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Curriculum Management in Encouraging Deep Learning in Vocational High Schools

Nungky Kusumawati[1], Enung Hasanah[2], Achadi Budi Santosa[3]
Universitas Ahmad Dahlan Yogyakarta, Indonesia

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Abstract
Immersive learning is a crucial need in vocational education to address the ever-changing dynamics of the workplace. However, its implementation in Vocational High Schools (SMK) still faces obstacles, particularly related to curriculum management, which tends to be administrative in nature. This study aims to describe in depth the implementation of curriculum management in encouraging deep learning in vocational schools, identifying supporting and inhibiting factors, and revealing school strategies in strengthening learning that aligns with the principles of the Independent Curriculum. This study used a descriptive qualitative approach and was conducted at SMK PGRI 01 Sukorejo, Kendal. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies involving the principal, vice principal for curriculum, teachers, and students. Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes data reduction, data presentation, conclusion drawing, and verification. The results of the study show that deep learning At SMK PGRI 01 Sukorejo, curriculum management strategies encompass vision-based planning, active and contextual learning, reflective evaluation and supervision, and continuous improvement. These strategies have positively impacted student engagement, increased understanding, critical thinking skills, and readiness to enter the workforce. Despite challenges such as differences in teacher readiness and student abilities, the school has been able to overcome them through a phased approach and a strengthened learning culture. This research underscores the importance of strategic and collaborative curriculum management as a key to success in deep learning in vocational schools.

Corresponding Author:
Enung Hasanah
Universitas Ahmad Dahlan Yogyakarta, Indonesia

1. INTRODUCTION

In this era of globalization, education equips students with critical, creative, collaborative, and communicative thinking skills. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology recommends the Independent Curriculum as a means of improving education that focuses on character and competence (Iyanda et al., 2025). In the context of vocational education, the curriculum serves as the core of learning, regulating objectives, content, and subject matter so that students master the competencies required by the world of work and industry (Harwisaputra et al., 2023). This also aligns with the vision of H. Abdul Mu'ti, the Indonesian Minister of Primary and Secondary Education, who designed a new curriculum based on Deep Learning. This curriculum aims to help students not only master knowledge but also find meaning in their learning. This approach is expected to prepare the younger generation to face global challenges with

critical, analytical, and creative thinking skills (Muvid, 2024). Currently, most teachers have implemented project-based learning with students, but it has not had a significant impact on in-depth learning. This is evident in the learning process results and student abilities, which are largely cognitive in nature and have not yet developed critical thinking skills. Another problem is that quality education remains a luxury for some in our society (Meliana, 2025).

The main problem in implementing deep learning in vocational schools lies not only in teachers' teaching strategies, but also in how curriculum management at the school level is designed and implemented (Al Munawar et al., 2025). In practice, curriculum development is usually still administrative, focusing more on document review and standardization than on improving the quality of learning experiences (Hamid et al., 2017). Generally, it is still administrative, focusing more on document review and standardization than on improving the quality of meaningful learning experiences. Curriculum development teams face challenges in integrating deep learning principles at every stage of curriculum management, from planning and implementation to evaluation. In the educational context, *deep learning* refers to learning that is not only superficial but involves in-depth understanding, critical analysis, and application of concepts in various real-life situations (Fahlevi, 2022).

According to Utari & Arifin (2023), several vocational schools **don't understand the link & match form yet. The** alignment of curriculum with industry and planning is time-consuming and not yet integrated. Furthermore, coordination between subject teachers, expertise program managers, and DUDIKA (Business World, Industry World, Work World) as vocational high school partners has not been optimal. Research has found that approximately 12% of vocational high school graduates are still not absorbed in the workforce, including the competencies of vocational high school graduates that do not match the needs of the business sectors where they work (Widodo & Anggraeni, 2016). As a result, the implementation of in-depth learning has not been able to connect classroom theory with real-world practice. Other factors, such as limited teacher training, a lack of in-depth learning-based academic supervision, and a learning outcome orientation that still focuses on exam scores, have also slowed down the paradigm shift in learning (Pardi, 2025). This condition indicates that effective curriculum management plays a strategic role in ensuring *deep learning* can be realized in vocational school environments (Azzahra et al., 2025).

