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## Critical Study of Education Management Practices in Supporting the Independent Curriculum at the Junior High School Level in Luwuk District, Banggai Regency

M. Jayadin Ilham<sup>1</sup>, Ahmadin<sup>2</sup>, Yayan Sahi<sup>3</sup>, Noprianto<sup>4</sup>,

<sup>1,2,4</sup> Pancasila and Citizenship Study Program, Tompotika University

<sup>3</sup> Pancasila and Civics Education Study Program, Gorontalo State University

(jaya23ilham@gmail.com)

(ahmadinbanggai@gmail.com)

(yayansahi@ung.ac.id)

(nopriantokebang@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This study looks at how education management helps use the Independent Curriculum in Junior High Schools in Luwuk District, Banggai Regency. Education today needs schools to change not just in paperwork but also in how they teach and manage. The study uses a qualitative method to understand how education management works in real life. Data was collected through observations, interviews, and document reviews. The people involved in the study were school principals, teachers, and staff who play key roles in planning and using the Independent Curriculum. The data was analyzed by reducing, presenting, and drawing conclusions from it. The study found that three main things help the Independent Curriculum work well: strong and flexible school leadership, teachers actively planning and evaluating lessons, and community support for school programs. However, there are challenges like limited teacher training, too much paperwork, low digital skills, not enough learning tools, and weak partnerships outside the school. The study highlights that the success of the Independent Curriculum depends on how ready the people and management at the school are. The findings aim to help create education management strategies that fit the needs of students and are sustainable.

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary educational management practices should not be perceived as static, procedural, or merely administrative endeavors. Instead, they should be regarded as transformative strategies that shape the direction, quality, and sustainability of the educational process in its entirety. Within this context, educational management emerges as a dynamic field that integrates transformative visions, demands for systemic efficiency, and a commitment to humanistic educational values. Educational leadership must transcend mere technocratic skills, embodying transformational characteristics capable of driving change through innovation, astutely interpreting context, and responding adaptively to internal dynamics and external pressures, such as curriculum changes, technological advancements, and the challenges posed by globalization (E. Mulyasa, 2022).

Nevertheless, this transformative approach frequently encounters a centralizing tendency, wherein managerial authority is concentrated in individual leaders. Consequently, the collective potential inherent within the school community is marginalized, and opportunities for participation are diminished. Indeed, effective educational management relies not only on well-established organizational structures but also on data-driven decision-making and the active involvement of all stakeholders. Autonomy and collaboration must serve as foundational elements in cultivating a dynamic and sustainable learning culture, capable of addressing the complexities of contemporary educational challenges (Mukhlisin, 2019).

The practice of educational management within schools is crucial for the effective implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes learning autonomy and the engagement of all stakeholders. Effective management extends beyond mere regulatory compliance, involving the active participation of teachers, students, and the community in every procedural aspect. This participation is not merely superficial; it is essential for fostering an open and adaptive school environment. However, such participation requires support through a well-defined and targeted evaluation system. Through collaborative and strategic management, the Independent Curriculum can be more effectively operationalized in schools (Yufrinalis Marianus, 2022).

Evidence-Based Management underscores the significance of utilizing valid data as the foundation for policy-making. While this approach is effective, it has been critiqued for potentially reducing education to a technocratic endeavor devoid of values. Consequently, the current challenge in educational management is to integrate meaningful participation with a rigorous evaluation system, ensuring that human values are preserved within the educational process (Supadi, 2021).

Visionary leadership currently serves as a strategic catalyst for transforming schools towards a more adaptive, collaborative, and valuable trajectory. This form of leadership is distinguished by the capacity to articulate a long-term vision, foster learning innovation, and cultivate an organizational culture receptive to change. Qualitative case study findings indicate that visionary leaders can enhance student learning outcomes, teacher professionalism, and the efficiency of school resource management. However, this success is contingent upon the active participation of teachers, students, parents, and policy support that facilitates leadership development (Nor & Suriansyah, 2024).

