



## Balancing control and freedom: Conditional autonomy in curriculum management in an Islamic Private School in Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the complexities of teacher autonomy in curriculum management at a private Islamic school in Indonesia, positioned within an educational environment shaped, to a certain extent, by Indonesia's shifting educational policies (oscillating between centralization and decentralization) and various religious frameworks. Through qualitative analysis of data obtained from focused group discussions involving teachers and school management, this research reveals how teacher autonomy is both supported and constrained by institutional policies, religious values, and resource availability. The main finding of this study is the emergence of a conditional autonomy model, where teachers exercise a negotiated form of autonomy within certain boundaries. On one hand, teachers' autonomy is influenced by national educational policies, institutional frameworks, and cultural-religious norms, indicating that this autonomy is conditional rather than absolute. On the other hand, due to practical field needs, teachers make adjustments in designing curriculum content, applying various teaching methods and strategies, and adapting teaching and assessment methods based on student conditions and time availability. These dynamics are influenced by factors such as school and foundation policies, educational supervision, resource availability, and teacher creativity. This study highlights unique challenges within the Indonesian context, where teacher autonomy in curriculum management requires a deeper, context-specific approach. A balance is needed between the demands for innovation and flexibility and the support and control mechanisms that do not restrict the space for the growth of teacher agency.

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### ABSTRAK

Studi ini mengkaji kompleksitas otonomi guru dalam pengelolaan kurikulum di sebuah sekolah Islam swasta di Indonesia, yang diposisikan sebagai satu lingkungan pendidikan yang sampai taraf tertentu terbentuk oleh ragam kebijakan pendidikan di Indonesia yang bergerak seperti pendulum (sentralistik-desentralistik) serta faktor berbagai kerangka keagamaan. Melalui analisis kualitatif atas data yang diperoleh dari diskusi kelompok terpumpun (focused group discussion), yang melibatkan guru-guru dan manajemen sekolah, penelitian ini mengungkapkan bagaimana otonomi guru didukung sekaligus dibatasi oleh kebijakan institusi, nilai-nilai agama, dan ketersediaan sumber daya. Temuan utama dari studi ini adalah munculnya suatu model conditional autonomy (otonomi kondisional), di mana para guru menerapkan otonomi yang dinegosiasikan dalam batas-batas tertentu. Di satu sisi, otonomi para guru tidak terlepas dari pengaruh kebijakan pendidikan nasional, kerangka institusi, dan norma budaya-religius, yang menunjukkan bahwa otonomi tersebut bukanlah mutlak melainkan bersyarat. Namun, di sisi lain, karena kebutuhan praktikal di lapangan, para guru melakukan penyesuaian-penyesuaian dalam merancang isi kurikulum, menerapkan berbagai metode dan strategi pengajaran, serta menyesuaikan metode pengajaran dan penilaian berdasarkan kondisi siswa dan ketersediaan waktu. Dinamika ini sendiri dipengaruhi oleh berbagai faktor seperti kebijakan sekolah dan yayasan, supervisi pendidikan, ketersediaan sumber daya, dan kreativitas guru. Studi ini menunjukkan tantangan unik dalam konteks Indonesia, di mana otonomi guru dalam pengelolaan kurikulum memerlukan pendekatan yang lebih mendalam dan konteks-spesifik, di mana perlu keseimbangan antara kebutuhan akan inovasi dan fleksibilitas dengan mekanisme dukungan dan kontrol yang tidak menyempitkan ruang bagi pertumbuhan agency guru.

**Kata Kunci:** *agensi guru, kerangka keagamaan, manajemen kurikulum, otonomi guru, otonomi kondisional, otonomi kurikulum, sekolah Islam swasta*

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## INTRODUCTION

Teacher autonomy in curriculum management is a crucial factor in the educational landscape, as it influences pedagogical innovation, teacher motivation, and student learning outcomes (Razak et al., 2024). Additionally, such autonomy empowers teachers to frame the educational process in a manner that is most relevant and contextual for students, fostering a learning environment that is more responsive and adaptable to changing needs and educational requirements (Amini & Kruger, 2022). In the specific context of Islamic private schools in Indonesia, teacher autonomy is further influenced by religious values and institutional frameworks, making the study of autonomy in these settings particularly complex (Wardati et al., 2023). Globally, education systems in developed countries such as Finland, Singapore, and Canada provide examples of how policies can support teacher autonomy in curriculum management. These systems emphasize professional development, collaboration, and innovation, offering a balance between policy mandates and teacher freedom (Parcerisa et al., 2022). In Finland, for instance, teachers collaborate with school leaders to implement innovative curriculum practices, while in Singapore, policies encourage self-reflection and ongoing professional development. Similarly, Canada's decentralized approach allows local adaptation of curricula while still granting significant autonomy to teachers (Campbell, 2012).

