellectual disabilities.

By situating the experiences of SLB Giri Wiyata Dharma within broader debates on inclusive education, this study contributes to a growing body of evidence that highlights both the transformative potential and the contextual vulnerabilities of curriculum reforms. Ensuring sustainability will require ongoing alignment between policy frameworks, resource allocation, and classroom realities.

5 Conclusion

This study examined the implementation of the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) for students with intellectual disabilities at SLB Giri Wiyata Dharma Wonogiri. The findings reveal that effective implementation requires a cyclical process of diagnostic assessment, contextualized instructional strategies, and adaptive evaluation tailored to individual student needs. Teachers employed differentiated approaches, including scaffolding and contextual learning, which improved accessibility for students with diverse cognitive profiles. Formative, performance-based assessments provided a more accurate measure of progress than standardized testing, aligning with inclusive education principles.

The study also identified key supporting factors such as teacher competence, principal leadership, and strong parental involvement, which together fostered a collaborative ecosystem essential for inclusive practice. However, significant challenges remain, particularly the diversity of student abilities, limited teacher readiness, and systemic resource constraints. These inhibiting factors highlight the need for sustained teacher professional development, institutional support, and policy reinforcement to bridge the gap between curricular aspirations and classroom realities.

Overall, the study contributes to the body of knowledge on inclusive curriculum reforms by demonstrating that the Independent Curriculum, while conceptually aligned with inclusive education, requires deliberate adaptation, stakeholder collaboration, and continuous professional development to succeed in special school contexts. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of curriculum implementation on students' academic and social development, as well as scalable strategies for enhancing teacher preparedness across diverse educational settings.

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