

Integration of KH Imam Zarkasyi's Independence Values in Differentiated Learning of the Independent Curriculum

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Vol. 23 No. 1 April (2026)

ARTICLE HISTORY

First Received: 2025-11-24

Revised: 2026-04-20

Accepted: 2026-04-26

Published: 2026-04-30

Keywords:

Gontor Independence, Differentiated Learning, Independent Curriculum, Self Regulation

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Published by:

UIR Press

ABSTRACT

This study explores the systematic integration of KH Imam Zarkasyi's philosophical Independence Values (Gontor Modern Islamic Boarding School) with the Differentiated Learning framework in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Indonesia. The Independent Curriculum prioritizes Differentiated Learning as a student centered pedagogical approach, which automatically demands a high level of self regulation from students. Although the independence values of Islamic boarding schools have proven successful in building students' self regulating character, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the integration of this traditional educational philosophy with modern approaches such as differentiation. Through a qualitative descriptive approach with a literature review, this article aims to formulate a strategic integration model. The results show that integration is achieved by strengthening three elements of differentiation using Gontor values, Process Differentiation strengthened by the concepts of Self Reliance and Discipline that shape responsible freedom, Product Differentiation strengthened by the principles of Initiative, Independence, and Adab to ensure the originality and usefulness of the work, and Content Differentiation strengthened by the principle of Itqan (complete mastery) to ensure all students achieve a fundamental understanding before undertaking further exploration. This integration results in a holistic learning ecosystem, where student freedom is framed by strong moral and academic standards, strengthening the identity and relevance of national education.

 [https://doi.org/10.25299/ajaip.2026.vol23\(1\).25694](https://doi.org/10.25299/ajaip.2026.vol23(1).25694)



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INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum, initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, marks a transformation of the learning paradigm in Indonesia toward a more student centered approach. One of the main strategies in the Independent Curriculum is Differentiated Learning (LD), a student focused pedagogical approach that addresses the needs of each child, each with their own unique characteristics, by adapting learning content, processes, and products (Jasiah et al., 2023). The philosophy of Differentiated Learning provides students with the autonomy to make strategic choices throughout the learning process. This freedom automatically requires students to have a high level of self regulated learning, as differentiated learning relies on their ability to set goals, make decisions, and manage their own learning process the essence of self regulation (Mahardika et al., 2023).

However, the implementation of differentiated learning in Indonesian schools still faces various obstacles. Teachers have not yet fully implemented differentiated learning, encompassing content, process, or product aspects comprehensively (WN Sari, 2023). There are still many teachers who implement a single method in learning activities, there is a lack of teacher understanding of the differentiated learning approach both in preparation and in its implementation (ZTM Sari et al., 2024), and there is still a lack of teachers in utilizing learning media in the learning process (Sihombing et al., 2023).

In the context of searching for pedagogical solutions, the visionary educational values of Indonesian reformers are highly relevant to reexamine. One central figure is KH Imam Zarkasyi (1910-1985), one of the founders of the Darussalam Gontor Modern Islamic Boarding School, known for his progressive vision of educational reform (Afandi et al., 2022). The education system developed by KH Imam Zarkasyi carries the philosophy of Panca Jiwa Pesantren, which consists of sincerity, simplicity, independence, Islamic brotherhood, and freedom (Zarkasyi, 2005). The value of independence is a crucial dimension in shaping the character of the younger generation, enabling them to meet future challenges. This value's relevance is further strengthened because independence is a key element in national education goals and is also a key dimension in the Pancasila Student Profile in the Independent Curriculum (Nofrita et al., 2023).