In contrast, developing countries like Indonesia face significant challenges in granting meaningful teacher autonomy. Despite the introduction of the school-level curriculum (KTSP) which aimed to provide teachers with greater autonomy in adapting curricula to local needs, implementation often deviates from this ideal. Teachers are frequently required to replicate policies issued by central authorities, limiting their ability to innovate and adapt to local contexts. As a result, teacher autonomy remains limited, and the potential benefits, such as improved pedagogical innovation and student outcomes, are not fully realized (Dieudé & Prøitz, 2024; Ertem et al., 2021). However, recent educational reforms, such as the introduction of the Kurikulum Merdeka, aim to provide teachers with greater autonomy in curriculum management. This curriculum represents a shift in national policy, encouraging teachers to exercise more professional judgment in designing and implementing curricula that meet the needs of their students. Islamic private schools, in particular, present a unique context where national curriculum policies intersect with religious values and institutional guidelines provided by religious foundations (Wardati et al., 2023). Understanding how teachers in these schools navigate these complex influences is key to comprehending the dynamics of teacher autonomy in Indonesia.

Research shows that teacher autonomy can increase ownership and responsibility for the teaching and learning process, which in turn can increase teaching effectiveness (Bergmark, 2020). Other research shows that autonomy in education develops the English curriculum in vocational schools to link the worlds of education, training, and employment (Poedjiastutie, 2019). Different from the previous study, this study seeks to explore how teachers in a private Islamic school in Indonesia understand and exercise their autonomy in curriculum management. Specifically, it examines how teacher autonomy is shaped by national policies, institutional frameworks, and religious values, and how these factors influence curriculum decisions and pedagogical practices. By investigating teachers' narratives, this research aims to uncover the challenges and opportunities associated with teacher autonomy in the context of curriculum reform, contributing valuable insights into achieving a balance between national curriculum policies and flexibility at the school level.

In short, by exploring the narratives of teachers in a private Islamic school, this study aims to contribute to the broader understanding of teacher autonomy in Indonesia, offering insights that can inform policy reforms and support pedagogical innovation. These findings may also apply to other contexts where teachers navigate complex intersections between national education policies and local or religious priorities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher autonomy is often critically considered a fundamental aspect of teacher professionalism and effectiveness. Teacher autonomy refers to the freedom and authority educators have to make decisions about their teaching practices, including curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and student assessment. This autonomy empowers teachers to adapt their instructional strategies to better serve the needs of their students, promote engagement, and foster more effective learning environments (Parker et al., 2021). In the Indonesian educational context, particularly in Islamic private schools, teacher autonomy is influenced by both national policies and cultural-religious expectations, making it a complex, context-dependent phenomenon.

However, the nature and scope of teacher autonomy vary significantly depending on institutional, cultural, and policy contexts. In many educational settings, particularly in developing countries, the implementation of teacher autonomy is often constrained by top-down policies, limited resources, and standardized curricula (Dieudé & Prøitz, 2024). Consequently, teacher autonomy becomes a dynamic negotiation between national policy mandates and localized professional practices (Oosterhoff et al., 2020). For instance, in Indonesia's Islamic private schools, teachers must negotiate between adhering to national curriculum standards and integrating religious values into their teaching (Wardati et al., 2023).

### Curriculum Management and Teacher Autonomy

Within this broader context, curriculum management emerges as a key area where autonomy is both exercised and constrained. Curriculum management refers to how teachers design, implement, and adapt curricular content and pedagogy to meet the needs of their students and the requirements of their institutions. While studies have shown that autonomy in curriculum management can enhance teacher motivation and increase pedagogical innovation, allowing teachers to tailor instruction to their student's specific needs (Bergmark, 2020), such autonomy often depends on the support and flexibility provided by institutional policies and leadership (Narayanan et al., 2024; Tokgoz-Can, & Bümen, 2021).

For example, in Islamic private schools, curriculum management often depends on the guidance provided by religious foundations, which allows teachers some autonomy in integrating religious values but may also impose constraints in terms of compliance with religious norms (Wardati et al., 2023). Teachers in these settings must navigate a complex relationship between institutional guidelines and their professional judgment, often balancing innovation with adherence to both religious principles and national education standards.

### The fluidity of Teacher Autonomy

One of the key challenges in conceptualizing teacher autonomy is recognizing its fluidity and context dependence. Autonomy is not a fixed trait but rather a dynamic construct that evolves in response to shifting educational policies, cultural expectations, and institutional pressures (Dieudé & Prøitz, 2024; Felayabi et al., 2022; Tahirsylaj, 2019). For example, in contexts like Indonesia, where educational reforms such as the transition from the Kurikulum 2013 to Kurikulum Merdeka are ongoing, teacher autonomy is shaped by the evolving demands of these policies (Marzuki & Indrawati, 2023; Rarasati, & Pramana, 2023). While the Kurikulum Merdeka aims to provide more flexibility, the integration of Islamic teachings requires teachers to balance this flexibility with adherence to religious frameworks, resulting in a form of negotiated autonomy (Wardati et al., 2023).

