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Evaluation of Students' Cognitive and Affective Development in the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah

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Abstract
The implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah represents a strategic effort to promote holistic student development, encompassing both cognitive and affective domains. This study aims to evaluate the cognitive and affective development of students within the implementation of the curriculum. The research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-evaluative design. Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using an interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum contributes positively to students' cognitive development, particularly in enhancing critical thinking, conceptual understanding, and problem-solving skills through contextual and project-based learning. In addition, students' affective development, including discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and value internalization, also shows significant improvement. However, the evaluation of the affective domain has not been optimally implemented. Assessment practices remain predominantly focused on cognitive aspects, while affective evaluation tends to be subjective and lacks standardized instruments. The study concludes that although the Merdeka Curriculum has successfully fostered holistic learning, there is a need to strengthen evaluation systems, particularly in the affective domain. Therefore, improving teachers' competencies in authentic assessment, developing comprehensive evaluation instruments, and enhancing institutional support are essential to ensure balanced and effective student development.
Keywords: *Independent Curriculum, Cognitive Development, Affective Development, Authentic Assessment, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah.*

INTRODUCTION

The change in the educational paradigm in Indonesia in recent years shows an increasingly progressive and adaptive direction to the needs of the times. One of the tangible manifestations of this transformation is the implementation of the Independent Curriculum which emphasizes student-centered learning, flexibility in the learning process, and strengthening essential character and competencies. This curriculum is designed to provide a wider space for students to develop their potential, both in cognitive and affective aspects, so that they are able to face increasingly complex global challenges (Sibuea, 2025).

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) level is a systemic transformation that aims to provide flexibility to educators and focus on developing students' character and competencies. Evaluation of cognitive and affective development in this context no longer relies solely on quantitative test scores, but shifts towards authentic assessments that include the learning process as a whole. This approach is in line with constructivist theory which emphasizes that knowledge is built by students through active experience and social interaction (Syifa' et al., 2025).

Affective development in the Independent Curriculum at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah was evaluated through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project and the Rahmatan Lil Alamin Student Profile (P5RA). The affective realm includes behavioral dispositions such as attitudes, interests, self-concept, values, and morals. According to Krathwohl, the affective realm consists of five levels: acceptance (*receiving*), response (*Reply*), awards (*Valuation*), organizing (*organization*), and characterization based on values (*characterization by value*) (Putri, 2024).

In Madrasah, affective evaluation is very crucial because it is related to the formation of morals. Teachers use observation techniques, reflection journals, and peer-to-peer assessments to monitor the development of students' attitudes. The criteria for achieving learning objectives (KKTP) in the affective aspect are not expressed in absolute numbers, but in qualitative descriptions that describe the growth of students' character, such as independence, mutual cooperation, and religious moderation (*Tawassut*) (Martatiyana et al., 2023).

In the context of basic education, especially in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum has a strategic role in forming the foundation of holistic student development. It not only focuses on the mastery of knowledge (cognitive), but also on the formation of attitudes, values, and character (affective) that are in harmony with Islamic values. Therefore, evaluation of students' cognitive and affective development is very important to ensure that comprehensive educational goals can be achieved optimally (Mustoip, 2023).

A student's cognitive development includes the ability to think, understand, analyze, and solve problems. Meanwhile, affective development is related to attitudes, emotions, motivation, and internalization of values reflected in daily behavior. In the

implementation of the Independent Curriculum, these two aspects cannot be separated, because effective learning must be able to integrate the dimensions of knowledge and character in a balanced manner. However, in practice, evaluations carried out in schools are often still more dominant on the cognitive aspect, while the affective aspect has not received proportionate attention (Karengga et al., 2025).

In addition, there are various challenges in the evaluation process, such as the limitations of comprehensive assessment instruments, teachers' readiness to understand the concept of evaluation based on the Independent Curriculum, and the lack of integration between formative and summative assessments. This condition has the potential to cause evaluation results that do not reflect the development of students as a whole. Therefore, a more systematic, authentic, and sustainable evaluation approach is needed to measure student learning achievement as a whole.