In the current educational context, the implementation of an adaptive and transformative curriculum is essential as a fundamental instrument for achieving a progressive leadership vision within the school setting. The Merdeka Curriculum, formulated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbud Ristek), constitutes a strategic effort to address the learning crisis while promoting a more flexible, contextual, and student-centered educational framework. This curriculum emphasizes the enhancement of foundational knowledge, character development, and 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. Nevertheless, the effective implementation of this curriculum is contingent upon visionary leadership within schools, particularly those capable of translating the curriculum's vision into concrete learning innovations, fostering an organizational culture open to change, and encouraging the involvement of all school stakeholders. The synergy between a responsive curriculum and transformative leadership will enable more meaningful, contextual, and impactful learning, thereby contributing to students' future advancement (Rahma & Hindun, 2024).

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum through the "Merdeka Belajar" program is aimed at establishing an education system that is more flexible, humanistic, and focused on the holistic development of students' potential. This initiative

grants educational institutions the autonomy to design contextual learning processes, liberates teachers from bureaucratic constraints that hinder creativity, and encourages students to engage in self-directed learning aligned with their interests. "Merdeka Belajar" underscores the significance of innovation, critical thinking, effective communication, collaboration, and creativity in educational activities. The primary objective is to enhance the quality of Indonesian human resources, making them adaptable to evolving circumstances, while fostering an enjoyable and meaningful learning environment. Consequently, the Independent Curriculum serves not only as a technical instrument but also as a philosophical foundation for educational transformation, liberating teachers and students from standardized and bureaucratic learning approaches (Nugraheny et al., 2023).

In the 21st century, education demands a comprehensive transformation of the learning system, including managerial aspects at the educational unit level. The Independent Curriculum emerges as a response to a deeply entrenched learning crisis, offering flexibility, differentiation, and an emphasis on cultivating students' holistic character and competencies. However, the success of this curriculum is contingent not only on policy design but also significantly on educational management practices at the school level, which must effectively translate the curriculum's vision into a tangible operational strategy. Educational management must transcend mere administrative functions to become transformative, capable of managing resources innovatively, fostering a collaborative culture, and promoting teachers' professional development to support independent and contextual learning practices. In Luwuk District, Banggai Regency, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the junior high school level reveals complex dynamics. Some schools experience significant constraints in terms of internal management readiness, ranging from weak curriculum planning, lack of principal and teacher training, to limited support for infrastructure that supports project-based learning and differentiation. Additionally, there are numerous policymakers at the school level who do not fully comprehend the philosophical approach of the Independent Curriculum, resulting in its application being more normative and administrative rather than transformative. Therefore, a critical study is required that not only describes the existing conditions but also rigorously explores how current education management practices can be enhanced to effectively implement the Independent Curriculum.

in terms of planning, implementation, and evaluation can strengthen or even hinder the achievement of the goals of the Independent Curriculum in junior high schools in Luwuk Regency. The findings of this research are expected to be the basis for the reformulation of educational managerial strategies that are contextual, effective, and in line with the spirit of freedom of learning.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, selected for its naturalistic characteristics that involve examining phenomena in their natural settings without researcher intervention. As a result, the data collected accurately reflects the empirical reality observed in the field. The qualitative approach is particularly effective in offering a comprehensive, nuanced, and meaningful depiction of social phenomena, especially within the dynamic and contextual framework of education management (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Data collection techniques employed in this research include observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted to gain an authentic understanding of educational management practices and the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in schools. Semi-structured interviews were held with key informants, including school principals, teachers, and educational staff, to gather detailed information on the planning, implementation, and evaluation of educational management policies and practices. Documentation served to supplement and verify data from observations and interviews through the examination of official school documents, such as program reports, learning tools, and relevant policy archives. The data sources in this study comprise both primary and secondary data. Primary data were directly obtained from research informants through observations and interviews, while secondary data were acquired through literature reviews, including scientific journals, reference books, and school documents pertinent to the research focus. Data analysis was conducted using a descriptive-qualitative approach, involving several stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data collected from the field. Subsequently, the data were presented in a thematic narrative format to facilitate understanding and interpretation. The final stage involved drawing conclusions in a reflective and iterative manner to identify patterns, meanings, and relationships among data categories. This analytical process aims to

achieve a comprehensive understanding of educational management patterns and to identify challenges and opportunities in supporting the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the junior high school level.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1. Application of Education Management Practices in Supporting the Independent Curriculum**

