

## Physical Education Teachers' Experiences in Implementing the Independent Curriculum: A Phenomenological Qualitative Study

Firayani<sup>1✉</sup>

Universitas Islam Negeri Sulthan Thaha Jambi, Indonesia<sup>1</sup>

e-mail: [firayani30@gmail.com](mailto:firayani30@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRAK

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum has brought significant changes to learning practices across various subjects, including Physical Education, which is characterized by learning based on physical activity and direct experience. This curriculum paradigm shift positions teachers as key actors in translating policies into contextual and meaningful pedagogical practices. This study aims to deeply understand the experiences of Physical Education teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum and the meaning they construct from the process. A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was used to explore the lived experiences of teachers as key actors in curriculum implementation. The research subjects consisted of Physical Education teachers who had implemented the Independent Curriculum, with data collected through in-depth interviews, learning observations, and documentation studies. Data analysis was conducted thematically to uncover the essence of teachers' experiences. The results show that teachers interpret the Independent Curriculum as a space for pedagogical freedom that demands high professional responsibility. The learning strategies developed are adaptive, contextual, and oriented towards meaningful learning. Challenges such as limited resources, curriculum understanding, and student readiness are addressed through reflection and institutional support. This study emphasizes the importance of teacher experience as the basis for developing sustainable Physical Education learning policies and practices.

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## INTRODUCTION

Changes in national education policy reflect the government's ongoing efforts to improve the quality of learning and its relevance to current developments. Curriculum transformation has become a strategic instrument to address the challenges of globalization, technological advancement, and the need for adaptive human resource development. Modern educational orientation positions students as active subjects in the learning process, which demands flexible pedagogical approaches. The competency-based learning paradigm increasingly emphasizes the importance of character building, creativity, and independent learning. Implementation of the new curriculum involves not only changes to the document's structure but also impacts daily classroom learning



practices. The role of teachers is a key factor in bridging education policy with the reality of learning. Teachers' readiness to understand and interpret the curriculum determines the success of achieving educational goals. These dynamics make teacher experience a crucial aspect in curriculum implementation studies (Putra et al., 2026).

The Independent Curriculum (Curriculum Merdeka) emerged as a response to the need for more contextual learning that supports student development. The principle of learning autonomy provides teachers with the freedom to design learning strategies tailored to student characteristics and the school environment. The flexibility of the curriculum structure allows for adjustments to learning outcomes without compromising national education standards. The emphasis on meaningful learning encourages a shift in the teacher's role from instructor to learning facilitator. Implementing the Independent Curriculum demands reflective and adaptive skills from educators. The curriculum adaptation process is often influenced by teachers' prior professional experience (Sefrinal et al. 2025). Teachers' interpretations of curriculum concepts contribute to variations in learning practices in the field. This situation indicates that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is not uniform across educational units.

Physical Education has learning characteristics that emphasize physical activity, hands-on experience, and social interaction. The learning objectives of Physical Education focus not only on physical fitness but also on developing students' attitudes, values, and social skills. The Physical Education learning process demands dynamic and contextual classroom management. Learning spaces that are not limited to formal classrooms add to the complexity of learning implementation. The alignment between the objectives of the Independent Curriculum and the characteristics of Physical Education opens up opportunities for learning innovation. Teacher creativity is a crucial element in integrating learning outcomes with meaningful physical activity (Adiyani et al., 2025). Teachers' practical experience influences the selection of learning methods, models, and evaluation. This uniqueness makes Physical Education an interesting field to study in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum.

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Physical Education presents both pedagogical and technical challenges. The availability of facilities and infrastructure is a key factor in the success of physical activity-based learning. Variations in school conditions lead to differences in curriculum implementation strategies used by Physical Education teachers. Teachers' understanding of learning outcomes and authentic assessments influences the quality of the learning process. Previous teaching experiences also shape how teachers interpret the freedom offered by the Independent Curriculum. Teachers' adaptation to curriculum changes often occurs gradually. Reflection on learning practices is a crucial part of this process. This reality highlights the need for a deep understanding of teachers' direct experiences.