Based on this background, this study aims to evaluate the cognitive and affective development of students in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. This study is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of curriculum implementation, as well as the basis for formulating a more optimal evaluation strategy. Thus, the results of this research can contribute to improving the quality of learning and strengthening the character of students in accordance with national education goals.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with an evaluative-descriptive type of research. This approach was chosen to gain a deep understanding of students' cognitive and affective development in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. Through this approach, researchers can comprehensively explore the learning process, evaluation practices, and dynamics that occur in the field (Zaluchu, 2020).

The research design used is a case study focused on one or several Madrasah Ibtidaiyah that has implemented the Independent Curriculum. The selection of research locations is carried out purposively, taking into account criteria such as the readiness of curriculum implementation, the availability of data, and the involvement of teachers in the learning evaluation process (Pd et al., n.d.).

The data sources in this study consist of primary data and secondary data. Primary data was obtained from teachers, madrasah heads, and students as the main informants. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from supporting documents such as teaching modules, Learning Implementation Plans (RPP)/RPP Merdeka, student assessment results, and school policies related to curriculum implementation.

Data collection techniques include: (1) in-depth interviews with teachers and madrasah heads to explore information related to cognitive and affective evaluation strategies; (2) direct observation of the learning process to see the implementation of authentic assessments; and (3) documentation studies to analyze evaluation instruments and student learning outcomes. This technique is carried out triangulatively to increase the validity of the data.

Data analysis was carried out using an interactive analysis model which included three stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Data reduction is carried out by selecting and simplifying relevant data, then presented in the form of a descriptive narrative, and then analyzed to find patterns, themes, and relationships between the variables studied (Wingdes, 2019).

The validity of the data is guaranteed through source triangulation techniques and method triangulation, as well as credibility tests through member checks to informants. In addition, researchers also increase diligence in the data collection process to obtain valid and accountable results.

With this research method, it is hoped that a comprehensive picture can be obtained regarding the evaluation of students' cognitive and affective development in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, as well as the factors that influence it.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah has a significant impact on the cognitive and affective development of students, although there are still various challenges in the evaluation process. The findings of this study are described as follows:

1. The implementation of the Independent Curriculum encourages the improvement of students' cognitive development in a more contextual and critical manner

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum shows a significant increase in students' cognitive development which is more contextual and critical. This can be seen from the change in students' learning patterns which are no longer oriented to memorization alone, but to a deep understanding of concepts. Students are able to relate the subject matter to daily life, so that the learning process becomes more meaningful (Demusti et al., 2024).

Cognitive development in the context of the Independent Curriculum is strongly influenced by the theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Piaget emphasized the importance of assimilation and accommodation in cognitive structures, in which students adapt new information into existing schemas or modify those schemas based on new experiences. The Independent Curriculum facilitates this through "Learning Outcomes" which are structured by developmental phases, rather than the school year, thus allowing students to learn according to their cognitive readiness (*teaching at the right level*) (Rahmawati et al., 2025).

On the other hand, Vygotsky emphasizes the role of *the Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD), which is the distance between what students can do independently and what they can achieve with help. In the Independent Curriculum, social interaction through group work and teacher guidance that is *scaffolding* is the key to encouraging students to go beyond current cognitive boundaries towards more complex and critical understanding.

One of the main pillars of the Independent Curriculum is contextual learning, which connects subject matter with real-world situations. According to the theory*Contextual Teaching and Learning*(CTL), the human brain naturally searches for meaning in context by looking for meaningful and useful connections. When students learn math through logistical distribution problems in the surrounding environment or learn science through observation of local ecosystems, their cognitive engagement increases significantly (Fatimah et al., n.d.).

This cognitive improvement is also measured through a focus on literacy and numeracy. In contrast to memorizing formulas, numeracy in the Independent Curriculum requires the ability to apply the concepts of numbers and symbols in practical situations. Mathematically, this development can be seen as a function of active involvement (E) and material relevance (R), which are conceptually formulated as (Gusri et al., 2024):

$$C=f\,(E\cdot R)$$

Where C is cognitive growth. The higher the relevance of the material to a student's life, the greater the acceleration of their critical understanding.

The Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) is an innovation in the Independent Curriculum that is specifically designed to hone critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In project activities, students are faced with *ill-structured problems* that do not have one correct answer. This process forces students to conduct investigations, collect data, and critically evaluate solutions.

Critical thinking in modern education is defined as the process of intellectual discipline to actively and skillfully conceptualize, apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information. By allocating about 20-30% of lesson time to P5, the Independent Curriculum provides a real laboratory for students to practice these cognitive skills beyond the confines of traditional textbooks (Saputra et al., 2025).

Although the Independent Curriculum offers a strong framework for cognitive improvement, its success depends heavily on the pedagogical competence of teachers. The change in the role of teachers from informants to facilitators requires a profound paradigm shift. In addition, the assessment system should move from mere memorization-based summative tests to continuous formative assessments to accurately monitor students' cognitive development.

The use of information technology in the Merdeka Mengajar platform also acts as a cognitive catalyst, providing resources that allow students to explore knowledge independently and critically. The integration of this technology, if done appropriately, can expand students' cognitive horizons beyond the physical boundaries of their classrooms (Annisa Alfath et al., 2022).

In addition, students also show better analytical thinking skills, such as identifying problems, expressing opinions logically, and providing solutions to given problems. Through the application of *project-based learning*, students are trained to explore knowledge independently and collaboratively, thereby improving problem-solving skills.

The observation results also show that students are more active in the learning process, both in group discussions and in the presentation of work results. This active involvement contributes to the improvement of higher order thinking skills (HOTS), which is one of the main indicators in cognitive development in the Independent Curriculum.

However, this increase is not even among all students, because it is still influenced by differences in initial ability, learning readiness, and learning strategies used by teachers. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the application of differentiated learning so that all students can develop optimally.

2. The development of students' affective aspects showed improvement, but the evaluation was not optimal

The development of students' affective aspects in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum shows a positive trend, especially in terms of discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and internalization of religious and social values. Students begin to show better behavioral changes, such as increased adherence to rules, the ability to work in groups, and mutual respect in the learning process. This is inseparable from the learning approach that emphasizes character strengthening and meaningful learning experiences (Angelika & Rusilowati, 2025).

The affective realm is characterized by a hierarchy of internalization, a process described by Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia in their seminal 1964 work. This hierarchy begins with "receiving," where a student is only aware of the presence of a stimulus, and continues through "responding," "appreciating," and "organizing," culminating in "value-based characterization," in which belief systems become a consistent part of an individual's lifestyle. In the classroom, this means that a student not only learns the facts of a scientific (cognitive) theory but also develops a curiosity about the natural world (affective) that ultimately shapes their professional identity and ethical behavior (Hanan et al., 2025).

Affective development consists of several distinct yet interrelated constructs that affect how a student interacts with his or her environment. These include emotions, attitudes, interests, values, and self-concept.

a. Emotions and Emotional Intelligence

Emotions are intense, short-lived physiological and psychological reactions to certain stimuli. In the early stages of development, children learn to identify and regulate these emotions, a process often referred to as emotional intelligence (EQ). Daniel Goleman's research emphasizes that EQ is a better predictor of life success than IQ, as it includes self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. When students experience positive emotions, such as excitement or interest, their "expanding and building" abilities are activated, allowing them to think more creatively and solve problems more effectively.

b. Attitudes and Interests

Interest is formed through a combination of hands-on experience, social learning, and cognitive processing. Interests, which are closely related to attitudes,

are an individual's preference to engage in a particular activity. According to Getzel, interest is an organized tendency through experience that pushes individuals toward a specific object or skill for the purpose of attainment. In the context of education, fostering interest is the main mechanism for shifting student motivation from extrinsic motivation (working for grades) to intrinsic motivation (working for learning itself). In the context of education, fostering interest is the main mechanism for shifting student motivation from extrinsic motivation (working for grades) to intrinsic motivation (working for learning itself).

c. Self-Concept and Self-Esteem

Self-concept is the totality of individual thoughts and feelings that refer to themselves as an object. Carl Rogers, a pioneer in humanistic psychology, argued that self-concept is a central construct in personality development. The concept of the self includes the "perceived self" (how I see myself) and the "ideal self" (who I want to become). A significant gap between the two can lead to anxiety and poor academic performance. On the other hand, positive self-concept fosters resilience, allowing students to view failure as an opportunity to grow rather than as a reflection of their intrinsic value.