Teachers in Islamic private schools often find themselves negotiating between maintaining national curriculum standards and exercising their professional judgment to adapt these standards to their students' needs. This negotiation is further complicated by cultural and religious values that influence curriculum design and implementation. The integration of Islamic teachings into the national curriculum presents unique challenges and opportunities for teachers, requiring them to adapt content and pedagogy in ways that align with both institutional mandates and religious principles (Wardati et al., 2023). These contextual factors highlight the need for a flexible and adaptive understanding of autonomy, one that accounts for both external constraints and internal professional agency.

### **Institutional Support and Collaboration**

Another critical factor influencing teacher autonomy is the role of institutional support. Research has shown that teachers' ability to exercise autonomy effectively is often contingent on the support they receive from school leadership, peer networks, and professional development opportunities (Ford et al., 2020). In schools where collaboration is encouraged, teachers are more likely to experiment with innovative teaching practices and adapt their curricula to better meet the needs of their students (Kilag et al., 2023). This collective autonomy, which emerges from shared decision-making and collaborative professional learning communities, plays an essential role in fostering both individual and collective innovation in the classroom (Nguyen et al., 2021).

In the context of Islamic private schools, institutional support from religious foundations is particularly important. These schools often operate within frameworks established by religious foundations, which influence curriculum decisions and provide guidance on integrating religious values into education. While this support enables teachers to integrate Islamic teachings into their curriculum, it may also limit the scope of their autonomy by imposing religious standards that must be followed (Wardati et al., 2023). Teachers in these settings must navigate between the expectations of religious foundations and the broader national educational goals, further shaping their autonomy in curriculum management.

### **Dynamic Nature of Curriculum Autonomy**

Teacher autonomy in curriculum management is strongly influenced by the dynamic relationship between policy and practice. In a context where national education policy is in flux—such as Indonesia's recent Kurikulum Merdeka shift—teachers are required to continually adapt their practice to fit new guidelines while maintaining their professional integrity and meeting local needs. In practice, teachers are not the only source of learning; students can be a source of learning through discussion (Miladiyah et al., 2023). While the Kurikulum Merdeka provides more flexibility in some areas, it still requires teachers to navigate the tension between standardized national expectations and localized adaptations, emphasizing the dynamic nature of teacher autonomy (Rifa'i & Putra, 2024).

At the same time, the cultural and religious context of the school plays a pivotal role in how curriculum autonomy is enacted. Teachers in Islamic private schools must integrate religious values with the formal curriculum, requiring them to exercise a form of contextualized autonomy that balances national standards with the cultural and religious needs of their students (Wardati et al., 2023). This adaptation process is central to the professional identity of teachers in these settings, reinforcing the idea that autonomy is not merely about freedom from constraints but also about the ability to creatively and meaningfully adapt to local contexts.

In short, teacher autonomy is a complex and multi-dimensional concept that cannot be fully understood through a single lens. It encompasses various aspects of professional decision-making, from curriculum content to pedagogy and assessment, all of which are influenced by institutional, cultural, and policy

frameworks. Teacher autonomy is fluid and constantly evolving in response to changing education policies and contextual factors. It must follow scientific, ethical, and pedagogical principles (Yorulmaz & Çolak, 2023). In the specific context of Islamic private schools in Indonesia, teacher autonomy is further shaped by religious values and institutional support, creating a unique landscape where teachers must constantly balance national educational goals with local and cultural needs. Ultimately, teacher autonomy in this context is a form of negotiated freedom, where teachers adjust their practices to fit professional and religious expectations that emphasize learning with character (Arwitaningsih et al., 2023).

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research methodology. According to Creswell and Poth in the book titled “*Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design Choosing among Five Approaches*” Qualitative research is chosen as it is conducive to understanding teachers’ narratives about their autonomy in curriculum management deeply and comprehensively. Focused group discussion (FGD) was the primary method of data collection, allowing the researcher to explore the topic dynamically and interactively, encouraging participants to build on each other’s responses, and providing clarification and elaboration in real time. FGDs were expected to provide an in-depth picture of the variation and manifestation of teacher autonomy in a specific context. Conversations were recorded to ensure accuracy in data transcription and to facilitate detailed analysis. Research subjects were selected purposively based on their seniority, willingness, and availability of time. This sampling method was used to ensure that the subjects have a wealth of experience and unique insights that contribute to this study.