Teachers' experiences reflect the interaction between education policy and on-the-ground learning practices. Each teacher brings a distinct background, values, and professional experience to the implementation of the curriculum. The meanings teachers construct around the Independent Curriculum influence their pedagogical decisions. The learning strategies they employ often emerge from a process of trial and error and ongoing reflection. The obstacles teachers encounter provide a concrete illustration of the challenges of curriculum implementation. Learning success is also inextricably linked to teachers' perceptions of institutional support. Teachers' subjective experiences provide a rich source of knowledge for understanding the dynamics of curriculum change. A

research approach that explores the meaning of these experiences is a relevant academic need. (Pangesti & Shufa, 2024)

A qualitative approach offers a platform for understanding educational phenomena in depth and context. Qualitative research focuses on individuals' interpretations of their experiences. The complexity of curriculum implementation cannot be fully explained through numbers and statistical measurements. Teachers' narratives of their experiences provide a more comprehensive understanding of the learning process. The perspective of teachers, as the primary actors in curriculum implementation, is the focus of qualitative research. Social interactions and learning situations are integral to the research data. The data collection process allows researchers to capture the natural reality of education. This framework is appropriate for examining the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Physical Education.

The phenomenological approach focuses on individual lived experiences and the meanings constructed from those experiences. Phenomenology allows researchers to explore teachers' perceptions in depth without excessive theoretical bias. Teachers' awareness of learning practices becomes the primary source of understanding the phenomenon. The experience of implementing the Independent Curriculum is viewed as a subjective reality with scientific value. Teachers' reflection is key to uncovering the meaning of curriculum implementation. The resulting data is descriptive and rich in context. This approach provides space for teachers' voices to emerge authentically. The relevance of phenomenology is increasingly strong in practice-oriented educational studies.

Based on this description, the experiences of Physical Education teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum are an important and strategic focus of this study. A thorough understanding of teachers' experiences is expected to provide a concrete picture of curriculum implementation in the field. The research findings can serve as a reflection for the development of educational policies. This study also has the potential to contribute to the development of Physical Education learning practices. The perspective of teachers as primary practitioners serves as the foundation for understanding the successes and challenges of curriculum implementation. A qualitative phenomenological approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of experiences. The research findings are expected to enrich academic studies in the field of physical education. This research focuses on placing teachers' experiences at the center of analysis in understanding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological approach to deeply understand the experiences of Physical Education teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum. This approach was chosen because the focus of the research is directed at exploring the subjective meanings, perceptions, and reflections of teachers as the main actors in learning practices. Phenomenology allows researchers to examine teachers' lived experiences as directly experienced and interpreted in the context of everyday learning. The reality of curriculum implementation is viewed as a social construct formed through interactions between teachers, students, and the school environment. This study does not aim to test hypotheses, but rather to understand the essence of teachers' experiences holistically. The research process was conducted naturally without variable manipulation. The researcher acted as the primary instrument

in data collection and interpretation. The researcher's sensitivity to context and meaning was key to maintaining the depth of analysis.

The research subjects consisted of Physical Education teachers who had implemented the Independent Curriculum in junior and senior high schools. Informants were selected purposively, with the criteria being at least one year of experience implementing the Independent Curriculum. Variations in school background and teaching experience were considered to obtain rich data. The number of informants was determined based on the principle of data sufficiency until information saturation was achieved. The research was conducted in the school environment where the teachers carry out their teaching duties. The natural context of the research allowed the researcher to understand real-life learning practices. The researcher's presence was carried out with the aim of maintaining ethical standards and the comfort of the informants. An open and reflective relationship was the basis of interactions throughout the research process.

Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, lesson observations, and documentation studies. In-depth interviews were used to explore teachers' experiences, perceptions, and the meanings they construct regarding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. The interview guide was semi-structured to allow for flexible exploration of experiences. Lesson observations were conducted to understand the actual practices of Physical Education teachers in the field. Field notes were used to record interactions, learning strategies, and classroom dynamics. Documentation studies included analysis of teaching materials, learning modules, and assessments used by teachers. Technical triangulation was conducted to increase data validity. The combination of data collection techniques provided a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under study.

