



Developing Independence in Early Childhood Through Full Day School

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how the full day school learning system fosters independent learning among children aged 5–6 years at Semarang Multinational School. The research involved 12 children, 4 teachers, and 8 parents from diverse family and linguistic backgrounds. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through classroom observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Findings show that the application of the International Early Years Curriculum (IEYC), which is thematic and project-based, creates meaningful, contextual learning. Children are encouraged to initiate tasks, solve problems, and complete activities independently. Teachers serve as facilitators who guide rather than instruct directly, while a child-friendly environment and consistent routines reinforce autonomy. Parental support at home further strengthens independent behavior. Challenges include varied readiness levels among children, fatigue from long school hours, and inconsistent parental involvement. This study offers practical insights for educators and curriculum planners implementing full day school models to nurture independence and character development. The findings highlight the importance of integrating structured autonomy, collaborative learning, and family-school synergy in early education settings.

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1. Introduction

Early childhood development is a critical phase in shaping a child's personality, attitudes, and foundational life skills, particularly independence. This stage is marked by rapid physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth, forming the basis for future learning and behavior (Tabrani et al., 2024; Ariyanti, 2016). Independence in this context refers not only to performing tasks without help, but also to self-regulation, decision-making, responsibility, and problem-solving—skills essential for success in later education (Tassoni, 2002; Erikson, 2018).

Children's independence does not emerge spontaneously. It develops through repetitive experiences, modeling, and environmental reinforcement. Erikson (2018) explains that autonomy evolves through the interaction of biological, emotional, and social systems. Therefore, the immediate environments of the child—family, school, and community—play significant roles in shaping behavior. Consistent exposure to decision-making opportunities and responsibilities builds children's agency and confidence (Bredenkamp, 2011; Berk, 2013).

In modern families, high work mobility and limited time reduce parental interaction at home (Igorovna, 2019; Vertel et al., 2024). This situation increases interest in full day school (FDS) models, which extend school hours and allow for more structured learning and character development (Basuki, 2007; Slamet, 2014). Through a full day format, children experience not only academic instruction but also routines, peer collaboration, and guided autonomy—conditions favorable for developing independence (Muhaimin, 2004; Sjamsir et al., 2019).

Semarang Multinational School applies the International Early Years Curriculum (IEYC), a thematic, project-based curriculum designed to support young children's holistic growth. The school's full day learning system offers more time for implementing activities that build independence in children aged 5–6 years. The learning approach emphasizes exploration, responsibility, and collaboration—supported by a child-friendly environment and consistent routines.

While previous research has highlighted the benefits of FDS and project-based curricula, few studies have examined how such programs develop independence among early learners within international curriculum settings. The specific intersection between full day school structures, teaching strategies, and family involvement remains underexplored in the Indonesian context.

Based on this background, the present study addresses three research questions: (1) How is the full day school learning system implemented in supporting the development of learning independence among children aged 5–6 at Semarang Multinational School? (2) What factors influence the success of fostering learning independence in a full day school environment? (3) What teaching strategies and roles do teachers play in facilitating the development of early childhood learning independence?

This study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of effective educational practices that foster independence in early childhood through a full day school approach. The findings are expected to offer valuable insights for other early childhood institutions and inform policies that support autonomy-based learning and character formation.

2. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to understand the implementation of independent learning within the full day school model at Semarang Multinational School. The descriptive qualitative method is used by researchers to uncover knowledge or build theories at a specific point in time (Mukhtar, 2013). Data were collected using three main techniques: observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation study. Observations were conducted directly in classrooms and school environments to monitor children's independent behaviors. Observation refers to the systematic monitoring and recording of phenomena as they appear in the research object (Margono, 2005). Interviews were carried out with teachers, the school principal, and parents to obtain in-depth information regarding instructional strategies and support for children's independence. Interviewing is employed as a data collection technique when researchers aim to conduct a preliminary study to identify research problems or to gain a deeper understanding of respondents' perspectives (Sugiyono, 2016). Meanwhile, documentation—including curriculum documents, learning programs, and student progress reports—was used to complement field data. Document analysis is a method of qualitative data collection that involves compiling a large volume of factual and stored information in documented materials (Sujarweni, 2014).