Researchers see that curriculum management in vocational schools is not just about administrative practices, but a strategic process that must connect educational vision and classroom teaching practices (EVAN, 2024).

This study aims to describe in depth the implementation of curriculum management in encouraging in-depth learning in vocational schools. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) identify the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes of curriculum management in schools; (2) analyze the supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of a curriculum oriented towards*deep learning*; and (3) reveal the managerial strategies implemented by schools to strengthen in-depth learning in accordance with the principles of the Independent Curriculum.

This research is very important because it is in line with the needs of vocational schools to implement the curriculum effectively, in other words, so that students can master not only technical skills, but also critical and creative thinking skills, and the ability to adapt to changes in the world of work. The research questions include: (1) How does the implementation of curriculum management in vocational schools encourage *deep learning*? (2) What factors support and inhibit its implementation? (3) How does the school's strategy address these inhibiting factors?

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach. This approach is used because it can provide an in-depth description of how the curriculum management implementation process is carried out and how in-depth learning (*deep learning*) is realized in the real context of a vocational school. This research was conducted at SMK PGRI 01 Sukorejo Kendal, as a relevant location because it is developing a learning approach oriented towards in-depth understanding. The focus of the research is directed at the curriculum management practices existing in the school.

In qualitative research, data collection techniques are generally carried out through a combination of complementary methods, such as in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation studies (Suprayitno et al., 2024). The use of various data sources aims to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied. (Farida et al., 2025) This research activity involved the principal, vice principal for curriculum, and teachers at SMK PGRI 01 Sukorejo.

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach, which aims to Getan in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of curriculum management implementation in promoting deep learning in vocational schools. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research focuses on exploring the meanings constructed by individuals or groups in a particular social context. The initial stage of data collection begins with determining the focus and location of the research. The focus of the research is directed at curriculum management practices, including planning, implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement strategies in promoting deep learning (Sari, 2023). The research location was selected purposively, namely at SMK PGRI 01 Sukorejo Kendal, because this school is developing learning oriented towards deep understanding. According to Sugiyono, as quoted by Niam et al. (2024), purposive location selection is carried out if the location is considered capable of providing rich and relevant data to the research focus.

Data collection was conducted using three main techniques: interviews, observation, and documentation studies, to obtain in-depth and complementary data (Zahroh et al., 2025). Semi-structured interviews were used to explore informants' experiences, views, and interpretations regarding the implementation of curriculum management and in-depth learning. Researchers used flexible interview guidelines to allow informants to express their opinions freely. According to Sugiyono (2007), semi-structured interviews allow researchers to obtain more in-depth data due to open interaction between researchers and informants.

Participatory observation is conducted by directly involving researchers in school activities, such as the learning process, curriculum meetings, and practical activities. This observation aims to directly observe how curriculum management strategies are implemented and how in-depth learning occurs. According to Spradley, as cited by Chuanshan (2022), participant observation allows researchers to understand behavior, interactions, and social contexts more comprehensively. Documentary studies are conducted by analyzing official school documents, such as lesson plans, annual programs, semester programs, curriculum evaluation reports, industry collaboration documents, and meeting minutes. According to Bowen (2009), documents are a stable source of data and can strengthen findings from interviews and observations.

To ensure the validity of the data, this study uses **triangulation of techniques and sources,** namely, comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation from various informants. According to **Miles et al. (2014),** Triangulation is important to increase credibility and trust in the results of qualitative research.