Previous research shows that Gontor's value of independence plays an important role in the character formation of students by developing self regulation, making decisions independently, and taking responsibility for their choices (Karim, 2016). These values are considered highly relevant to the demands of differentiated learning, which treats students with strong self regulation skills. Although the Islamic boarding school education system has proven successful in building student independence (Al Faruq et al., 2025), there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the integration of KH Imam Zarkasyi's philosophical independence values with the Differentiated Learning framework in the context of the Independent Curriculum.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how the value of independence from KH Imam Zarkasyi's educational concept can be integrated into differentiated learning practices within the Independent Curriculum. This research is expected to yield a comprehensive understanding of the integration of Indonesia's rich heritage of educational thought with current national education policies, thereby strengthening the identity and relevance of Indonesian education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article uses a qualitative descriptive approach with a literature study method. This study aims to describe, analyze, and integrate two relevant educational frameworks: KH Imam Zarkasyi's Independence Values as a philosophical foundation and Differentiated Learning as a pedagogical approach to the Independent Curriculum, in order to formulate a new strategic integration model and theoretical implications. The analytical approaches used are content analysis and conceptual analysis. Content analysis is used to identify and categorize the independence values contained in KH Imam Zarkasyi's works, while conceptual analysis is used to examine the relationship and compatibility between concepts from two different frameworks: the philosophy of Islamic boarding school education and modern differentiation pedagogy. Data collection techniques are carried out through three stages: first, identification and selection of relevant literature based on the criteria of theme suitability and currency; second, extraction of key concepts from each source; and third, concept mapping to find the intersection between Gontor's independence values and elements of differentiation.

The primary data sources include the main works or thoughts of KH Imam Zarkasyi on educational values, particularly independence, as well as official documents related to the Independent Curriculum and Differentiated Learning from the Ministry of Education. The primary data sources include the main works or thoughts of KH Imam Zarkasyi on educational values, particularly independence, as well as official documents related to the Independent Curriculum and Differentiated Learning from the Ministry of Education. Meanwhile, secondary data includes scientific journals, books, theses, and other literature related to the values of independence, self regulation (*self regulated learning*), and the implementation of Differentiated Learning. Literature review was conducted systematically by reading, reviewing, and analyzing relevant literature. Qualitative analysis was conducted descriptively by outlining the main concepts, followed by comparison and alignment to find common ground between the two concepts, and concluding with the formulation of an integration model to draw a new synthesis. Data validity was ensured

through cross checking of various existing literature sources to ensure the objectivity and accuracy of the discussion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

History and Vision of KH Imam Zarkasyi

KH Imam Zarkasyi was born on March 21, 1910, in Gontor, Ponorogo, East Java. His educational journey encompassed various traditional Islamic boarding schools and modern schools, including the Jamsaren Islamic Boarding School in Solo, the Arabiyah Adabiyah School in Solo, and the Sumatra Thawalib in Padang Panjang (1935), a teacher training school that brought the spirit of Islamic educational renewal from the Middle East. This multidimensional experience shaped his integrative educational vision (Hasanah, 2024). An important turning point occurred when he studied at the Arabiyah Adabiyah Solo School until 1930, where he met a very influential figure in his life, namely Ustadz Muhammad Osman al-Hasyimi (Budiman et al., 2022). In 1936, together with his two older brothers, KH Ahmad Sahal and KH Zainuddin Fannani, he chose to return to Gontor to build a modern and comprehensive Islamic boarding school education system (Takunas, 2018).

As a visionary educator, he developed a modern education system that remained rooted in Islamic values. KH Imam Zarkasyi's thoughts on modernity in education encompassed broad, substantive, and universal aspects, first emphasizing the importance of the pesantren spirit as a foundation (Afandi et al., 2022). The vision of modern Islamic boarding school education developed by KH Imam Zarkasyi affirms the curriculum's goal of encompassing a holistic array of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes. He believed that education aims not only to cultivate intellectual intelligence but also to foster good morals, independence, and leadership that can benefit society (Suhaimi et al., 2025).

KH. Imam Zarkasyi's Value of Independence as a Foundation for Education

The core values of KH Imam Zarkasyi's thoughts are crystallized in the Panca Jiwa Pondok, which is the foundation of life at the Gontor Modern Islamic Boarding School. (Rofiq, 2018). Panca Jiwa consists of five basic values (1) Sincerity (*ikhlas*), which means acting solely for Allah without expecting worldly rewards; (2) Simplicity, which does not mean being passive or poor, but contains the values of strength, fortitude, and self control; (3) Independence (*berdikari*), which means the ability to stand on one's own two feet without relying on the help of others; (4) Islamic brotherhood, which creates brotherhood and solidarity based on shared religion and goals; and (5) Responsible freedom, which means the freedom to think and act within a positive corridor with full responsibility (Takunas, 2018).

