

NATURE SCHOOL-BASED CURRICULUM MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES THROUGH CHILD-CENTERED LEARNING AND RELIGIOUS HABITUATION PROGRAMS AT PAUD SAUNG: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
Keywords: Early Childhood Education; Nature-Based School; Curriculum Management; Religious Habituation	<i>Curriculum management in nature-based early childhood education requires a strategy that integrates child-centered learning with religious habituation programs to support character development. This study aimed to analyze the curriculum management strategy implemented through child-centered learning and religious habituation programs at PAUD Saung, Semarang Regency. The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach involving the principal and teachers as research participants. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, while data credibility was ensured through source and technique triangulation. The findings revealed that the curriculum management strategy was implemented through four management functions: planning, organizing, implementation, and evaluation. Curriculum planning began with a diagnostic assessment as the basis for developing the operational curriculum. Curriculum organization was carried out through collaboration among the foundation, principal, and teachers, supported by continuous professional development for educators. Curriculum implementation emphasized child-centered learning by utilizing the natural environment as the primary learning resource and integrating religious habituation programs into daily learning activities. Curriculum evaluation was conducted continuously through children's developmental assessments, teacher reflection, and parental involvement. The findings indicate that the curriculum management strategy supports meaningful learning while promoting children's cognitive, socio-emotional, spiritual, and character development in an integrated manner.</i>

A. Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) serves as the foundation for children's character formation, cognitive, socio-emotional, and spiritual development, as well as the acquisition of essential life skills (Kemendikdasmen, 2026). In contemporary educational practice, effective curriculum management has become one of the key determinants of high-quality learning. The educational paradigm of the twenty-first century has shifted the focus of curriculum management from conventional content delivery toward contextual, meaningful, and child-centered learning experiences (Azzuri et al., 2024). This paradigm shift has encouraged many Early Childhood Education institutions to develop curriculum models that are more responsive to children's developmental needs while simultaneously integrating spiritual and character values into the learning process.

In recent years, the nature school concept has gained increasing attention as an alternative educational approach. Nature schools provide learning experiences that utilize the natural environment as the primary learning resource, allowing children to observe, experiment, explore, and acquire knowledge through direct experiences (Kamelia, n.d.). This approach aligns with the principles of constructivist learning theory, in which children actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment. Beyond supporting cognitive development, nature-based education has been recognized for fostering creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, environmental awareness, and independence among young learners (Azzabra, 2025). Consequently, the success of nature schools depends not only on the design of learning activities but also on curriculum management strategies capable of effectively integrating educational objectives, children's developmental characteristics, the learning environment, and the institution's educational culture.

Numerous educational policies emphasize the importance of cultivating character from an early age through the consistent practice of positive daily behaviors (Fadhillah et al., 2016). One practical manifestation of this commitment is the implementation of religious habituation programs (Isnawati, 2019). Such programs not only introduce children to religious practices but also foster moral values, including discipline, responsibility, empathy, gratitude, and ethical behavior (Tazkia & Da, 2024). Previous studies have demonstrated that religious habituation contributes significantly to the development of children's religious character while simultaneously promoting prosocial behavior (Muhammad Nasiruddin¹, Maylita Dwi Putri¹, 2025).

Curriculum management strategies in nature schools extend beyond the preparation of curriculum documents. They encompass the continuous processes of planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating learning activities to ensure that all educational programs operate cohesively and systematically. In practice, these strategies should integrate child-centered learning as the primary pedagogical approach with religious habituation programs as a means of fostering religious character from an early age. Child-centered learning provides children with opportunities to learn through exploration, authentic experiences, and interaction with their environment in accordance with their developmental stages. At the same time, religious habituation programs become an integral component of the school's culture through their consistent implementation in daily activities. The integration of these two components requires a systematic curriculum management strategy to ensure the balanced development of children's cognitive, socio-emotional, spiritual, and independent capacities.

Curriculum management functions not only as a guideline for organizing learning activities but also as a strategic instrument for ensuring coherence among educational objectives, learning experiences, character development, and school culture (Rahayu et al., 2025). Therefore, curriculum management strategies warrant further investigation

to understand how planning, implementation, and evaluation are systematically conducted to ensure that all educational programs are aligned with the institution's vision and distinctive educational characteristics.