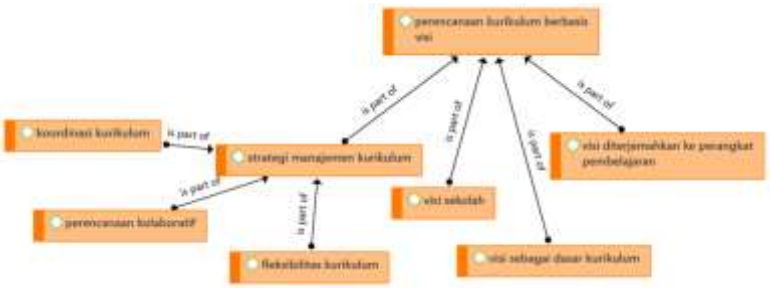
Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously. The data obtained was

analyzed in stages through reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. This aligns with the cyclical nature of qualitative research. According to Miles et al. (2014), qualitative data analysis does not wait for all data to be collected but rather begins from the beginning of the study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the research data obtained by the researcher, the results of the study on curriculum management strategies to encourage in-depth learning at SMK PGRI 01 Sukorejo were implemented through five curriculum management strategies. These are explained as follows:

3.1.Curriculum Planning



The results of observations and interviews with the principal of SMK PGRI 01 Sukorejo indicate that curriculum planning at SMK PGRI 01 Sukorejo is based on the school's vision as the primary foundation for curriculum decision-making. The school's vision is not only understood as a slogan but also implemented in learning tools. This can be seen from the relationship between the school's vision code, the vision as the basis for the curriculum, and the vision implemented into learning.

As quoted by participant 1 and participant 2 as follows:

Based on interviews with key informants at SMK PGRI 1 Sukorejo, it was found that the school's vision serves as a fundamental foundation for the entire curriculum management process. The school demonstrates a strong commitment to producing graduates who excel not only in technical competence but also possess noble character and high dignity. This is reflected in every stage of curriculum planning, which consciously integrates character building as a component equal to skill mastery. As explained by Participant 1, this vision serves as the main compass in balancing learning aspects:

> "Our vision at SMK PGRI 1 Sukorejo is to commit to producing graduates with noble character, dignity, competence, and skills. This vision serves as the primary foundation for curriculum management at the school. This means that our curriculum is not only geared toward mastering skills but also toward developing students' character. In every curriculum plan, we always emphasize a balance between knowledge, skills, and attitudes."

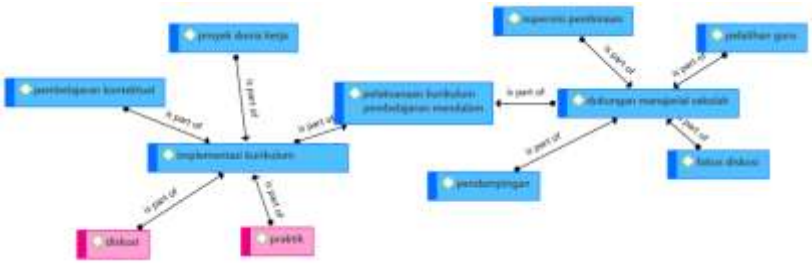
Furthermore, the implementation of this vision is technically translated into the development of learning materials by teachers. School management ensures that the educational orientation does not stop at cognitive abilities alone, but rather focuses on developing students' in-depth thinking patterns. This process is reinforced through regular coordination and oversight of the developed instructional documents. Participant 2 emphasized how this vision is realized in daily academic activities:

> "The school's vision serves as the primary reference in curriculum planning. We ensure that every learning tool developed by teachers is oriented not only toward

competency, but also toward developing student character. In curriculum meetings, we consistently emphasize that learning must encourage students to think, ask questions, and understand the material deeply, in line with the school's vision."