The study utilized thematic analysis to examine the transcribed data. Data collected from FGD were analyzed to uncover key themes. The thematic analysis in the study followed systematic coding techniques to ensure rigor and reliability. Themes were carefully identified and grouped to align with the research objectives: the manifestation of teacher autonomy in different curricular decisions, informed by the four autonomy dimensions. However, this qualitative research design has limitations and challenges. The findings are largely interpretive, which may limit their generalizability to other contexts or populations. Additionally, the nature of FGDs means that individual participants may feel uncomfortable expressing dissenting opinions or discussing sensitive issues in dialogue, which could potentially affect the depth and diversity of the data collected. Therefore, the researcher was aware of group dynamics and took steps to create a safe and inclusive environment for all participants.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Education Policy and Teacher Autonomy in Curriculum Management in Indonesia

#### *Shifts in Teacher Autonomy*

In the context of education in Indonesia, the concept of teacher autonomy has experienced its dynamics, especially with the national decentralization policy and the conceptual development of the curriculum. In the centralized era, the Ministry of Education set and issued the curriculum and teachers mostly functioned as implementers of the curriculum. In this model, of course, teacher autonomy in curriculum management is very limited. While in the decentralization era, the Indonesian government has carried out various educational reforms, including increasing teacher autonomy in teaching practices. Centralized control is gradually transferred to school-based management, where schools and teachers are given more freedom to adapt the curriculum to the local context and student assessment systems (Anggraini et al., 2022).

This decentralization policy can be seen in the Education Unit Level Curriculum (KTSP) policy, which gives schools and teachers the responsibility to develop their curriculum based on national standards. While

there is a push for greater autonomy in the policy, there are still some challenges. Studies show that many teachers in Indonesia are still caught between implementing national policies and adapting to local needs. In addition, teachers' lack of understanding of the Kurikulum Merdeka is a barrier to its implementation (Fifani et al., 2023; Qotimah & Rusman, 2024). The latest education policy, the Merdeka Belajar policy, and its various derivatives, represents a new era for teacher autonomy. On paper, this policy is expected to empower teachers to take more control over their classrooms, allowing them to tailor the curriculum to better meet the needs of their students. This policy is expected to potentially increase student engagement and learning outcomes, although its implementation still faces various challenges, including the need for more comprehensive teacher training and adequate resource support (Afandi et al., 2022; Marzuki & Indrawati, 2023; Rarasati & Pramana, 2023).

### ***Teacher autonomy in curriculum management in public and private schools***

Indonesian public schools, as entities directly managed by the government, traditionally follow a centrally designed curriculum. In this setting, teachers function primarily as implementers of the predetermined syllabus, and their autonomy in curriculum management is very limited. On the one hand, the shift towards decentralization in the early 2000s was expected to provide more room for teacher autonomy in terms of what is called the School Curriculum Level (KTSP) related to the curriculum. On the other hand, in this context for teachers in public schools, various challenges have emerged in adjusting work patterns, curriculum design and implementation, and pedagogical practices (Fifani et al., 2023). Meanwhile, the design and implementation of training and preparation of the necessary resources, which should be in line with these updates—such as in designing and managing the curriculum effectively—did not go as expected. In addition, although the policy is visionary, its implementation has turned out to be inconsistent, and there has even been a long-standing tug-of-war about the extent of teacher autonomy in curriculum management in public schools (Cirocki & Anam, 2021).

Private schools, on the other hand, have historically enjoyed more flexibility in terms of curriculum management, especially those based on a certain religious, pedagogical, or philosophical orientation. Islamic private schools, for example, have the authority to adapt the national curriculum to include more Islamic teaching and values (Wardati et al., 2023). However, this does not necessarily mean that there is greater teacher autonomy, as decisions often remain at the institutional level, and teachers are still likely to function primarily as curriculum implementers and have not yet reached the level of developers. These differences show that although Indonesian education policy has shifted to a more decentralized approach, the practical application of these policies and their effect on teacher autonomy vary greatly across different types of schools. This presents a complex landscape for researchers seeking to understand the nuances of teacher autonomy in curriculum management in Indonesia.

### ***Forms of Teacher Autonomy in Curriculum Management in Indonesia***

Based on the review of teacher autonomy in curriculum policy in Indonesia, first, the curriculum content is determined at the national level or by the state, not by individual teachers. The Ministry of Education and Culture (abbreviated in Indonesia as Kemendikbud) as a representative of the state is responsible for developing and standardizing the national curriculum, which aims to ensure a level of consistency and equality in various regions and schools. However, there is flexibility at the local, unit, or school level to adjust the curriculum to local needs on the condition that national standards can be met (Fauzi, 2022).

Second, teachers have more autonomy in terms of pedagogical decisions in their classrooms. Although curriculum policy may determine what should be taught, teachers can be seen as having the freedom to decide how to teach the content and modify it. Teachers can choose the teaching methods and strategies

that they believe are most effective for students. However, this of course can vary depending on the level of teacher creativity, school policies regarding teacher autonomy, and the control system run by school management or the education office (Parker et al., 2021).