In the context of this research, independence is the primary focus due to its high relevance to differentiated learning. Independence is a hallmark of the Gontor educational system, strongly emphasized by KH. Imam Zarkasyi. He argued that a student must be able to stand on his own two feet economically, intellectually, and spiritually (Zarkasyi, 2005). This concept is realized through a self help and self supporting system within the Islamic boarding school environment, where students are taught to manage their own needs independently. The value of independence not only fosters personal responsibility but also serves as a means to foster adaptability in a pluralistic society (Sepiana et al., 2025). In the context of religious moderation, an independent attitude distances individuals from dependence on a single authority and encourages critical thinking about various religious views.

The Concept of Differentiated Learning in the Independent Curriculum

According to Tomlinson (2014) Differentiated learning is an effort to adapt the classroom learning process to meet the individual learning needs of each student. In this model, teachers pay attention to differences in students' learning styles, readiness levels, interests, cognitive abilities, and backgrounds (Almujab, 2023).

To ensure optimal learning outcomes for each student, this approach adheres to five main principles (Purba et al., 2021):

- a. A supportive learning environment creates a safe, comfortable, and flexible classroom. Layout the space to suit the diverse learning needs of students.
- b. Quality curriculum, learning materials must be relevant and adapted to suit students' needs and understanding.
- c. Continuous assessment: Conduct ongoing (*formative*) assessments to monitor student readiness, interest, and progress. The results are used to modify learning methods.
- d. Responsive Teaching, teachers must be responsive and use assessment data to provide appropriate assistance/intervention according to student development.
- e. Effective classroom leadership, teachers lead by creating clear routines and rules so that the learning atmosphere is orderly and conducive.

In the Independent Curriculum, Differentiated Learning is the main strategy to realize student centered learning and accommodate student needs (Purnawanto, 2023). Differentiated Learning is defined as a strategy that adapts three main elements of learning (1) Content differentiation, the material taught is appropriate based on the students' readiness, abilities and interests, (2) Process differentiation refers to the way students understand information through tiered activities, with different levels of support, challenge, and complexity, and (3) Product differentiation reflects student understanding through work or performance (*essays, presentations, videos, etc.*) (Sarnoto, 2024).

Gontor's Independence Integrity Strategy in Differentiated Learning Elements

The integration of Gontor's independence values with Differentiated Learning is not simply a merger of two systems, but rather a synthesis that bridges Islamic educational traditions with a modern pedagogical framework. In this case, Gontor's independence operates at the level of shaping students' internal dispositions, while differentiation works at the level of external adaptation of learning. Gontor's values exist to fill a fundamental gap in the implementation of differentiation in Indonesia: students' unpreparedness to take autonomy over their learning process. Without a strong character foundation, differentiation has the potential to widen the gap: students with low self regulation tend to choose the easiest path when given autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Gontor's discipline and *itqan* ensure that the freedom to differentiate does not turn into academic relativism, but remains grounded in high moral and academic standards. The integration model for these three elements of differentiation is summarized in the following table.

Table 1. Gontor's Independence Value Integration Model in Differentiated Learning

Gontor Values	Differentiation Elements	Integration Mechanism	Expected Learning Outcomes
<i>Self Reliance</i> and Discipline	Process Differentiation	Self learning contracts, regular monitoring, and strengthening of a culture of peer accountability	Personal accountability, self regulation, and responsible autonomy.
Initiative, Integrity, and Manners	Product Differentiation	Designing original, useful products through independent technical problem solving.	Authentic creativity, intellectual honesty, and social utility.
<i>Itqan</i> (Complete Mastery)	Content Differentiation	Implementation of the "Core Concepts and Advanced Exploration" model based on continuous assessment.	Complete mastery of fundamental concepts and the realization of educational equity.

a. Strengthening Process Differentiation (Learning Method)

Process differentiation aims to adapt how students internalize information to their individual learning styles and pace. However, the primary challenge isn't the availability of strategies, but rather the students' readiness to operate autonomously. This is where Gontor's values of *Self Reliance* and *Discipline* play a role as a foundation for self regulation.