The results of the data analysis indicate that curriculum development at SMK PGRI 1 Sukorejo represents a participatory planning model involving synergy between the principal, vice principal for curriculum, and teaching staff. This collaborative pattern creates a constructive, dialogical space, where teachers are no longer trapped by administrative demands to simply complete the material (*content delivery*), but rather focus on instructional design that facilitates deep learning. This strategy is reinforced by curriculum flexibility that provides teachers with pedagogical autonomy to differentiate learning. This freedom to adapt teaching methods to students' unique characteristics indicates that the curriculum is viewed as a dynamic instrument, not a rigid document. Overall, these findings confirm that the integration of a strong school vision and a collaborative work culture is a key determinant in creating a meaningful and student-centered learning ecosystem at SMK PGRI 1 Sukorejo.

3.2.Curriculum Implementation



During the curriculum implementation phase, interviews with the principal, vice principal for curriculum, and teachers revealed that in-depth learning was realized through active and contextual learning. Teachers not only delivered material but also encouraged students to participate in discussions, practical exercises, and projects related to the workplace.

The codes for discussion, practice, contextual learning, and workplace projects are directly related to the curriculum implementation and delivery categories. This indicates that curriculum implementation aims to engage students in thinking, engaging in dialogue, and connecting material to real-world experiences.

The role of teachers in deep learning is also very prominent. Teachers act as facilitators who guide, set examples, and encourage students to be active. Teachers are given space to innovate learning methods without pressure to follow a certain pattern. This condition makes the curriculum more flexible and meaningful for students.

The above statement is shown through several participants as follows:

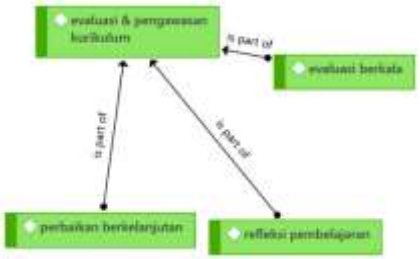
"We recognize that in-depth learning cannot occur without teacher support. Therefore, the school provides support in the form of training, mentoring, and teacher discussion forums. We also don't require teachers to always follow a particular method, but rather provide space for innovation. Through coaching supervision, we strive to help teachers become more confident in implementing learning that emphasizes student understanding and active engagement." (participant 1)

Curriculum development at SMK PGRI 1 Sukorejo is rooted in a participatory planning model that prioritizes synergy between the principal, vice principal for

curriculum, and teaching staff. This synergy stems from a collaborative pattern that creates a constructive, dialogical space, so that planning is no longer a one-way instruction, but rather the result of shared thinking. Through this dialogue, teachers' focus begins to shift; they are no longer trapped by administrative demands to simply complete material (content delivery), but instead shift to developing instructional designs that facilitate deep learning for students.

This shift in focus is fully supported by the curriculum's flexibility, which provides teachers with pedagogical autonomy in the classroom. This autonomy allows teachers the freedom to differentiate learning, adapting teaching strategies and methods to the unique characteristics and needs of each student. This practice demonstrates that the curriculum at SMK PGRI 1 Sukorejo is viewed as a dynamic and adaptive instrument, not simply a rigid formal document. Ultimately, the integration of the school's strong vision and collaborative work culture is a key determinant in creating a meaningful, relevant, and fully student-centered learning ecosystem.

3.3.Curriculum Evaluation and Monitoring



Evaluation and supervision of the curriculum at SMK PGRI 01 Sukorejo, the results of interviews with the vice principal for curriculum showed that the category of evaluation and supervision of the curriculum was linked to the codes of periodic evaluation, learning reflection, and continuous improvement.

The vice principal responsible for curriculum, along with the principal, conducts oversight to determine the extent to which learning fosters student engagement and understanding. Evaluation results are used not only to assess teacher performance but also to inform improvements in curriculum planning and implementation.

This is confirmed by the statement of participant 2 as follows,

"Curriculum evaluation is conducted periodically through student learning outcomes, observations of the learning process, and teacher feedback. We assess whether students are simply completing assignments or truly understanding the material. Based on these evaluations, we make improvements to both the planning and implementation of learning."

This evaluation approach makes teachers feel supported, rather than rigidly supervised. Thus, curriculum evaluation and oversight actually strengthen the implementation of in-depth learning in schools.