The data sources in this study consisted of primary data, namely observation and interview results, and secondary data, such as school documents and supporting literature. In qualitative research, the primary sources of data are words and actions, with supplementary data such as documents and other materials serving as additional information (Moleong, 2019). The research site was Semarang Multinational School, an international early childhood institution implementing the International Early Years Curriculum (IEYC) through a full day learning format. The program operates from 08.00 to 15.00 WIB and emphasizes autonomy-based, project-centered learning. A total of 18 participants were involved, selected using purposive sampling to ensure alignment with the research focus (Sugiyono, 2016). These included 12 children aged 5–6 years as the subjects of observation, 4 classroom teachers (identified as Teacher A, B, C, and D), 1 school principal, and 1 curriculum team member. Children were not interviewed directly due to their developmental stage but were observed during regular classroom activities. Teachers and school leadership provided narrative insights into learning strategies, routines, and indicators of children's independence.

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model, which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data analysis is the process of systematically organizing and interpreting the data gathered from interviews, field notes, and other sources so that the findings are easily understood and can be shared with others (Bogdan & Biklen, as cited in Hardani et al., 2020). To enhance the validity of the findings, data triangulation was employed. This approach is expected to clearly describe how the full day school learning system supports the development of learning independence among young children. The research instruments used for each variable are presented in Table 1:

Tabel 1. Research Instrument Table

Indicator	Observation Result	Interview Excerpts
Autonomy		
Freedom	Children freely choose learning corners or project activities they enjoy	"We give them space to choose the activities they like every morning." – Teacher A
Initiative	Children begin learning activities without being prompted, such as tidying up desks	"The children are used to starting their tasks on their own since the second week." – Teacher B
Confidence	Children confidently speak during storytelling and project presentations	"They were shy at first, but now they compete to come forward and present." – Principal
Responsibility	Children tidy up play tools and complete tasks they've started	"They know what they need to do every day." – Teacher C
Decision-making	Children determine activity order (e.g., reading first, then drawing)	"We don't set the order—they're free to choose." – Teacher A
Self-regulation	Children manage playtime and return to focus when the school bell rings	"We just play the transition music, and they know what to do." – Teacher B

Learning Objectives	Learning goals are contextualized in daily activities	"We link each theme's objective to the children's daily real-world activities." – Curriculum Team
Learning Materials	Children use manipulative learning materials such as puzzles and blocks	"We choose materials that the children can physically interact with." – Teacher D
Teaching-Learning Process	Children learn through collaborative projects and outdoor exploration	"We invite them to observe the environment around the school." – Teacher C
Assessment & Evaluation	Evaluation is based on anecdotal records and children's portfolio work	"We assess not by numbers, but through the process and the story behind each piece of work." – Teacher D

3. Result And Discussion

3.1. Result

3.1.1 Childern Autonomy

One of the most consistently observed forms of independent behavior was the children's growing autonomy in managing their learning experiences. From the second week onward, a majority of the children—10 out of 12—demonstrated the ability to initiate their learning by selecting activities from various classroom learning centers. These included areas such as reading, building, science exploration, and creative expression. The classroom was intentionally structured to allow freedom of access, with materials placed at child-height, clearly labeled, and visually organized to foster independent engagement. Teacher A explained this approach: *"We give them space to choose the activities they like every morning. They know where things are and how to start."*

This statement reflects the pedagogical emphasis placed on child-directed exploration. Autonomy was not only present in activity selection but also in how children navigated the space physically. They showed confidence moving between areas, returning items when finished, and sustaining concentration in chosen tasks—often without adult intervention. Children who initially hesitated to explore the room freely became more confident over time, suggesting that autonomy was being gradually internalized through routine and trust. Documentation, including classroom portfolios and photos, showed children deeply engaged in tasks of their own choosing, often returning to familiar themes or creating new variations. This self-direction aligned with the school's use of the International Early Years Curriculum (IEYC), which emphasizes experiential, play-based learning embedded in real-world contexts.