Some of the main psychological theories provide a framework for understanding how affective development develops from infancy to adulthood (Aransyah et al., 2023).

1) Erikson's Psychosocial Stages

Erik Erikson posits that personality develops in a series of eight stages, each of which is characterized by a psychosocial crisis. For school-age children, the "Industry vs. Inferiority" is very important. During this time, children work on mastering skills; Success leads to a sense of competence, while failure produces a feeling of inadequacy. In adolescence, the focus shifts to "Identity vs. Role Confusion," where the affective task is to integrate the various roles into a coherent self-understanding.

2) Kohlberg's Moral Development

Lawrence Kohlberg expands on Piaget's work to explain how moral reasoning is a key component of the affective realm. He identifies three levels: Pre-conventional (focusing on punishment and reward), Conventional (focusing on social and legal norms), and Post-conventional (focusing on universal ethical principles). Affective development in this context involves a transition from selfishness to a broader concern for justice and human rights.

3) Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham Maslow's theory states that affective and cognitive growth cannot occur unless basic needs are met. Before a student can achieve "self-actualization" of realizing their full potential they must feel safe, loved, and have a sense of belonging. Schools that ignore students' "sense of belonging" needs often find that academic interventions fail because students' affective foundations are unstable.

4) The Role of Educators in Affective Learning

The teacher acts as the main "affective model" for students. Because affective traits are often imitated rather than taught, the teacher's emotional regulation and attitude towards the subject matter is contagious. Effective affective teaching involves the creation of a "humanistic" classroom environment where students feel safe to express emotions and take intellectual risks. As for the Strategy for Affective Integration;

a) Clarifying Values: Helps students identify their own values and understand how those values affect their behavior.
b) Social-Emotional Learning (SEL): Implements a curriculum that explicitly teaches empathy, conflict resolution, and cooperation.
c) Reflective Practice: Encourage students to journal or discuss their feelings about what they are learning, which helps shift information from the cognitive realm to the affective realm.

One of the main difficulties in education is that affective outcomes are more difficult to measure than cognitive outcomes. Although math tests provide clear scores, assessing a student's "empathy" or "integrity" is subjective and complex. Evaluation often relies on the scale of self-report, behavioral observations, and anecdotal notes. However, because affective development is a long-term process, short-term assessments may fail to capture profound changes in a student's character and value system.

However, the evaluation of affective aspects has not been carried out optimally. The results show that attitude assessment still tends to be subjective and has not been supported by standardized instruments. Teachers generally make assessments through observation, but they are not accompanied by clear and measurable indicators, so the assessment results are less consistent.

In addition, the focus of assessment, which is still dominant on the cognitive aspect, causes the affective aspect to not receive proportional attention. Limited time, administrative burden, and lack of teachers' understanding of affective evaluation techniques are the main factors that affect these conditions. Therefore, it is necessary to develop more systematic affective assessment instruments and improve teacher competence so that evaluations can be carried out more objectively, comprehensively, and sustainably.

Discussion

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah shows a change in the learning paradigm that emphasizes more on holistic student development. The results indicate that a flexible, contextual, and student-centered learning approach is able to encourage more optimal cognitive development. This is in line with the concept of constructivism, where students actively build knowledge through meaningful learning experiences. The application of project-based learning and differentiation allows students to relate material to the realities of life, thereby improving critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Aransyah et al., 2023).

From the affective aspect, the implementation of this curriculum also has a positive impact on the formation of student character. A collaborative learning environment and the integration of religious values in the teaching and learning process contribute to an increase in attitudes of discipline, responsibility, and cooperation. This shows that the Independent Curriculum is not only oriented to academic achievement, but also to the formation of students' personalities as a whole. These findings reinforce the view that educational success is not only measured by cognitive aspects, but also by affective development reflected in student behavior (Fajri et al., 2023).