Education management transcends mere administrative functions, representing a strategic process that systematically oversees educational resources to achieve national education objectives (Lazwardi et al., 2025). Within the framework of an Independent Curriculum, education management is pivotal in translating policies into contextually relevant actions at the educational unit level. The principal assumes a central role, not only as an administrative leader but also as a learning leader, through supervision that continuously enhances teacher competence. This supervision involves monitoring learning outcomes and implementing formative evaluations responsive to student needs. Consequently, education management in the Independent Curriculum prioritizes not only the efficiency of structures and systems but also ensures alignment and coherence with the learning process (Justus, 2023).

Conceptually, effective education management practices supporting the implementation of an Independent Curriculum must encompass the entire managerial cycle comprehensively and adaptively. This begins with planning an operational curriculum tailored to the individual needs of students and the local context, organizing collaborative curriculum development teams, implementing inclusive differentiated learning, and conducting continuous and reflective formative evaluations. This approach aligns with classical management function theory, reinforced by participatory strategic management principles, where decision-making is conducted openly and is responsive to learning dynamics. A study by Zulfina, Suasti, and Ernawati at SMA IT Fadhilah Pekanbaru demonstrated a comprehensive implementation of the entire curriculum management cycle through the strengthening of organizational structures, delineation of curriculum team roles, and utilization of diagnostic assessments as the foundation for learning differentiation (Zulfina et al., 2025). The transformation of education management in the Independent Curriculum is inextricably linked to the strategic role of school principals as

drivers of change at the educational unit level. Beyond being administrative managers, principals must act as learning leaders who can direct the vision, support teachers in the teaching process, and ensure optimal implementation of differentiated learning. This role is executed through reflective, data-based, and collaborative academic supervision. Additionally, the use of digital technology, such as the Merdeka Mengajar platform, serves as a crucial instrument in enhancing teachers' readiness to face curriculum changes and in promoting more adaptive and innovative learning. With this leadership model, the principal functions not only as a manager but also as a facilitator and inspirer, guiding the school ecosystem towards more transformative and contextual learning (Wullur et al., 2025).

In alignment with this theoretical framework, the effectiveness of educational management is largely dependent on the ability of schools to develop systems that are open, adaptive, and responsive to the dynamics of their external environment. The study by Midiaty, Mulawarman, and Masruhim at the SMK Center of Excellence illustrates that planning informed by regional needs and strategic partnerships with the industrial sector can result in an operational curriculum that is both relevant and contextual. In practice, educational management has evolved beyond its traditional administrative role, becoming a strategic tool that links schools with various external stakeholders. This approach enables the integration of 21st-century skills into curriculum documents, thereby promoting a more collaborative and future-oriented learning ecosystem. By fostering opportunities for cross-sectoral participation, schools not only fulfill educational functions but also emerge as centers for local innovation, aligning with the vision of regional development and global demands (Midiaty et al., 2024).

The results of this study demonstrate that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the secondary school level is significantly shaped by educational management practices that are adaptive, participatory, and focused on learning transformation. The principal plays a strategic role as a change leader, aligning the curriculum's vision with school policies and engaging all stakeholders. Teachers serve not only as implementers but also as catalysts for learning innovations, effectively translating the principles of Independent Learning into contextual and relevant activities for adolescent students. Additionally, the active participation of parents and the support of the local community enhance the school's role as a center of learning that is open and

responsive to social dynamics. These findings underscore the importance of synergy between leadership, teacher professionalism, and community involvement in facilitating the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum in secondary schools. A summary of the findings is presented in the following table

Table 1. Key Findings of the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Secondary Schools Through an Educational Management Approach

<b>Strategic Dimension</b>	<b>Description of Findings</b>	<b>Impact on the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum</b>
School Transformational Leadership	The principal acts as a driving force for change, ensuring synergy between the vision of the Independent Curriculum and managerial practices at the school level.	Improve the effectiveness of program coordination and accelerate the adoption of new curriculum in a targeted and measurable manner.
Teacher Professional Collaboration	Teachers are not only as implementers, but also as designers and innovators of learning that are tailored to the needs and potential of students.	Encouraging the creation of a contextual, adaptive, and student-centered learning process, in accordance with the spirit of Freedom of Learning.
School Community Involvement	Parental and community participation in school deliberative forums is part of participatory management practices that support curriculum policies and implementation.	Strengthen school social accountability and foster an open, inclusive, and environmentally responsive educational ecosystem.