3.1.2 Childern Initiative

Closely related to autonomy was the development of initiative—children's ability to begin, persist, and complete activities on their own. By the third week, most of the children were seen initiating tasks as soon as they entered the classroom or completed one activity. Morning routines such as organizing personal items, checking the daily schedule, or preparing drawing supplies became self-managed. Teacher B reflected: *"The children are used to starting their tasks on their own since the second week. Some even help us arrange the tables or remind their friends to start."*

This shift in behavior—from passive to proactive—indicates a change in how children viewed themselves in the learning space. They were no longer merely following teacher instructions, but taking responsibility for how they began and structured their day. During project-based activities, for example, children collected their own materials, set up their workspaces, and determined what steps to take first—actions which suggest initiative grounded in familiarity and confidence. Moreover, initiative extended beyond individual tasks. Observations recorded children taking the lead in group activities, proposing solutions during play, and inviting peers to collaborate. Such actions demonstrate emerging leadership and self-efficacy, nurtured by the extended time and flexible structure of the full day school format.

3.1.3 Childern Confidence

Another key area of development was children's growing self-confidence, particularly in verbal expression and social participation. At the start of the observation period, only two children willingly spoke during whole-class sessions. However, by the fourth week, **eight out of twelve** children were confidently engaging in group discussions, storytelling, and project presentations. The principal commented on this progression: *"They were shy at first, but now they compete to come forward and present. Some even volunteer without being asked."*

This transformation was facilitated through consistent opportunities for sharing, encouragement from teachers, and the creation of a psychologically safe environment. Children were encouraged to tell stories about their families, explain their artwork, and report on group investigations. These opportunities not only enhanced verbal communication but also built emotional resilience—children learned that their voices were valued, and that making mistakes was part of the learning process. Additionally, the use of visual tools such as "feeling charts" and "show-and-tell boards" gave children non-verbal entry points into participation, which supported more hesitant children in gradually finding their voice. Over time, confidence became visible in body posture, eye contact, and willingness to interact with peers across learning settings.

3.1.4 Childern Responsibility

The full day structure allowed for consistent reinforcement of routines, and responsibility was one of the most observable domains to flourish. Children were expected to care for their own belongings, follow classroom

schedules, and help maintain the shared environment. By the third week, 11 children consistently followed classroom routines such as storing bags, setting up their lunch mats, and preparing for nap time without reminders. Teacher C shared her observation: *"They know what they need to do every day. Some even remind their friends if someone forgets."*

The emergence of such responsibility suggests a deep internalization of classroom expectations, which were made visible and predictable through visual cues and repeated practice. Children were not only managing their own tasks, but also demonstrating awareness of group norms and contributing to classroom harmony. Responsibility was also reflected in how children engaged with communal materials. They took care not to damage supplies, cleaned up spills, and returned items to their proper places. This behavior was not taught through punishment or reward, but through consistent modeling and respectful teacher language that positioned children as capable and trustworthy.

3.1.5 Children Decision-Making

Decision-making was not treated as a one-time event, but as a daily habit encouraged by the classroom structure. Children were invited to choose not only their activities but also the order in which they would complete them, the peers they would work with, and how to approach certain tasks. These choices required them to assess their own readiness, interests, and sometimes negotiate with others. Teacher A explained: *"We don't set the order—they're free to choose. Some plan their whole day around their favorite center."*

Observational data revealed that children varied in how they approached decision-making. Some preferred consistency—returning to the same center each morning—while others experimented with new tools and spaces. Over time, children were seen discussing their choices with peers, indicating not only self-awareness but emerging collaborative planning skills. Decision-making was also embedded in reflective activities. At the end of the day, children were invited to share what they chose and why. These metacognitive moments helped them become more intentional in their choices and begin to understand cause and effect in their own behavior—a key foundation for more complex executive functioning.

