Building Independence and Exemplary Character through the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Primary Schools (Madrasah Ibtidaiyah) in Pekalongan: Enlightening the Community through Dedicated Service

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Abstract

This program aims to explore the implementation of the "Kurikulum Merdeka" (Independent Curriculum) in Islamic primary schools (Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, MI) in Pekalongan, Indonesia, with a focus on fostering students' independence and character development. This is a community service activity that is packaged in socialization activities through the virtual platform. The program includes three phases: planning, implementation, and evaluation. The program involved 50 participants, including teachers, school principals, students, and community members. The program includes three phases: planning, implementation, and evaluation. The community engagement program successfully promoted independence and developed exemplary character traits among participants. Through interactive workshops, mentoring sessions, and community projects, participants demonstrated increased self-confidence, critical thinking skills, and ethical behavior. The program's comprehensive approach highlights the importance of holistic education in nurturing responsible and well-rounded individuals capable of making positive contributions to society. The outcomes serve as a testament to the transformative impact of community engagement in building a stronger and morally upright community.

Keywords: Kurikulum Merdeka, character development, primary schools, community engagement

Introduction

Information regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has not been fully understood by Madrasah teachers. This is evident from the

numerous partner schools of Higher Education Institutions that have proposed training activities in schools regarding the Merdeka Curriculum. Furthermore, there are several issues that frequently arise in Madrasahs, including: (1) Only a small number of teachers are knowledgeable and meet the qualifications; (2) Insufficient teacher knowledge regarding instructional tools; and (3) The creativity of teachers in creating instructional media is still low (Barsihanor et al, 2020; Nurhayati et al, 2022).

Over recent years, educators and community members in Pekalongan have observed a noticeable gap between academic achievements and the development of character traits among students. Many students exhibit a lack of independence, critical thinking skills, and ethical behavior, which hampers their ability to make informed decisions and solve problems effectively (Rif'ah, 2022). The absence of opportunities to develop these qualities within the existing curriculum further exacerbates the problem. The lack of independence, critical thinking skills, and ethical behavior among students hampers their ability to make informed decisions and solve problems effectively (Ghimby, 2022). The absence of opportunities within the existing curriculum to develop these qualities further exacerbates the problem. It is crucial to address these shortcomings and implement initiatives that explicitly focus on fostering independence, critical thinking, and ethical behavior to empower students and prepare them for success in all aspects of life.

Recognizing the significance of character education, the program aims to introduce an independent curriculum tailored specifically to primary schools in Pekalongan. This independent curriculum places a strong emphasis on fostering independence, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and moral values among students (Jamaludin et al, 2022). It provides a structured framework that empowers students to take ownership of their learning journey and nurtures their development as well-rounded individuals capable of navigating complex situations and contributing positively to their communities (Lidi, 2021). Through dedicated service to the community, the program seeks to enlighten and engage stakeholders about the potential benefits of implementing the independent curriculum. It aims to foster collaboration and active participation among educators, parents, and community members to collectively support and promote the implementation of the curriculum. By involving the community, the program aims to raise awareness about the significance of character development and independence in students' education. It emphasizes the need for a holistic approach that goes beyond academic achievements and prioritizes the cultivation of ethical behavior, integrity, and responsibility.

The program recognizes that character development and independence are essential qualities for students to succeed not only academically but also in their personal and professional lives. By implementing the independent curriculum, the

program aims to provide students with the necessary tools and experiences to become well-rounded individuals capable of making ethical decisions, solving problems effectively, and positively contributing to their communities. Ultimately, the program seeks to create an educational environment that nurtures students' exemplary character traits, prepares them for future challenges, and empowers them to become independent, responsible, and compassionate members of society.

The program emphasizes the urgency of nurturing independence and exemplary character traits among primary school students. In a society where ethical behavior, critical thinking, and responsibility are crucial, the curriculum serves as a timely response to bridge the gap between academic achievements and character development. By focusing on fostering independence, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and moral values, the program aims to equip students with the necessary skills and qualities to succeed not only academically but also in their personal and professional lives. The urgency also lies in the need to prepare students for the challenges they will face as they grow and contribute to their communities. The independent curriculum enables students to become self-reliant individuals who can make informed decisions, solve problems effectively, and navigate complex situations with integrity and resilience. By cultivating these qualities, the program seeks to empower students to become responsible citizens and leaders who can positively impact their communities.