Students' affective development is influenced by internal factors (psychological and biological) as well as external factors (family, school, and peer environment). Based on Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, students at elementary school age are at the stage of*Industry vs. Inferiority*, where they begin to develop a sense of pride in their abilities and achievements. If affective support is provided appropriately, students will grow into competent and confident individuals (Melati, 2023).

In adolescents, affective development becomes more crucial because they enter the stage of identity search (*Identity vs. Role Confusion*). Here, the affective aspect includes the formation of a more stable self-concept and the development of social empathy. The improvement of the affective aspect at this stage is often seen in the ability of students to work together in groups, show concern for social issues, and begin to have clear life principles.

Despite the increase in awareness of the importance of character, the evaluation of affective aspects in schools still faces various technical and methodological obstacles. Some of the reasons why affective evaluation is not optimal include (Prabawati et al., 2024):

1. Subjectivity of Assessment: In contrast to the cognitive aspects that can be measured by objective tests (such as multiple choice), the affective aspect relies heavily on the observation of behaviors that are subjective in nature. Teachers often have difficulty giving grades that truly reflect the students' true attitudes because of the tendency of students to "pretend" in front of educators (*social desirability bias*).
2. Limitations of Instruments: Many schools still rely on very simple instruments, such as the Likert scale or brief observations that are not in-depth. Ideal instruments should include various techniques such as *self-assessment*, *peer-assessment*, and reflective journals, but their implementation requires a high level of time and precision on the part of teachers.
3. Focus on Cognitive Outcomes: The education system that is still very oriented towards national exam scores or academic grades makes affective evaluations often only considered as a complement or formality in the report card. As a result, the development of students' attitudes is not monitored continuously.

However, the results of the study also reveal a gap in learning evaluation practices. Although the curriculum emphasizes the importance of authentic assessments, its implementation in the field has not been fully optimal. Assessment is still dominated by cognitive aspects, while affective aspects have not been evaluated systematically and

measurably. This is due to the limited understanding of teachers in developing valid and reliable affective assessment instruments, as well as the lack of continuous training.

In addition, technical constraints such as time constraints and administrative burdens are also factors that affect the effectiveness of evaluations. Teachers tend to focus more on easy-to-measure assessments, such as written tests, than on attitude assessments that require continuous observation. This condition shows that the transformation of the curriculum has not been fully followed by the readiness of a supporting evaluation system (Saputri et al., n.d.).

In a broader perspective, these findings confirm that the success of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is highly dependent on the readiness of teachers as the main implementers of learning. The pedagogical, professional, and evaluative competence of teachers is a key factor in ensuring that the goals of the curriculum can be achieved optimally. Therefore, efforts are needed to increase teacher capacity through training, mentoring, and strengthening the teacher learning community (Annisa Alfath et al., 2022).

Thus, this discussion emphasizes that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah has made a positive contribution to the cognitive and affective development of students, but still needs to be strengthened in the aspect of evaluation. The integration between comprehensive learning and assessment is key in realizing quality education and oriented towards overall student development.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah makes a positive contribution to the cognitive and affective development of students. In the cognitive aspect, students show improvements in critical thinking skills, conceptual understanding, and more contextual problem-solving skills. Meanwhile, in the affective aspect, there is a development of students' attitudes and characters, such as discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and internalization of religious values.

However, the evaluation of these two aspects, especially the affective aspect, is not fully optimal. Assessments still tend to focus on cognitive aspects, while affective evaluations still face obstacles in terms of instrument, objectivity, and consistency. In addition, the limitations of teacher competence and technical factors such as time and administrative burden also affect the effectiveness of the evaluation implementation.

Therefore, strategic efforts are needed in the form of strengthening teachers' competencies in conducting authentic assessments, developing comprehensive evaluation instruments, and institutional support in creating a more integrated evaluation system. Thus, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum can run optimally in realizing holistic learning, balanced between cognitive and affective aspects, and able to produce students who excel academically and in character.

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