Third, assessment of learning can also vary greatly. Although the national exam has been in many schools various types of exams or tests are still used as assessment tools as a policy. With the absence of the national exam, on the one hand, teachers have the responsibility and autonomy to assess student learning continuously through various formative and summative assessment methods. This allows teachers to adjust their instruction based on student performance and provide feedback to students. However, on the other hand, the design and implementation of alternative assessments require expertise, consistency, and instruments that require teacher professional development, something that is often overlooked (Arwitaningsih et al., 2023).

Fourth, autonomy in adapting curriculum content and teaching methods in the context of school locality can be seen as the most promising and has been more widely done. However, this also depends on various factors such as school policies, supervision by the education office, and available resources. Teacher autonomy in this case is usually related to learning differentiation according to individual student needs and considering the local cultural, social, and economic context (Dieudé & Prøitz, 2024).

In short, the degree of teacher autonomy can be influenced by various factors such as the overall educational policy environment, cultural norms and expectations, school leadership, teacher training and professional development, and available resources. Although teacher autonomy is often seen as important and necessary, there is a complex interplay between demands for accountability, the availability of support or incentives, and the assurance of quality, equality, and equity in education (Marzuki & Indrawati, 2023; Rarasati & Pramana, 2023).

### **Curriculum Management Autonomy in Teacher Narratives**

In practice, teachers perceive the curriculum as being closely tied to administrative deliverables, such as lesson schedules, learning journals, lesson plan development (RPP), administration, and syllabi. For the principal, however, the curriculum is more strongly associated with the school program:

*"It's about the programs. When I think about the curriculum, what comes to mind is the programs. For example, when we look for a school for our children, we often ask, 'What is the curriculum?' What we really want to know is, 'What are the programs like?'"*

Regarding curriculum choices, one teacher stated, "...we comply. We just comply. Like it or not, every curriculum has been thoroughly considered [before being enacted]." However, another teacher expressed a slightly different view:

*"What we do is take the good parts, right ma'am? [She is asking the principal for confirmation]. Yes, like [the proposal on] student-centered learning, we adopt that. Perhaps we also take the [proposal on] differentiated learning. We take the good parts."*

Another teacher described the national curriculum as:

*"... really just a reference [positioned as a framework], in my opinion. Because there is what is called the education unit curriculum [abbreviated KOSP, which is developed at the school level]. From there [the national curriculum framework], we can develop it according to our uniqueness and our topography [environment]. In other words, what is our environment really like? We are the ones who create the curriculum because it's the responsibility of the education unit."*

With the school's adoption of the Kurikulum Merdeka, which is promoted as being more adaptable and giving schools greater autonomy, the principal added:

*“Now it’s more in our hands, especially with the Kurikulum Merdeka. It’s really just a guide. And it’s unfortunate when teachers are solely focused on the books. On what’s provided by the ministry, they don’t expand beyond that.”*

In addition to the national curriculum, the school also refers to the curriculum framework developed by the Integrated Islamic School Network (JSIT), as it is a member of the network. This framework essentially incorporates the national curriculum, enriched with Islamic teachings and practices. To further enhance the distinctiveness of the schools it manages, the Foundation develops its policies and frameworks, which also serve as a basis for each school’s curriculum development.

In terms of curriculum development at the school level, the school relies heavily on its teachers. As the national curriculum was undergoing changes (at the time the data were collected), and the school had decided to comply with the new guidelines, the principal recalled the school management’s response during the first year of adoption:

*“[In preparing the curriculum]... at the beginning of the [academic] year, we had a working meeting [Raker] and developed what is now called KOSP. So, we first explained to them that the curriculum [for the school unit] is changed. [We explained] what KOSP is, all the details we [the school management] know. After the explanation, we continued with how to generate CP [learning outcomes] and teaching modules, and we discussed it according to the levels each teacher teaches.”*

Since the working meeting, which lasted one week, was not sufficient, the school instituted regular weekly meetings to ensure that the new curriculum was well understood, developed, and implemented. The principal emphasized that it was a collective learning process:

*“So, we practiced... we learned while practicing. By the second year, things became clearer. The structure started to take shape. ‘Oh, so, this is how it is.’”*

Throughout this ongoing self-learning process, teachers received training—both online and offline—provided by the Ministry of Education and Culture, local education offices, and support from the Foundation. While attending training incurs costs and logistical considerations, the teachers acknowledged that the Foundation has been very supportive, often encouraging them to participate:

*“Come on! Join this [training], join that [training].” The principal concluded, “So far, Alhamdulillah, we are fully supported.”*

The advancement of information technology has also been a significant help, as the teachers are already internet literate. Frequent curriculum changes in Indonesia meanwhile require schools and teachers to continually adjust. As one teacher commented:

*“It has been that way since the beginning [it has become a routine]. If there’s a curriculum change, there’s usually confusion.” However, she added, “When something new comes along, we ask, ‘What is this?’ But once we understand it, we comply.” In short, the teachers asserted that they have become accustomed to responding to policy changes.*

The support for teachers extends to the curriculum implementation level. The principal recalled how she continually encourages the teachers:

*“Come on, let’s create some new [learning] media.”*

While mandatory administrative tasks are typically fulfilled by the teachers, she recognizes challenges in the implementation stage:

*“Yes, there are some [teachers] who are less proactive. We try to motivate them and encourage creativity. For those who are less innovative, we nudge them along. Usually, every week, I say*



*something like, 'Propose a list of media to be purchased. Come on, what do you want to buy for this week?'*"

Curriculum development and implementation are closely related to the selection of appropriate textbooks. While free, government-published textbooks are available in electronic format, schools also have access to books from independent publishers, which are often marketed intensively. In selecting textbooks, schools largely rely on teachers, despite some involvement from foundations:

*"[Selecting textbooks] is done by the teachers. We analyze the books we'll use. From several publishers, we review a few books and then choose the one that best fits... There are criteria, there are indicators usually provided by the Foundation."*

As a result, schools may use textbooks from various publishers across different subjects and time periods. The next theme that emerges is related to the pattern of the relationship with the Foundation, particularly in terms of autonomy and control in curriculum management at both the school and teacher levels. Regarding intervention at the school level, the principal commented:

*"We are trusted. Alhamdulillah [Praise be to Allah]. We don't feel intimidated. But there is some control. We have to get the work done. There are indeed targets."*

In terms of intervention with teachers, one teacher mentioned that she needs a certain level of intervention and control:

*"It seems I'm the type who needs to be reminded. I really need to be pushed: 'Come on, come on, come on.' That's how it is. I'm still young, after all. [So, control is necessary for] monitoring. 'Have you finished yet?'"*

In this context, she was referring to intervention from the Foundation or school management, whom she views as her leaders or seniors.

Another area of intervention for teachers is class supervision. In addition to supervisors from the Foundation and school management, there are also supervisors from the local educational office. While all teachers agreed with the supervision process, one teacher admitted that it makes her "a bit nervous" both before and during supervision. However, another teacher stated:

*"It's not [a problem], sir [the interviewer], as long as the lesson plan (RPP) is fully prepared, we feel confident. That's how it is for me. It's the guide, sir... The structure lies in the RPP."*

Teachers are expected to focus not only on "satisfying" the supervisors but also on ensuring that students learn effectively. One teacher elaborated:

*"We have a strategy for that [laughed]. Yes, the strategy has to work. [The goal is] both to make the children happy and to 'satisfy' the supervisor."*

These forms of intervention are in addition to what was previously mentioned, particularly regarding curriculum determination, especially with the adoption of the JSIT framework, curriculum development at the unit level, and the selection of textbooks. A teacher emphasized that these interventions are perceived more as forms of support:

*"[There is] always [support from the Foundation]. We are always guided. So, before any decisions or policies are made, or before the start of the school year, we receive guidance from the Foundation first. This ensures that the Foundation's goals align with the unit's goals so that everything runs in sync."*

In terms of curriculum implementation—specifically the operational curriculum (KOSP) that is typically developed at the beginning of the school year—one teacher affirmed, "We are always compliant, aren't we?" Another teacher added, "We must adhere to it." A third teacher provided more detail:

*"...how much adherence do we have? Maybe around 60-70%, depending on the condition of the children and the available time, perhaps. It's conditional. And there are a lot of activities here, so the teachers aren't just tired from teaching, but also from the extracurricular activities."*

Another teacher elaborated:

*"As for me, I don't know the exact percentage, but when we make the lesson plans (RPP), we try. For example, 'Oh, it seems this model will work, a certain model.' But when we enter the classroom and see the students, we realize, 'Oh, it seems this won't work, let's just teach.' Unfortunately, that sometimes happens. However, the importance of the RPP is indeed to structure the learning process, isn't it? So that the learning is organized."*

In terms of assessment, the school implements a policy where teachers are responsible for managing assessments. Teachers, for instance, determine the type of assessment, what should be assessed, and the scoring criteria, ensuring that the assessments align with what the students have learned. One teacher mentioned that about 60-70% of what was planned is implemented, forming the basis for the assessments. Another teacher emphasized the need to adjust teaching methods based on the students' conditions and the available time in the classroom, with the assessments adapting accordingly. This policy aligns with what is proposed in the new Kurikulum Merdeka.