Additionally, the urgency of the program is evident in the need to promote collaboration and community engagement. Through dedicated service, the program aims to engage various stakeholders, including educators, parents, and community members, to collectively support and promote character development in primary schools. By enlightening the community about the importance of character education and involving them in the implementation process, the program seeks to create a shared commitment towards nurturing independent and exemplary individuals who can contribute meaningfully to society.

Methods

In the community engagement program titled "Building Independence and Exemplary Character through the Independent Curriculum in Primary Schools (SD/MI) in Pekalongan: Enlightening the Community through Dedicated Service," conducted in the city of Pekalongan from January to March 2023, various practical methods were employed. The program consisted of a series of online socialization activities, which were attended by 50 participants, including teachers, school principals, students, and community members. Through the virtual platform, the program aimed to foster independence and develop exemplary character traits among the participants.

During the online socialization activities, teachers and educators actively engaged the participants through interactive webinars, virtual discussions, and video presentations. The sessions provided comprehensive insights into the Independent Curriculum's principles and how it can be effectively integrated into primary school education. Participants were introduced to the importance of promoting independence among students, encouraging them to take ownership of their learning journey. Moreover, the program utilized digital platforms to share practical teaching strategies and classroom activities that nurture exemplary character traits. Teachers and school principals were guided on creating a positive and supportive learning environment, instilling values such as integrity, respect, and empathy in their students.

Firstly, interactive workshops were conducted to provide participants with a platform for active learning and engagement. During these workshops, participants actively participated in discussions, group activities, and role-plays that focused on promoting independence, critical thinking, and ethical behavior. These interactive sessions allowed participants to reflect on their own actions, share their perspectives, and develop a deeper understanding of the importance of independence and character development. Secondly, mentoring sessions were organized to provide guidance and support to participants in their journey towards building independence and exemplary character. Experienced mentors, including educators and community members, were assigned to small groups of participants. The mentors offered individualized assistance, feedback, and practical advice to help participants overcome challenges and develop their character traits effectively. Additionally, community projects were implemented to provide hands-on experiences and real-world applications of the independent curriculum. Participants collaborated on projects that addressed local community issues and required them to demonstrate independence, critical thinking, and ethical behavior. Through these projects, participants were able to see the direct impact of their actions and develop a sense of responsibility towards their community.

Furthermore, regular assessments and evaluations were conducted to track participants' progress and provide feedback for improvement. Assessments included both individual and group-based activities that measured participants' understanding and application of independence and exemplary character traits. The feedback received during these assessments helped participants identify areas for growth and provided them with specific guidance to further enhance their development.

Results and Discussion

The community engagement program aimed to empower the community by promoting independence and developing exemplary character traits among

participants, including teachers, school principals, and students. The program's results are discussed below:

1) *Planning Phase*

During the planning phase, a comprehensive needs assessment was conducted to identify the specific needs and challenges faced by primary schools in Pekalongan. The program team collaborated with educators, school administrators, students, and community members to gather insights and develop a clear understanding of the desired outcomes. The identified objectives were to foster independence, critical thinking, ethical behavior, and a sense of responsibility among participants. To achieve these objectives, the program team prepared documents related to the implementation of the independent curriculum that incorporated best practices from previous successful programs.

At this stage, various needs related to this program have been identified, including: 1) a lack of knowledge regarding the implementation of the independent curriculum, 2) limited adoption of the independent curriculum by Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, and 3) a lack of understanding among students and the majority of community members regarding the independent curriculum.

2) *Implementation Phase*

The implementation phase of the program involved a series of activities that were designed to promote independence and develop exemplary character traits among the participants. Participants were encouraged to actively participate, express their opinions, and engage in critical thinking exercises. For example, in one workshop session, participants were presented with a real-life scenario where they had to work collaboratively to solve a community problem. They were tasked with developing a solution, considering various perspectives, and making ethical decisions. Through this activity, participants not only enhanced their critical thinking and problem-solving skills but also developed a sense of responsibility towards their community.

Mentoring sessions were an integral part of the program, providing participants with individualized guidance and support. Experienced mentors, including educators and community leaders, were assigned to small groups of participants to provide mentorship, share best practices, and offer practical advice. These mentors served as role models and provided personalized support to help participants navigate challenges and reinforce positive behaviors.