According to the findings of the data analysis, the characteristics of transformational leadership exhibited by school principals are pivotal in facilitating the effective implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the secondary school level. Principals serve as visionary leaders and catalysts for institutional transformation by fostering interinstitutional coordination, promoting teacher collaboration, and cultivating an innovative school environment receptive to change. This form of adaptive

leadership enables schools to address both technical and non-technical challenges associated with the introduction of a new curriculum more efficiently. Conversely, teachers demonstrated a high level of professionalism in their roles as curriculum designers. Their responsibilities extend beyond mere curriculum implementation to include the development of educational materials, evaluation of learning practices, and facilitation of student-centered learning, thereby addressing students' needs in a more personalized and contextual manner.

Within the framework of school community involvement, the active participation of parents and the broader community plays a crucial role in sustaining the Independent Curriculum. This involvement transcends mere attendance at school events, encompassing the contribution of local ideas, policies, and resources that enhance project-based learning initiatives and local cultural knowledge. Such community engagement fosters strong social relationships between schools and their surrounding environments, thereby reinforcing the school's role as an integral component of a comprehensive educational ecosystem. Consequently, the collaboration among school principals, teachers, and the community serves as the primary foundation for educational management practices capable of effecting meaningful changes in the era of the Independent Curriculum.

The study's findings indicate that the implementation of educational management practices to support the Independent Curriculum in the schools under investigation was conducted in a participatory and collaborative manner. The principal actively facilitated teacher involvement in the preparation of the Learning Objectives Flow (ATP), the development of teaching modules, and the execution of the Pancasila Student Profile project. This approach is further supported by ongoing internal training and open communication with school committees and parents, fostering a managerial climate that is both democratic and responsive to local needs. These findings align with the research conducted by Firmansyah, Hanafiah, and Handayani at SMPN 154 Jakarta, which underscores that teacher involvement in curriculum management not only enhances understanding of the Independent Curriculum but also strengthens the sense of ownership of the learning process. This, in turn, promotes the creation of a school culture that supports independent learning and is oriented towards the development of students' character (Firmansyah et al., 2024).

The findings of this study are corroborated by Santoso's research, which demonstrates that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SMPN 2 Tanjung Jabung Timur is more effective when teachers assume roles not only as implementers but also as principal agents in the processes of planning, training, and learning development. The active involvement of teachers in the compilation of teaching modules and Pancasila Student Profile projects, facilitated by participatory and continuous internal training, fosters a strong sense of ownership over the contextual learning process (Kusumawardani et al., 2024). Similarly, Maharani, Astutik, and Marlina at Hang Tuah 6 Juanda Sidoarjo Junior High School underscore that the success of educational management is significantly influenced by the establishment of collaborative spaces among teachers, supervisors, school committees, and parents in the processes of curriculum development and evaluation. This cross-stakeholder synergy cultivates a collective work culture that not only fortifies the implementation of the Independent Curriculum but also broadens the scope for dialogue, joint reflection, and decision-making based on the specific needs of the school. These findings clearly indicate that a participatory, open, and contextual management model is essential for embedding the ethos of learning freedom within educational units (Santoso, 2022).

#### **4.2. Factors Inhibiting the Practice of Education Management in the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum**

The management of education in the era of the Independent Curriculum is no longer just an administrative task, but a transformational strategy that demands autonomy, collaboration, and innovation as the main foundation. Schools are encouraged to become decision-making centers that are responsive to local needs and characteristics, so visionary planning, adaptive leadership, and active involvement of all stakeholders of teachers, principals, parents, and the community are required. The successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum relies heavily on the readiness of school management to transform the work culture and resource management holistically, which is not only structurally efficient but also substantially inspiring (Pramuja et al., 2021).