Within the context of nature schools, curriculum management possesses characteristics that distinguish it from those of conventional Early Childhood Education institutions. Nature schools integrate the natural environment as the primary learning resource, adopt child-centered learning as the core pedagogical approach, and incorporate religious habituation into children's daily activities. The integration of these three components requires management strategies capable of aligning learning objectives, children's developmental needs, religious values, and the optimal utilization of the natural environment. Accordingly, in-depth research is needed to examine how curriculum management strategies are implemented within nature schools, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of curriculum management practices in Early Childhood Education institutions characterized by nature-based learning and a religious school culture.

Based on these considerations, this study focuses on analyzing curriculum management strategies in a nature school setting through the implementation of child-centered learning and religious habituation programs at PAUD Saung. PAUD Saung is an Early Childhood Education institution in Semarang Regency that adopts the nature school approach by integrating child-centered learning with religious habituation into its daily educational activities. This distinctive characteristic differentiates PAUD Saung from conventional Early Childhood Education institutions, as its learning process not only utilizes the natural environment as the primary learning resource but also cultivates a strong religious culture through various habituation activities. Consequently, PAUD Saung provides a relevant context for an in-depth examination of curriculum management strategies within nature-based Early Childhood Education.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to obtain an in-depth understanding of curriculum management strategies in a nature school setting through the implementation of child-centered learning and religious habituation programs at PAUD Saung. The research was conducted at PAUD Saung, located at Jl. Ismaya Raya No. 57 Lorog, RT 02/RW 06, Soka, Lerep, West Ungaran District, Semarang Regency, Central Java 50519, Indonesia.

The research participants consisted of the principal and teachers who were directly involved in curriculum management and implementation. Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted to examine the implementation of child-centered learning, the utilization of the natural environment as a primary learning resource, the implementation of religious habituation programs, and interactions between teachers and children during learning activities. In-depth interviews were carried out to obtain comprehensive information regarding curriculum management strategies, including the processes of curriculum planning, organization, implementation, supervision, and evaluation, as well as the integration of child-centered learning and religious habituation programs into daily educational practices. Documentation was used to complement the data through the collection of curriculum documents, teaching modules, activity schedules, children's developmental assessment records, and documentation of learning program implementation.

The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through source triangulation and method triangulation, whereby information obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation was systematically compared to enhance the credibility of the findings. Subsequently, the data were analyzed using the interactive data analysis model,

which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The analysis was conducted continuously throughout the research process, beginning with data collection and continuing until the completion of the study. The data were organized according to the research focus, namely curriculum planning strategies, the organization of learning programs, the implementation of child-centered learning, the implementation of religious habituation programs, and the evaluation of curriculum management within the nature school context at PAUD Saung.

C. Results and Discussion

The findings obtained from classroom observations, interviews with teachers and school administrators, and document analysis at PAUD Saung indicate that the institution's nature school-based curriculum management strategy is implemented through an integrated process of planning, organizing, implementation, and evaluation. These processes are closely aligned with child-centered learning and religious habituation programs. Curriculum development not only follows the Learning Outcomes (Capaian Pembelajaran/ CP) established by the Ministry of Education but is also adapted to the institution's unique characteristics, which emphasize the natural environment as the primary learning resource and the integration of religious values into the school's culture.

1. Nature School-Based Curriculum Development Strategy

The interview findings revealed that curriculum development begins during the new student admission process (PPDB). At this stage, an initial assessment is conducted through direct observation of prospective students and interviews with their parents. The interviews focus on gathering information regarding children's individual characteristics, daily habits, special educational needs, and developmental history beginning from the prenatal period. Meanwhile, observations are conducted to identify children's fundamental competencies, particularly their motor skills, such as manipulating objects, drawing, writing, and performing other developmentally appropriate activities.

The assessment data subsequently serve as the foundation for providing individualized educational services that support each child's development throughout their educational journey at PAUD Saung. This finding demonstrates that the curriculum is developed based on the principles of diagnostic assessment, ensuring that learning experiences are designed according to children's individual needs.

Furthermore, curriculum development is carried out by integrating the national curriculum established by the Ministry of Education with the institution's operational curriculum. The principal explained that although curriculum implementation is adapted to the school's distinctive characteristics through its curriculum model and weekly learning schedule, it remains fully aligned with national educational regulations. At the beginning of each academic year, all teachers participate in collaborative curriculum development workshops organized by the foundation to formulate the institution's vision, learning objectives, Qur'anic memorization targets, daily prayers, selected short hadiths, and religious character development programs.