The teachers also discussed their approaches to curriculum and teaching innovation, what inspires them, and how they engage in self-development. One teacher stated:

*"We don't close ourselves off to inspiration. We're open to it. If it can be used for the school, whether for innovation or improvement, we don't close off any possibilities."*

Another teacher, noting that there is usually room for innovation or experimentation, shared:

*"We often conduct learning outside the classroom. [We also facilitate activities where] students practice taking care of the environment. [There are] class duty shifts and the 5 Rs. We're still keeping it simple for the 5 Rs, though. The Adiwiyata program is actually broader, [but we haven't officially registered for it yet]."*

The school's greenery is the result of such initiatives. As one teacher explained:

*"We've had a program for several years where new students bring plants. Yes, they donate the plants. So, what you see in the front yard [of the school] is the result of that... from here to over there."*

Teachers are regularly assigned to learn from other schools through direct visitations. One teacher emphasized her focus during these visits:

*"...knowledge, experience, something unique, something new that I just learned from them—unique things... For example, in teaching, if it's something we can apply to our students, I apply it. That's how it is."*

The principal reflected on her previous experience working in various institutions, comparing them to where she is now:

*"I've taught at a private middle school (SMP) once, but the longest was at a public elementary school. It was an exemplary public school, back before 2010. At that time, in public elementary schools, the curriculum was very rigid. We had to follow whatever the supervisor said, and it was very SOP-minded. Everything had to be done a certain way. But from there, I learned administrative discipline. Personally, I learned pedagogy there, sir. Maybe that was my life school, sir. At that public elementary school... I stayed for five years. That was like my life school. In public schools, teachers have this ingrained understanding: 'This has to be done this way. This is not right.' Yes, that's how*

*it is. Then, moving here, it became more dynamic and innovative. Public schools are rigid; there's less innovation unless we seek it out ourselves. But seeking it out isn't facilitated, because we're contract teachers [guru honor]."*

Teachers also reflected on their university education in connection with their experiences working as educators. One teacher said, "I truly started learning after working here." Another teacher explained:

*"...[in university] it's more lectures, and you're not exactly taught, sir. Whether you're learning by yourself or in college, in the end, you're learning on your own... Professors may spark curiosity, but it's up to us to seek out the knowledge ourselves."*

Another teacher recalled what one of her university professors had said:

*"...knowledge evolves. If you're studying here now, you'll definitely learn even more when you move to another place."*

Despite recognizing the connection between her university education and her teaching responsibilities, a teacher shared how one of her colleagues said, "I've never made an RPP before." While she had made one before, she acknowledged that at this school, she follows the latest guidelines. "I have to update my knowledge again because what we learned in college isn't enough. We can't just rely on that," she added.

How teachers interact with parents regarding curriculum and teaching was a significant topic in the FGD. The principal explained:

*"So far, they trust us with the curriculum. Whether their children progress well or not, they trust us. The main issue is more related to human resources. We acknowledge that many of us don't come from PGSD (primary school teacher education). Professionalism also plays a role. More coaching is needed for teachers who are slow responders, and such. But regarding the curriculum and everything else, so far, there have been no complaints."*

Communication with parents takes at least three forms. Initially, communication happens through technological tools like WhatsApp. If this method proves ineffective, parents are invited to the school for a face-to-face conversation. To foster closer relationships, there is a third approach:

*"Every two months, we conduct a home visit, which we call the Guru Rumah [Teacher at Home] Program. Parents gather at a particular house—say, at A's house—and all the other parents come there. That's where we build relationships. We eat together, chat, and share information. It's also a platform for receiving critiques and suggestions. This is how we build engagement with the parents. It's similar to what we do at the start of the school year when we present the school's vision and mission."*

In the Guru Rumah Program, there was an instance when one of the parents, who was also a teacher, provided valuable information and explanations.

## **Discussion**

The findings from this study offer valuable insights into how teacher autonomy is exercised and shaped within the context of an Islamic private school in Indonesia. Teachers in this school enjoy a significant degree of freedom in shaping the curriculum, choosing pedagogical methods, and adjusting their assessment practices. However, this autonomy is influenced by several factors, including national education policies, institutional frameworks, and cultural-religious norms, which suggest that autonomy is not absolute but conditional (Afandi et al., 2022). These findings align with broader educational research, which underscores the complexity and context-dependent nature of teacher autonomy.

## **Curriculum as Both a Framework and a Site of Innovation**

Teachers perceive the curriculum as a flexible structure, offering them the opportunity to adapt and innovate. While the national curriculum provides essential guidelines, teachers in this study view it as a broad reference rather than a prescriptive set of rules. This flexibility allows them to integrate Islamic teachings and local context into the curriculum, ensuring that learning is relevant and meaningful for their students. This aligns with global trends that see teachers increasingly as designers of curriculum, where they have the agency to modify national guidelines to address the unique needs of their students (Dieudé & Prøitz, 2024; Narayanan et al., 2024;).

However, this freedom to innovate within the curriculum raises critical questions about the extent of true autonomy. Teachers' creativity is bounded by the JSIT framework and the Foundation's guidelines, which serve as institutional checks on how far the curriculum can be adapted. This nuanced autonomy reflects a balancing act between creative freedom and compliance, with teachers navigating multiple layers of accountability. While the Kurikulum Merdeka provides a degree of empowerment, the Foundation's influence ensures that curriculum changes stay aligned with both national standards and religious values, suggesting that autonomy is structured rather than absolute (Afandi et al., 2022).