Data analysis was conducted thematically following the principles of phenomenological analysis. The analysis process began with verbatim transcription of interview data. Repeated readings were conducted to understand the informants' overall experiences. Coding was conducted to identify meaningful statements related to the experience of implementing the Independent Curriculum. Key themes were developed through grouping similar meanings. Data reduction was carried out without losing the essence of the informants' experiences. Interpretation of meaning was carried out while still referring to the teacher's perspective. The results of the analysis are presented in the form of a context-rich narrative description.

Data validity was maintained through source and method triangulation techniques. Member checking was conducted by confirming findings with informants. An audit trail was developed to systematically document the research process. Continuous researcher involvement in the field enhanced the credibility of the findings. Researcher reflexivity was maintained to minimize interpretation bias. Reflective notes were used to evaluate the researcher's position throughout the study. Consistency of the research process was a primary concern. These steps ensured the quality and reliability of the research results.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Physical Education Teachers' Interpretation of the Independent Curriculum**

Physical Education teachers' understanding of the Independent Curriculum is shaped through the interaction of their professional knowledge, teaching experience, and the school context in which they work. The Independent Curriculum is perceived as a policy that provides broader pedagogical space than the previous curriculum. This

understanding develops through adaptation and reflection on learning practices. Teachers interpret curriculum freedom as an opportunity to adapt learning to student characteristics. The curriculum is understood as a pedagogical tool that supports teacher creativity, not simply an administrative requirement. Therefore, the process of understanding is built through direct experience in the field and ongoing professional reflection.

Over time, the meaning of teachers has deepened, influenced by both successes and challenges in teaching practices. Teachers who have taught for a long time tend to compare the Independent Curriculum with previous curricula, resulting in a critical attitude toward flexibility and professional demands. The curriculum is understood not as a limitation, but as a pedagogical challenge that requires teachers to develop more adaptive and innovative teaching strategies. This transformation demonstrates a shift in teachers' professional orientation, where personal reflection becomes a crucial part of understanding curriculum policies.

Teachers' interpretations are also influenced by their understanding of the holistic goals of physical education. Physical education is not simply physical activity, but also a means of developing character, social values, and collaborative skills. The Independent Curriculum is considered aligned with these goals because it emphasizes meaningful and contextual learning. Teachers understand that physical education (PJOK) learning must integrate the physical, social, and cognitive aspects of students, making the learning process a comprehensive experience. Teachers' interpretations are integrative, encompassing curricular and pedagogical aspects, with the curriculum serving as a framework that supports the achievement of comprehensive learning goals.

The meaning of the curriculum deepens when teachers respond to the diversity of students' abilities, interests, and needs. The freedom to design learning is understood as a significant professional responsibility, encouraging teachers to develop diverse methods tailored to student characteristics. This understanding fosters the internalization of teachers' roles as active pedagogical decision-makers, so that the curriculum is no longer viewed as a rigid guide. These adaptive experiences enrich teachers' interpretations of educational policy, shaping flexible, reflective, and student-needs-based practices.

Ultimately, teachers' interpretations of the Independent Curriculum (Curriculum Merdeka) reflect a variety of receptive attitudes. Some teachers expressed enthusiasm for pedagogical freedom and the ability to innovate, while others remained skeptical due to the high demands of adaptation. The curriculum is understood as a dynamic and evolving process, where the meanings teachers construct reflect their professional experience, readiness to adapt, and ability to integrate curriculum philosophy with learning practices. These interpretations serve as the foundation for subsequent strategies, practices, and evaluation of Physical Education learning.