Structural barriers are one of the biggest stumbling blocks in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, especially in schools outside of cities. Infrastructure

limitations such as the absence of ICT laboratories, low access to independent learning platforms, and lack of digital infrastructure make it difficult for the spirit of learning autonomy to be realized. A study at SMP Negeri 2 Ploso revealed that around 60% of elderly teachers have difficulty adopting technology, while the absence of ICT laboratories directly weakens the quality of adaptive and needs-based learning management of students. This fact confirms that the success of the Independent Curriculum is not enough to rely only on the pedagogical readiness of teachers, but also requires solid structural support so that the ideals of education that are independent, inclusive, and relevant to the times can be truly realized (Ni'mah & Sirojudin, 2024).

Teacher competence is a crucial point in the management of education in the era of the Independent Curriculum, because it is the spearhead of the successful transformation of learning in the classroom. Unfortunately, there are still many teachers who do not fully understand the characteristics of students and different learning concepts, so they have difficulty in designing and implementing teaching modules effectively. Most teachers are still in the early adaptation stages without adequate and ongoing training support (Pramuja et al., 2021). The findings at SMP Negeri 2 Lembang show that teachers' understanding of the Independent Curriculum is very diverse, a clear picture of the weakness of the professional capacity building system. This condition is an alarm that the success of the curriculum is not enough just with good policies on paper, but must be supported by strategies to strengthen teacher competence that is systematic, progressive, and contextual so that they are able to become independent, reflective, and transformative learning facilitators (Sinta, 2024).

The evaluative approach to education management practice actually reveals the contrasting reality between the spirit of policy idealism and the factual challenges in the field. Research by Al Jauzy, Perdana, and Ramdani (2024) at SMK Muhammadiyah Delanggu shows that even though the management of learning evaluation has been carried out structurally, principals and teachers still experience serious obstacles in translating the Independent Curriculum into daily learning activities. The implementation of formative assessments, mapping learning outcomes, and management of remedial programs has not achieved optimal effectiveness. This is largely due to the limitations of adequate training and the weak conceptual understanding of teachers towards the new curriculum philosophy. This condition emphasizes the importance of

education management that is not only based on structures and procedures, but also prioritizes an adaptive leadership approach that is able to respond to the complexity of change by empowering teachers, strengthening curriculum literacy, and creating a learning ecosystem that supports innovation in a sustainable manner (Muhammad Hafidz Al Jauzy et al., 2024).

Research findings in the field show that the results of the analysis of nine junior high schools in Luwuk City, found that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum still faces various challenges that are quite serious in the aspect of education management. Of the nine indicators measured, the most dominant obstacles were seen in the aspects of teacher training, different learning understandings, and high administrative burden. For example, Cokroaminoto Luwuk Junior High School received a high score (4) in the aspect of teacher training, showing that there are still many educators who have not received intensive training related to the preparation of teaching modules, Pancasila student profile projects (P5), and learning strategies according to student needs. Similar things are also seen in several other schools such as SMP IT Ummul Quran which recorded very high scores (5) in understanding different learning, reflecting the difficulty in applying an approach oriented to the character and unique potential of students.

In addition, excessive administrative burden is the main obstacle at Muhammadiyah Luwuk Junior High School (score 5), where teachers have difficulty dividing time between administrative tasks and lesson planning based on the Independent Curriculum. Another significant obstacle also arises in the aspect of digital literacy, as seen in Luwuk Regional Junior High School which recorded the highest score (5) in this category, showing the low ability of teachers to access and utilize digital platforms to support learning. Limited facilities and infrastructure are also a crucial problem, especially at Saint Joseph Luwuk Catholic Junior High School (score 5), which does not fully have supporting infrastructure such as laboratories, stable internet, and ICT devices to support innovative learning processes.

On the managerial side, obstacles to teacher participation in decision-making were highly identified at Luwuk Christian Junior High School, while the aspect of monitoring and evaluation of curriculum implementation was a concern at SMP Negeri 2 Luwuk (score 4). Equality of understanding between teachers in implementing the

Independent Curriculum is a problem at SMP Negeri 1 Luwuk, which shows that there is still a disparity in readiness and acceptance of the concept of the new curriculum. Meanwhile, SMP Negeri 3 Luwuk recorded a very high score (5) in the aspect of external partnerships, which reflects the lack of collaboration with parents, the business world and industry (DUDI), and the community in supporting the P5 project.