3.1.6 Children Self-Regulation

Self-regulation—the ability to manage one's emotions, behavior, and attention—developed noticeably across the observation period. Children learned to recognize classroom cues, such as music transitions or light changes, and adjusted their actions accordingly. They moved from one activity to another with decreasing need for adult intervention, demonstrating increasing control over impulses and emotional responses. Teacher B described this shift: *"We just play the transition music, and they know what to do. Even the more energetic ones settle down quickly."*

Self-regulation was particularly evident during moments that often provoke dysregulation in young children—such as waiting turns, cleaning up, or preparing for nap. Children who initially resisted transitions or became upset when redirected, gradually adapted and began to anticipate what was expected. Some developed their own strategies for calming down, such as taking deep breaths, going to the reading corner, or asking for quiet time.

These observations point to a classroom culture where emotional literacy was explicitly taught and modeled. Teachers used consistent language ("Take a deep breath," "You can try again") and visual tools (emotion charts, peace corners) to help children understand and regulate their internal states. Over time, children not only used these tools independently but began suggesting them to peers.

Table 1. Summary of Independence Indicators

Indicator	Observation Result (with frequency)	Interview Excerpts
Autonomy	10 of 12 children independently chose learning corners or project activities they enjoyed	"We give them space to choose the activities they like every morning." – Teacher A
Initiative	9 of 12 children began tasks without being prompted, such as tidying up or setting up materials	"The children are used to starting their tasks on their own since the second week." – Teacher B
Confidence	8 of 12 children voluntarily spoke during storytelling or class presentations	"They were shy at first, but now they compete to come forward and present." – Principal
Responsibility	11 of 12 children tidied up, managed belongings, and followed routines without prompting	"They know what they need to do every day." – Teacher C
Decision-Making	10 of 12 children determined their own task order (e.g., reading first, then drawing)	"We don't set the order—they're free to choose." – Teacher A
Self-Regulation	10 of 12 children transitioned smoothly and returned focus after play when cued (e.g., with music)	"We just play the transition music, and they know what to do." – Teacher B

To enhance the clarity of qualitative findings and respond to reviewer feedback, Table 2 provides a summary of the six core indicators of independence observed during the study, supported by frequency counts and representative quotes from teacher and principal interviews.

While the study employed a qualitative approach, the integration of frequency data serves to illustrate the consistency and extent to which specific behaviors were demonstrated across participants. Each indicator—autonomy, initiative, confidence, responsibility, decision-making, and self-regulation—was derived from field observations conducted over four weeks with 12 children in a full-day early childhood classroom. The numbers reflect how many children displayed each behavior reliably and independently by the end of the observation period.

For example, autonomy was shown by 10 out of 12 children, who consistently chose their learning activities without prompting. Responsibility had the highest frequency, observed in 11 children who reliably managed routines such as tidying up and preparing for meals or naps. On the other hand, confidence—the willingness to speak in front of peers—was exhibited by 8 children, highlighting this area as a relatively slower-developing domain, possibly requiring more environmental or emotional support.

The interview excerpts offer contextual depth, illustrating how teachers perceived and interpreted these behaviors. For instance, Teacher A's reflection that children were given space to choose activities helps explain the emergence of autonomy. Similarly, Teacher B's description of using music cues to prompt transitions aligns with the high frequency of self-regulation behaviors observed.



Figure 1. *Classroom Utilized as a Play Area*

4. Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate how the full day school learning model can cultivate meaningful dimensions of independence in children aged 5–6 years, through a well-structured, autonomy-supportive environment. Over four weeks of classroom observation and interviews with educators, six core themes emerged that reflect the children's developmental progress: autonomy, initiative, confidence, responsibility, decision-making, and self-regulation. These themes were consistently reinforced by teacher practices and institutional structure, revealing the interconnected nature of daily routine, emotional safety, and pedagogical trust in promoting independence.