### **Physical Education Learning Strategies and Practices in the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum**

Physical Education learning strategies and practices in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum emphasize the integration of teacher creativity, student needs, and the school context. Teachers develop various approaches to ensure that learning is not only physical but also socially, cognitively, and emotionally meaningful. One important aspect is differentiated learning, where teachers adapt activities to students' abilities, interests, and characteristics. This approach allows all students to actively participate, regardless of their physical skill level (Okobitri & Juniarisca, 2025).

Teachers also utilize the school environment as a learning tool, including facilities such as fields, auditoriums, and open spaces, to create varied learning experiences. Learning activities are not limited to formal sports practices but are developed into educational games, collaborative activities, and physical projects that emphasize the values of cooperation, leadership, and responsibility. Learning practices are contextual, adapting to the actual school conditions, such as the number of students, the size of the field, and the available facilities.

Authentic assessment is an integral part of the learning strategy. Teachers assess students not only based on physical abilities but also on social skills, creativity, and perseverance. The evaluation process is carried out continuously through observation, student self-reflection, and project assessment, ensuring that physical education and health education focuses on the holistic development of students.

The implementation of this strategy is gradual, with teachers conducting experiments, reflecting, and repeatedly refining. Interaction between teachers and students is key to success, as teachers must be able to understand classroom dynamics, student motivation, and any obstacles that arise during learning activities. Thus, Physical Education learning practices under the Independent Curriculum are flexible, adaptive, and contextual, and encourage teacher professional development through ongoing reflection on practice.

### **Challenges, Support, and Teacher Reflections in the Independent Curriculum Implementation Process**

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Physical Education is not without internal and external challenges. Limited facilities and infrastructure, such as narrow fields or a lack of sports equipment, present real obstacles for teachers in implementing a variety of learning strategies. Furthermore, differences in student abilities, interests, and readiness also require teachers to be more creative and adaptive in designing relevant and enjoyable activities. This complexity requires teachers to balance pedagogical freedom with the effectiveness of achieving learning objectives.

Institutional support and collaboration among teachers play a crucial role in addressing these challenges. Schools that provide professional training, discussion forums for teachers, and additional learning resources facilitate teachers' development of pedagogical competencies and innovative strategies. A collaborative environment encourages the exchange of experiences, shared reflection, and the development of best practices in implementing the Independent Curriculum.

Teacher reflection on learning practices serves as a mechanism for ongoing professional learning. Teachers evaluate the effectiveness of methods, assess student responses, and adjust approaches based on field experiences. This reflective process not only improves the quality of learning but also fosters a deeper understanding of the teacher's role as a pedagogical decision-maker. Teachers' emotional dynamics, including enthusiasm, frustration, and satisfaction, are part of the experience of adapting to curriculum changes.

Overall, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Physical Education is a dynamic and contextual process. Teachers play a role not only as curriculum implementers but also as learning designers who are responsive to students' needs. The challenges and support provided form a process of professional reflection that enriches teaching practice, strengthens pedagogical competence, and ensures meaningful learning for all students.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study shows that Physical Education teachers' experiences in implementing the Independent Curriculum constitute a complex and dynamic pedagogical process. Teachers' interpretations of the Independent Curriculum are shaped through the interaction between educational policies, professional experiences, and the realities of learning in schools. The curriculum is understood not simply as a normative document, but as a framework that provides both freedom and pedagogical responsibility. The learning strategies developed by teachers reflect adaptive efforts to integrate physical activity, meaningful learning, and student character development. Learning practices exhibit variations influenced by the school context, teacher preparedness, and student characteristics. The implementation of authentic assessments demonstrates a shift in assessment orientation from outcomes to learning processes. Challenges such as limited understanding and infrastructure are integral to the implementation process. Institutional support and professional collaboration have been shown to strengthen teachers' readiness to face curriculum changes. Continuous reflection is a key mechanism for teachers to improve the quality of learning. Teachers' experiences illustrate the implementation of the Independent Curriculum as a continuous professional learning process. The phenomenological approach successfully uncovers subjective meanings that are not apparent in quantitative measurements. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of placing teacher experiences at the center of analysis in the development of educational policies and practices.

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