Overall, these findings confirm that the success of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is highly determined by the readiness of human resources, infrastructure support, and the quality of school management governance. Low technical training and guidance, lack of optimal collaborative culture in schools, and lack of synergy with the external environment, are inhibiting factors that need to be addressed immediately in a strategic and sustainable manner.

Regarding the findings of the above research, teacher capacity building through intensive training and technical supervision has proven to be the backbone of the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum. The findings of this study highlight that the lack of continuous training and high administrative burden are the main obstacles to the application of independent and distinct learning principles. The effectiveness of the Independent Curriculum is highly determined by the existence of a planned and consistent teacher professional development system. Schools that do not provide serious training and technical assistance support are likely to experience gaps in the development and implementation of teaching modules, Learning Objective Flows (ATPs), and diagnostic assessments. As a result, the spirit of differentiation and student-centered learning has only become a slogan without realization in the classroom (Sari & Setiawati, 2023).

However, it is not enough to strengthen the capacity of teachers only through technical training. Another aspect that is no less important is their active involvement in the curriculum decision-making process at the educational unit level. More than just teaching implementers, teachers are actually the main actors in the process of curriculum change. Their participation in the planning, reflection, and evaluation stages of learning has proven to be key in realizing a contextual and meaningful Independent Curriculum, especially in presenting project-based learning that suits the needs of students. The findings of this study show that teacher involvement in the decision-making process is still relatively low, so learning innovation has not grown from collective awareness, but

is only limited to the implementation of administrative instructions. This finding is in line with the results of Damayanti and Kurniawati's research which emphasizes that the Independent Curriculum will not run optimally if teachers are only positioned as technical implementers, without space to contribute ideas, conduct critical reflection, and play a role in the joint evaluation process. When the space for teacher participation is limited, what emerges is not a collaborative spirit, but a rejection of change and stagnation in the transformation of the learning culture in the school environment (Afriani et al., 2023).

In addition, the active participation of teachers in the process of changing the curriculum is not just a complement, but the main foundation for the realization of meaningful project-based learning. When teachers are involved from the planning stage to the evaluation, they not only feel they belong, but are also able to revive the spirit of the Independent Curriculum in the classroom. Unfortunately, the findings of this study show that teacher involvement in decision-making is still low, so learning innovations run half-heartedly. This is in line with the findings of Damayanti and Kurniawati (2023), who affirm that it is difficult for the Independent Curriculum to achieve its goals if teachers are only treated as technical implementers without room for dialogue. This lack of participation fuels rejection and hinders the growth of a collaborative and adaptive learning culture (Anggara et al., 2023).

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the results of a critical study of education management practices in supporting the Independent Curriculum at the junior high school level in Luwuk Regency, Banggai Regency, it can be concluded that the success of the implementation of this curriculum is highly determined by the quality of school governance involving the transformative leadership of the principal, the professionalism of teachers, and the active involvement of the school community. Visionary and adaptive principals are able to build a collaborative and responsive work climate to change, while teachers involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning play an important role as a key driver in delivering differentiated and project-based learning. In addition, the support of parents and the community has been proven to strengthen the sustainability of the Independent Curriculum, especially through the contribution of ideas, local resources, and partnerships in the P5 project.

However, the findings of this study also show that there are various significant challenges in the managerial aspect, such as low intensity of teacher training, lack of understanding of contextual learning approaches, high administrative burden, low digital literacy, and limited learning facilities and infrastructure. Lack of teacher involvement in decision-making, weak internal monitoring and evaluation systems, and low external collaboration are also serious bottlenecks. Therefore, to answer the challenges of the 21st century and realize the spirit of independent learning, schools need to reformulate management strategies that are not only oriented towards administrative completeness, but are also able to encourage the transformation of learning culture through continuous training, participatory leadership, and strong synergy between schools and the surrounding environment.

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