The emergence of autonomy was closely tied to the freedom provided within the school's daily structure. Children were given the space to choose their activities, determine their working zones, and take initiative in how they began each day. As Teacher A explained, *"We give them space to choose the activities they like every morning. They know where things are and how to start."* This practice demonstrates an intentional shift from instruction to facilitation. Such classroom environments reflect what Sulistyarningsih (2008) described as *"ruang aktualisasi kemandirian"*—learning spaces that promote personal agency through choice and freedom. Figure 1 in this study supports this point visually, capturing how spatial arrangement and visual cues encourage children's self-navigation. This echoes what Zhang et al. (2024) emphasized as a key factor in early learner-centered classrooms: structured freedom with embedded support systems.

Initiative emerged as children began to perform tasks without prompting, not only for themselves but also in support of peers. By the second week, several children were setting up tables, preparing tools, and even prompting classmates to start. Teacher B noted, *"The children are used to starting their tasks on their own since the second week. Some even help us arrange the tables or remind their friends to start."* This reflects what Mulyasa (2013) identified as the essence of

"inisiatif bermakna": when learners act not just for individual compliance, but to uphold collective responsibility. Santriati (2020) further affirms that initiative grows in children when educators avoid over-directing and instead co-construct expectations. Our findings align with this view, showing that initiative grows not from adult enforcement, but from peer interaction and daily opportunity to lead.

Confidence, however, unfolded more gradually and with greater variation across individuals. At the start, only two children participated willingly in group discussions. Yet by week four, most had begun sharing thoughts aloud, narrating project work, or volunteering to speak. The principal described this shift: *"They were shy at first, but now they compete to come forward and present. Some even volunteer without being asked."* This behavioral evolution confirms Bahri's (2010) assertion that verbal confidence in early learners is socially constructed—it must be invited, not demanded. However, as Luo (2023) notes, confidence develops unevenly depending on a child's home language, temperament, and sense of security. This variation was evident in our observations, as some children still hesitated to speak publicly even as others flourished.

Responsibility became the most observable and consistent behavior across the cohort. Children not only followed routines but took ownership of shared responsibilities—cleaning up materials, preparing mats for meals, and reminding others to maintain order. Teacher C captured this succinctly: *"They know what they need to do every day. Some even remind their friends if someone forgets."* These findings are echoed in Hariwijaya's (2009) framework for character education, which emphasizes daily habit and role-modeling as mechanisms for instilling a sense of duty. Rianto et al. (2025) similarly noted that the internalization of responsibility begins not through lecture but through rhythm—rituals that children come to own.

Decision-making was another domain where teacher flexibility played a crucial role. Children had the freedom to choose the sequence of their activities, decide how long to stay in a learning zone, and reflect on their progress during afternoon sessions. Teacher A shared, *"We don't set the order—they're free to choose. Some plan their whole day around their favorite center."* Such expressions of choice are what Adrila et al. (2022) call "child-level planning competencies," which foster the roots of long-term agency. Bahrudin (2017) also reminds us that structured choice is the foundation of problem-solving behavior: when children are given the freedom to make real decisions, they learn to consider options, reflect on consequences, and adapt plans to meet goals.

Self-regulation developed most clearly during transitions and emotionally charged moments. Children who were once dependent on verbal reminders began responding to environmental cues. *"We just play the transition music, and they know what to do. Even the more energetic ones settle down quickly,"* said Teacher B. This finding validates what Santriati (2020) and Luo (2023) have both affirmed: that self-regulation is teachable, observable, and deeply social. The consistent use of auditory and visual cues helped children move from co-regulated behavior toward independent control—a vital skill for formal schooling and beyond.