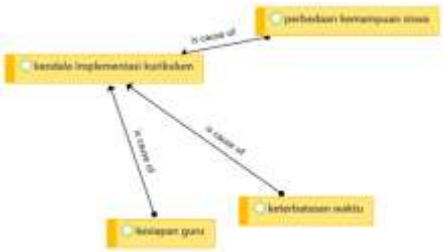
3.4.The Impact of Deep Learning

The research results show that the implemented curriculum management strategies impacted students' learning experiences. This was evident in their active student engagement and the impact of in-depth learning. Students became more active in learning through discussions, group work, and practice. The impact on students was not only on their understanding of the material but also on their improved thinking skills, self-confidence, and ability to collaborate. Students felt that learning was more meaningful because they understood the material and knew how to apply it in the workplace.

One teacher stated, "Deep learning is learning that allows students to truly understand, not just memorize. Students are encouraged to think, discuss, and relate the material to real-world practice. This way, students more easily remember and understand the material." (Participant 3)

This study shows that in-depth learning not only impacts cognitive aspects but also students' attitudes and skills, in line with the objectives of vocational education.

3.5.Obstacles and Continuous Improvement



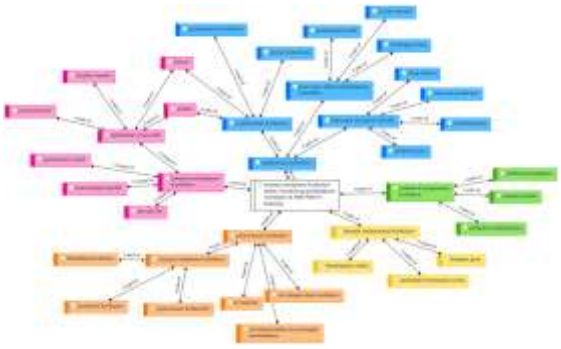
Although the curriculum management strategy has been successful, this study also identified several obstacles in its implementation. The main obstacles include time constraints, differences in teacher readiness, and differences in student abilities. This is clearly reflected in the category of obstacles to curriculum implementation in the interview results of participant 1.

"The challenges we face include differences in teacher readiness and diverse student backgrounds. Not all teachers are immediately comfortable with the immersive learning approach. However, we address this with a gradual approach. We don't force drastic changes, but encourage continuous improvement. Our principle is to build a culture of learning for both students and teachers." (participant 1)

Schools address these obstacles with a gradual and sustainable approach. Changes are not implemented drastically, but through a process of mentoring, teacher training, and collaborative reflection. The principle developed is to build a culture of learning for both teachers and students.

With this continuous improvement strategy, obstacles are not seen as major barriers, but as part of the learning and curriculum development process.

4. CONCLUSION



Based on the research results and discussion, it can be concluded that the curriculum management strategy at SMK PGRI 01 Sukorejo plays a crucial role in fostering in-depth learning. Curriculum management is not understood as merely an administrative activity, but rather as a strategic process that connects the school's vision with classroom learning practices. Curriculum planning, which stems from the school's vision and is carried out collaboratively, provides teachers with clear direction in designing learning that balances knowledge, skills, and character development.

The curriculum implementation demonstrates more active and contextual learning relevant to the workplace. Teachers are given space to innovate and act as facilitators, encouraging students to think critically, discuss, and connect the material to real-world experiences. Curriculum evaluation and monitoring are conducted reflectively and continuously, not to find fault, but as a means to improve learning and strengthen deep learning practices.

This curriculum management strategy had a positive impact on student engagement and their learning experience. Students not only cognitively understood the material but also experienced increased self-confidence, collaboration skills, and readiness for the workplace. Although barriers such as differences in teacher readiness, time constraints, and diverse student abilities persisted, the school addressed these through a phased approach and continuous improvement. Therefore, this study confirms that the effectiveness of visionary, collaborative, and reflective curriculum management is key to promoting deep learning in vocational schools.

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