3) *Evaluation Phase*

The evaluation phase was crucial in assessing the program's impact and identifying areas for improvement. Both formative and summative evaluations were conducted to gather feedback from participants, educators, and community members. Surveys were used to collect data on participants' perceived improvements in independence, character traits, and their overall satisfaction with

the program. The evaluation results indicated positive outcomes from the program. Participants demonstrated an enhanced sense of independence, improved critical thinking skills, ethical behavior, and a greater sense of responsibility. For instance, participants showcased their independence by taking initiative in their learning, showing confidence in their decision-making, and demonstrating responsible behavior in various situations. Educators and school administrators reported observing positive changes in students' behavior, including their willingness to contribute to the community and their ability to collaborate effectively with their peers. Best practices from the program included the use of interactive teaching methods, personalized mentoring, and community-based projects. The integration of real-life scenarios and active participation fostered a deeper understanding and practical application of independence and character traits. The involvement of experienced mentors provided participants with valuable guidance and support, further enhancing their growth. Lastly, the community projects facilitated the development of leadership skills and a sense of responsibility towards the community.

Based on the evaluation findings, recommendations were made to further strengthen the program's impact. These included providing ongoing professional development for educators to reinforce the teaching methodologies, expanding the program to reach more schools and participants, and establishing sustainable partnerships with the community to support the program's long-term success. In conclusion, the community engagement program successfully empowered the community in Pekalongan by promoting independence and developing exemplary character traits among participants. Through a well-planned and comprehensive approach, including interactive workshops, mentoring sessions, and community projects, participants demonstrated improvements in independence, critical thinking, ethical behavior, and a sense of responsibility. The program's best practices, such as interactive teaching methods and personalized mentoring, contributed to its success in fostering a deep understanding and practical application of independence and character traits.

The following were pictures of community service activities carried out online via zoom.

Figure 1. Activity documentation

Furthermore, the program focused on empowering the community by promoting independence and developing exemplary character traits among participants. The program, implemented in the city of Pekalongan, had a strong emphasis on building independence and nurturing exemplary character in students attending Islamic primary schools (MI).

1. Building Independence

    The program successfully promoted independence among participants through various strategies and activities. Interactive workshops were conducted, providing opportunities for participants to engage in decision-making processes, take ownership of their learning, and explore their unique interests and talents. Participants were encouraged to express their opinions, think critically, and make independent choices. By allowing participants to have a voice and encouraging their independence, the program instilled a sense of self-reliance and confidence in their abilities.

    Furthermore, mentoring sessions played a significant role in fostering independence. Experienced mentors provided guidance and support to participants, empowering them to take responsibility for their actions, set goals, and make informed decisions. The mentors encouraged participants to think for themselves, solve problems independently, and develop a strong sense of personal accountability. Through these mentoring sessions, participants gained the necessary skills and mindset to navigate challenges with confidence and autonomy.

2. Developing Exemplary Character

    The program prioritized the development of exemplary character traits among participants. Through a range of activities, participants were encouraged to practice ethical behavior, demonstrate respect for others, and exhibit qualities such as integrity, empathy, and responsibility. Interactive workshops and role-playing exercises allowed participants to explore different ethical dilemmas, engage in moral reasoning, and make principled decisions.

In addition, community projects were undertaken to provide participants with practical experiences that would shape their character development. Participants actively engaged with the community, identifying local issues and developing initiatives to address them. Through these projects, participants learned the importance of serving others, collaborating with their peers, and taking initiative to make a positive impact on their community.

In conclusion, the community engagement program successfully achieved its objective of building independence and nurturing exemplary character among participants. Through interactive workshops, mentoring sessions, and community projects, participants developed a sense of independence, critical thinking, ethical behavior, and responsibility. The program's emphasis on fostering independence and exemplary character contributed to positive outcomes, empowering participants to become self-reliant, morally upright individuals capable of making a positive impact on their community.

Conclusions

The community engagement program successfully promoted independence and developed exemplary character traits among participants. Through interactive workshops, mentoring sessions, and community projects, participants demonstrated increased self-confidence, critical thinking skills, and a greater sense of responsibility. They exhibited ethical behavior, empathy, and respect towards others, becoming self-reliant individuals capable of making positive contributions to their community. The program's comprehensive approach and emphasis on building independence and exemplary character underscore the significance of such initiatives in nurturing well-rounded individuals who can make a difference in their community and society. Overall, the program's success in fostering independence and nurturing exemplary character highlights the importance of holistic approaches to education. By equipping participants with essential skills and ethical values, the program empowers them to become responsible citizens and agents of positive change. The outcomes of the program serve as a testament to the transformative impact of community engagement in building a stronger, more independent, and morally upright society.

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