Despite these strengths, the study acknowledges several limitations. The sample size was small and drawn from a single international school, which, as Sulistyaningsih (2008) notes, may not represent the average conditions of early education in Indonesia. The presence of multiple teachers, a well-resourced classroom, and an internationally structured curriculum (IEYC) provided conditions not universally available. Additionally, while frequency counts were integrated, formal rubrics or scaled assessments were not used, limiting comparative depth. As Zhang et al. (2024) advocate, mixed methods may provide richer insight into early childhood behavioral development over time.

Finally, the development of independence was not uniform across all participants. Some children quickly adapted to routines and choices, while others required more scaffolding. As Teacher B candidly stated, *"Some children needed more time. We had to scaffold more gently with them."* This resonates with Bahrudin's (2017) insights that independence is not a singular path but a personal trajectory. Contextual factors—such as home routines, prior preschool experiences, or family language use—played a role in shaping children's readiness and responsiveness to the full day model. In conclusion, the full day school model at Semarang Multinational School provides a pedagogically rich environment for cultivating independence. Through deliberate structure, routine freedom, and consistent emotional safety, children learned to act, decide, express, and regulate with growing maturity. These findings align with national goals in early childhood education (Mulyasa, 2013) and offer a model for designing independence-centered classrooms in diverse early learning settings.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the full day school model, when thoughtfully implemented, can serve as a highly effective approach for fostering independence in early childhood learners. At Semarang Multinational School, children aged 5–6 years exhibited clear growth in six core dimensions of independence: autonomy, initiative, confidence, responsibility, decision-making, and self-regulation. These behaviors emerged through structured routines, freedom to choose activities, consistent teacher support, and emotionally safe environments. Through natural observation and educator narratives, it became evident that independence is not only teachable but also observable and scalable when children are given the time, space, and trust to practice it.

The study reaffirms that full day school is not merely an extension of instructional time but a pedagogical opportunity to cultivate foundational life skills. However, such outcomes do not happen automatically. They depend on deliberate environmental design, relational teaching, and a deep understanding of each child's individual trajectory.

Teachers played a central role not only in modeling but also in gradually releasing responsibility—allowing children to take initiative while providing scaffolding when needed.

From these findings, several practical recommendations can be drawn for early childhood educators and policymakers. First, teachers should be trained to implement autonomy-supportive strategies, including offering meaningful choices, encouraging decision-making, and minimizing unnecessary adult intervention. Second, schools should prioritize consistent daily routines and child-accessible learning spaces that allow children to act independently throughout the day. Third, curriculum frameworks such as IEYC or similar project-based models can be adapted to provide time and thematic flexibility without compromising structure. For policymakers, the study suggests that investing in full day early education programs—when designed with attention to developmental needs—can significantly support the national goal of building self-reliant, socially competent future learners.

Despite its contributions, this study had several limitations. It was conducted in a single, well-resourced private school, which may not represent the diversity of early childhood institutions across Indonesia. The presence of a multicultural student body, access to international curriculum tools, and favorable teacher-child ratios likely supported the emergence of independence in ways not available in all contexts. Furthermore, while the study included frequency-based observation data, it did not incorporate standardized behavioral scales, longitudinal tracking, or children's own perspectives. These factors limit the generalizability of the findings.

For future research, it is recommended that similar studies be conducted in public early childhood institutions, across different socioeconomic and cultural contexts, and with varying curriculum frameworks. Researchers might also consider including child-led documentation methods such as drawings, voice recordings, or photo journals to better understand how young learners themselves perceive independence. Longitudinal studies tracking independence development over a full academic year—or even across the transition to primary school—could offer deeper insights into which instructional practices have the most lasting impact.

In closing, this study highlights that when children are given structure, trust, and space, they grow into thoughtful, capable, and self-directed learners. Independence, as shown here, is not an abstract ideal but a lived experience—nurtured through routine, empowered by choice, and sustained through care.

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7. References

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