## **Pedagogical Practices: Balancing Freedom with Institutional Control**

The findings reveal that teachers experience considerable pedagogical freedom, allowing them to choose instructional methods that best suit their students. The ability to combine student-centered approaches with Islamic teaching practices illustrates a nuanced understanding of pedagogy that is responsive to both educational and cultural needs. Teachers are empowered to experiment with teaching strategies, particularly when addressing the diverse needs of their students (Pratycia et al., 2023).

However, the degree of this pedagogical freedom is tempered by institutional control. The school management and the Foundation play a critical role in guiding and overseeing how teachers exercise their pedagogical autonomy. While this oversight encourages innovation, it also ensures that teaching practices remain consistent with the school's broader educational and religious goals. This creates tension: teachers have the freedom to innovate, but they must do so within the boundaries set by the school's leadership. This form of conditional autonomy is reflective of broader debates about the nature of teacher freedom in hierarchical or religiously governed schools, where professional judgment is balanced with institutional expectations (Cirocki & Anam, 2021).

## **Professional Development and Resource Support: Enhancing Teacher Agency**

These findings highlight the important role of professional development in supporting teacher autonomy. Teachers in this study reported that school foundations and management actively provide frequent training opportunities, both online and offline, facilitated by the Ministry of Education and Culture and local education offices. This investment in professional development is critical as it equips teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate curriculum changes and adopt innovative teaching practices. Teachers can engage students in social activities in character learning (Haetami et al., 2023).

However, the findings also reveal resource limitations, which present a challenge to fully realizing teacher autonomy. While the Foundation's support and training programs are appreciated, teachers indicate that they still face constraints when it comes to implementing more resource-intensive teaching methods or experimenting with new technologies (Bergmark, 2020). This reflects a broader pattern in educational research, where autonomy is often contingent not only on the freedom to innovate but also on the resources available to do so effectively. In this case, the Foundation and school management provide

important support, but there is room for further investment to ensure that autonomy is accompanied by the necessary resources to foster meaningful innovation (Afandi et al., 2022).

### **Navigating External Control and Accountability**

Although teachers in the Islamic private schools studied enjoy considerable autonomy, the findings underscore the role of external supervision in maintaining accountability. Teachers are subject to supervision not only from school management and foundations but also from the local education office. Although some teachers expressed initial discomfort with being evaluated, most teachers viewed supervision as a necessary mechanism to ensure education quality and standards. This is in line with research that teachers in countries with strong large-scale accountability instruments report low perceived autonomy and vice versa (Lennert-DaSilva, 2022). This means that teacher autonomy and accountability can coexist productively when oversight is framed as supportive rather than punitive.

The study reveals that the teachers experience a supportive supervisory environment, where the focus is on guidance and improvement rather than control. Teachers report that supervision helps them refine their teaching practices and ensures that their work aligns with the school's educational and religious mission. This model of supervision as guidance supports teacher growth, allowing for autonomy within a framework of accountability, thus creating a balanced approach that fosters innovation while maintaining high standards (Cirocki & Anam, 2021).

### **Balancing Innovation with Tradition: Navigating Competing Demands**

These findings highlight the critical tension between innovation and tradition in educational approaches in schools. On the one hand, teachers are encouraged to experiment with modern pedagogical methods, such as student-centered learning. On the other hand, they are expected to adhere to and uphold the Islamic values and traditional practices embedded in the school's ethos. This dynamic creates a nuanced space where teachers must carefully navigate the demands of progressive education and the sometimes competing cultural-religious expectations. Teachers are faced with the challenge of creating learning strategies to keep up with the times (Anas et al., 2023).

The school's layered curriculum—which incorporates elements of the national curriculum, the JSIT framework, and policies from the Foundation—reflects a deliberate attempt to balance these demands. Teachers report that this layered approach allows them to innovate within a structured environment, ensuring that their educational practices remain aligned with both national educational standards and religious principles. This balance is crucial for creating a school culture that values both tradition and progress, allowing teachers to navigate these demands in ways that enhance student learning (Dieudé & Prøitz, 2024).

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings from this study illustrate the complexity of teacher autonomy in an Islamic private school context. While teachers enjoy considerable freedom in curriculum design, pedagogy, and assessment, their autonomy is shaped by a broader institutional framework that includes national education policies, the JSIT framework, and oversight from the Foundation. The school's approach fosters a nuanced form of autonomy, where teachers can exercise professional discretion within a supportive and accountable environment. The balance between autonomy and accountability, innovation and tradition, is central to understanding how teacher autonomy operates in this setting. The Foundation and school management play a critical role in providing the resources, training, and guidance necessary for teachers to navigate

this complex terrain. Future research could explore how these dynamics play out in other educational contexts, such as public schools or non-Islamic private institutions, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how teacher autonomy can be supported across diverse educational environments.

### **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest in connection with this research study.

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