These findings indicate that the curriculum development process reflects the flexibility promoted by the Merdeka Curriculum, which enables educational institutions to design operational curricula that accommodate students' developmental needs while reflecting the institution's unique educational characteristics. This finding is consistent with previous research demonstrating that initial assessment constitutes a fundamental component of adaptive and child-centered learning, ensuring that every child receives learning experiences appropriate to their developmental stage (Suryana & Hijriani, 2023). Likewise, the

development of an operational curriculum tailored to an institution's unique characteristics has been identified as one of the defining indicators of high-quality curriculum implementation in Early Childhood Education (Kurniawati & Prasetyo, 2024).

2. Curriculum Organization and Resource Management

The findings indicate that curriculum development is carried out collaboratively by the foundation, school administrators, and teachers. Each teacher assumes a dual role as both classroom teacher and learning facilitator, with responsibilities assigned at the beginning of each academic year. Furthermore, depending on institutional needs, teachers are encouraged to provide learning support across different class levels within the foundation.

The foundation assumes primary responsibility for establishing religious learning objectives, designing educational programs, and enhancing teachers' professional competencies. To support continuous professional development, monthly teacher training sessions are conducted in collaboration with external experts, including specialists in child behavior management and emotional development. This practice reflects the institution's strong commitment to improving teachers' professional capacity on an ongoing basis.

Although PAUD Saung does not possess specialized infrastructure that distinguishes it physically from other Early Childhood Education institutions, its greatest strength lies in its ability to maximize the natural environment as a learning resource. The surrounding environment functions as a natural learning laboratory, providing authentic opportunities for contextual learning, observation, experimentation, exploration, and discovery.

This organizational structure reflects the integration of strong institutional support, effective human resource management, and the strategic utilization of the learning environment. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that school leadership, teacher collaboration, and organizational support in establishing an environmentally based learning culture significantly influence the successful implementation of nature school education (Rahmawati et al., 2023). Furthermore, continuous professional development has been shown to enhance the quality of learning implementation in Early Childhood Education institutions (Wulandari & Fitria, 2024).

3. Implementation of Child-Centered Learning in a Nature School Setting

Observational findings indicate that the majority of learning activities at PAUD Saung take place outdoors. The natural environment serves as the primary learning medium through a variety of exploratory activities, including constructing miniature mosques from clay, observing the surrounding environment, conducting simple experiments using natural materials, and participating in play activities that involve direct interaction with nature.

Within this learning process, teachers function primarily as facilitators, providing children with opportunities to explore their surroundings according to their interests and natural curiosity. Learning activities are intentionally designed as authentic life experiences that encourage children to observe, ask questions, investigate, and independently construct fundamental concepts. At the same time, religious education constitutes an integral component of classroom instruction through activities such as Qur'anic memorization, the practice of the five daily prayers, memorization of selected short hadiths, and the cultivation of moral character.

These findings demonstrate that the instructional process effectively embodies the principles of child-centered learning, enabling children to become active participants in their own learning. The natural environment

enriches children's educational experiences by functioning as an authentic and meaningful learning resource that supports experiential learning.

The findings are consistent with the principles of constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes that knowledge is actively constructed through direct experience. They are also supported by recent studies demonstrating that nature-based learning enhances young children's critical thinking, creativity, communication, and problem-solving abilities (Pratini et al., 2023). Moreover, previous research has shown that child-centered learning significantly improves children's learning motivation, curiosity, and active engagement throughout the educational process (Ningsih & Arifin, 2024).

4. Implementation of the Religious Habituation Program

The religious habituation program constitutes an integral component of curriculum implementation at PAUD Saung. Based on the interview findings, the institution's primary educational focus extends beyond academic development to encompass the cultivation of moral values, independence, and religious character. The habituation program includes the memorization of daily prayers, short chapters (surahs) of the Qur'an, selected hadiths appropriate to each age level, the practice of Islamic greetings, prayers before and after activities, proper dining etiquette, appropriate communication manners, and the cultivation of Islamic behaviors in daily life. Memorization targets are established each semester and form part of the children's developmental learning outcomes.

Rather than being taught as a separate subject, these religious habituation activities are integrated into all learning experiences, thereby becoming an essential element of the school's culture. Teachers serve as role models by consistently demonstrating positive behavior in their daily interactions while continuously guiding children throughout every activity. These findings indicate that the religious habituation program functions as the institution's primary strategy for fostering children's religious character.