Self Reliance This approach is implemented by giving students autonomy to choose learning paths such as group discussions, independent research, or practical projects, along with full responsibility for those choices. This is implemented through learning contracts that detail the justification for methods, time management, and indicators of independent progress. For example, in Islamic history lessons, students are

free to choose between conducting literature research or producing a video documentary, as long as the choice is based on the commitment stated in the learning contract (Hazmi et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, Gontor's Discipline values serve as a structural framework to prevent this freedom from becoming a neglect of responsibility. This is realized through three mechanisms, including (1) regular monitoring as a form of accountability for the learning contract, (2) a culture of peer accountability where students monitor each other's consistency, and (3) natural consequences that encourage students to evaluate the effectiveness of their learning paths independently. This discipline is dynamic; students are allowed to change learning strategies with logical justification, but are prohibited from changing paths simply to avoid challenges (escape mechanism). The integration of these two values creates responsible autonomy that simultaneously fulfills the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness in Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

b. Strengthening Product Differentiation (Learning Outcomes)

Product differentiation allows students the freedom to demonstrate their understanding through a variety of forms, such as essays, presentations, videos, models, and projects. The primary challenge lies not in the variety of forms, but in ensuring that each product reflects high quality standards and is not simply an expression lacking in substance. This is what is called Levy (2008) as a differentiation paradox. To anticipate this, the values of Initiative, Self Reliance, and Adab from Gontor's tradition are integrated as a moral and academic foundation that guarantees the quality of every student's work.

The Initiative Principle encourages students to not only choose options offered by their teachers, but also to boldly propose original, complex products that add value to the community. For example, in ecology lessons, students can take the initiative to design a plastic waste reduction campaign in an Islamic boarding school environment that encompasses research, communication strategies, and a concrete implementation plan. Similarly, the Independence Principle requires students to address technical production challenges independently, such as learning video editing techniques or basic programming on their own. In this process, the teacher acts as a facilitator, training students to become resilient problem solvers (Fahamsyah, 2020).

Furthermore, the Principle of Adab ensures that the resulting product is not only technically superior, but also ethically noble and socially beneficial. This is realized through two main aspects. The first is intellectual honesty, where the work is the result of authentic understanding that values authenticity and prioritizes substance over mere visual appearance. The second is the usefulness of the product, where each work must have value for both the student and the wider community. Thus, although the forms of the products vary, all are assessed based on consistent standards: depth of understanding, originality, quality of execution, relevance, and critical reflection on the process (Dylan, 2011; Tomlinson, 2014).

c. Strengthening Content Differentiation (Material)

Content differentiation is an effort to adapt learning materials based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Failure to adapt content can trigger two destructive consequences: under challenging high ability students, leading to boredom, and over challenging unprepared students, leading to the phenomenon of learned helplessness (Tomlinson, 2014). The primary challenge lies in ensuring educational equity, ensuring that all students receive the same quality of education despite learning different content. Without a proper foundation, differentiation risks becoming trapped in tracking practices that actually deepen social and academic disparities (Petrová et al., 2020).

The principle of Itqan, or complete mastery, rooted in the tradition of Ta'lim al-Muta'allim, is the answer to this risk. In the context of content differentiation, itqan serves as a universal standard that requires all students to achieve complete mastery of fundamental concepts before moving on to other material. This value is implemented through a model of core concepts and advanced exploration. In this model, each learning unit has a core concept that must be mastered by all students without exception. Once itqan on fundamental concepts is achieved, students are allowed to explore advanced content that suits their individual interests and abilities (Salsabila & Sanina, 2025).

To ensure the achievement of ITQAN, three key mechanisms are implemented. First, continuous assessment (*assessment for learning*) through observation, discussion, and small assignments to periodically measure understanding. Second, mastery based progression, the principle that students do not move on to more advanced content until they have fully mastered basic concepts. Third, the provision of multiple paths to mastery, where ITQAN can be achieved through repeated practice, independent exploration, or through peer teaching methods. The value of ITQAN structurally embodies the principle of high expectations for all students. This is because ITQAN internalizes the awareness that half hearted work is a form of dishonesty toward oneself (Petrová et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study argues that the independence values taught by KH Imam Zarkasyi at Gontor Islamic Boarding School align closely with the Differentiated Learning approach in the Merdeka Curriculum. These values—such as self-reliance, discipline, initiative, and mastery (itqan)—strengthen differentiated learning by guiding how students learn (process), what they produce (product), and what they study (content), while maintaining strong moral and academic standards. The integration creates a balanced model that promotes autonomy without losing structure and responsibility. However, the study is theoretical and has not yet been tested in real classrooms, is more applicable to Islamic-based schools, and lacks extensive comparison with international research. Therefore, it recommends future empirical studies, development of practical teaching tools, comparative research across school types, and further exploration of Islamic educational philosophies to enrich modern pedagogy.

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