The findings are consistent with previous studies demonstrating that the consistent implementation of religious habituation programs contributes significantly to the development of religious character, discipline, responsibility, empathy, and self-regulation among young children (Safitri et al., 2024). Similarly, other studies have shown that a religious school culture integrated into daily educational activities positively influences children's moral and socio-emotional development (Hasanah & Nurhayati, 2023).

5. Curriculum Evaluation and Children's Developmental Reporting

Children's developmental progress is evaluated continuously through activity documentation, sequential photographic records, daily observations, and intensive communication with parents. Children's daily progress is reported through Whats.App groups, while more comprehensive developmental reports are provided periodically in printed form.

Teachers prepare Daily Learning Implementation Plans (RPPH) as guidelines for conducting daily instructional activities. However, interview findings revealed that no systematic evaluation has yet been conducted to assess the quality of RPPH preparation. Furthermore, each classroom relies on a single RPPH document, limiting opportunities for critical reflection on the effectiveness of learning implementation.

Nevertheless, the regular reporting of children's developmental progress demonstrates a strong partnership between the school and parents. Parents receive timely information regarding their children's development, enabling them to provide appropriate follow-up stimulation and support at home. This finding suggests that curriculum evaluation at PAUD Saung primarily emphasizes assessing children's developmental progress rather than comprehensively evaluating curriculum implementation as a whole. Consequently, there remains

considerable potential for strengthening curriculum evaluation practices, particularly through enhanced academic supervision, reflective teaching practices, and periodic reviews of instructional planning documents and learning resources.

Recent studies have emphasized that comprehensive curriculum evaluation should extend beyond assessing children's developmental outcomes to include the effectiveness of the learning process, teachers' professional competencies, instructional materials, and the overall achievement of curriculum objectives (Ananda & Suryadi, 2024). Therefore, strengthening the institution's internal evaluation system would contribute significantly to improving the overall quality of curriculum management at PAUD Saung.

6. Parent Partnerships as a Means of Strengthening Curriculum Management

The findings indicate that parents serve as strategic partners in curriculum implementation. The school fosters open communication through WhatsApp groups, parenting programs, community service activities, the Forum Ibu Saung (Saung Mothers' Forum), health screening programs, and various community engagement initiatives. In addition, parents actively support the school's promotional efforts by disseminating information through community networks within their residential neighborhoods.

This collaborative partnership demonstrates that curriculum management extends beyond the school environment by actively involving families as an integral part of the early childhood education ecosystem. These findings support previous research indicating that strong partnerships between schools and families enhance the consistency of children's developmental stimulation, reinforce character development, and improve the overall effectiveness of curriculum implementation in Early Childhood Education institutions (Lestari et al., 2023).

D. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the nature school-based curriculum management strategy at PAUD Saung has been implemented systematically through the interconnected stages of planning, organizing, implementation, and evaluation. During the planning stage, the school conducts initial assessments of children through parent interviews and observations of their developmental progress. These assessments serve as the foundation for designing learning experiences that are tailored to each child's individual characteristics and developmental needs. Curriculum organization is carried out collaboratively by the principal, teachers, and the foundation, supported by clearly defined roles and responsibilities as well as continuous teacher professional development through regular training programs.

Curriculum implementation integrates the Merdeka Curriculum with the distinctive characteristics of a nature school by adopting child-centered learning, utilizing the natural environment as the primary learning resource, and consistently implementing religious habituation programs throughout daily educational activities. This integrated approach effectively supports the balanced development of children's cognitive, motor, socio-emotional, and spiritual competencies while fostering religious character and independence.

Meanwhile, children's developmental progress is evaluated continuously through observations, documentation, and regular reporting to parents. However, the evaluation of curriculum implementation and instructional planning documents has not yet been conducted systematically or comprehensively. This indicates that, although the assessment of children's development has been well established, the institution's internal curriculum evaluation system still requires further improvement.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the nature school-based curriculum management strategy implemented at PAUD Saung effectively supports the delivery of contextual, child-centered learning while promoting the

development of children's religious character. Nevertheless, strengthening curriculum evaluation practices, academic supervision, and reflective teaching processes is essential to ensure that curriculum management becomes more effective, sustainable, and capable of continuously improving the quality of early childhood education.

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