

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum Across Educational Levels

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ABSTRACT

The Merdeka Curriculum is an educational policy developed to support learning transformation while accelerating the recovery of educational quality in the post-pandemic era. This study aims to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum across various educational levels, including early childhood, primary, and secondary education. The study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method by examining scientific articles, academic books, international reports, and policy documents published over the last five years. The findings indicate that the Merdeka Curriculum is characterized by learning flexibility, emphasis on essential competencies, differentiated instruction, and character development through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project. The implementation of this curriculum provides opportunities to develop more contextual, adaptive, and student-centered learning practices. However, its implementation still faces several challenges, including teacher readiness, institutional adaptation capacity, and the availability of supporting learning facilities. Therefore, continuous support is required through teacher professional development, strengthened school leadership, and the cultivation of innovative learning cultures. Overall, the Merdeka Curriculum has significant potential to improve educational quality by integrating competency development, character building, and twenty-first-century skills within a comprehensive educational framework.

Keywords: Curriculum Implementation, Differentiated Instruction, Learning Recovery, Independent Curriculum, Pancasila Student Profile.

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1. | INTRODUCTION

Education is a strategic instrument in human resource development that is able to answer the challenges of the development of science, technology, and social dynamics in the 21st century. The rapid changes that occur require the education system to be not only oriented towards the mastery of knowledge, but also on the development of competencies, character, creativity, critical thinking skills, communication, and collaboration of students. In line with this, various countries are reforming the curriculum to produce graduates who are adaptive to changing times and future needs. The OECD (2018) emphasizes that the future education system must focus on developing competencies that enable students to be able to cope with the complexities of life and the ever-changing world of work (OECD, 2018).

In Indonesia, education transformation is gaining more attention after various learning challenges have emerged exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The disruption of the learning process that lasts for a long time has caused the phenomenon of learning loss which has an impact on the decline of learning outcomes of students at various levels of education. Donnelly and Patrinos (2022) explained that learning loss is one of the main consequences of educational disruption during the pandemic that has the potential to affect the quality of learning in the long term. This condition encourages the need for education policy innovations that are able to accelerate learning recovery while improving the quality of education in a sustainable manner (Donnelly & Patrinos, 2022).

In response to these challenges, the Indonesian government developed a Freedom of Learning policy that places students at the center of learning. This policy aims to provide flexibility to educational units and educators in designing learning processes that are in accordance with the needs, characteristics, and potential of students. According to Saleh (2020), the concept of Freedom of Learning exists as an effort to create an education system that is more adaptive, creative, and oriented towards developing student competencies. A similar view is put forward by Sherly, Dharma, and Sihombing (2021) who state that Freedom of Learning emphasizes learning independence, freedom to innovate, and a more humane transformation of educational culture.

The implementation of the Independent Learning policy is then realized through the development of the Independent Curriculum which began to be implemented gradually as part of the learning recovery program. This curriculum is designed to provide greater flexibility to teachers in arranging learning, prioritizing strengthening essential competencies, and developing students' character through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project. Rahayu et al. (2022) explained that the Independent Curriculum provides a wider space for educational units to develop learning according to the needs of students and the learning context. In addition, this curriculum encourages a paradigm shift from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning.

The characteristics of the Independent Curriculum are also closely related to the concept of differentiated instruction that adjusts the learning process based on the readiness, interests, and learning profiles of students. Tomlinson (2017) emphasized that differentiated learning is an effective approach to accommodate the diversity of learning needs so that each student has the opportunity to develop optimally. This approach is becoming increasingly relevant in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum which places the diversity of students as one of the bases in learning planning.

In addition to being oriented towards the development of academic competence, the Independent Curriculum also emphasizes the importance of strengthening 21st century character and skills through contextual and meaningful learning experiences. Suhartoyo et al. (2020) stated that contextual learning is able to increase student engagement because the material learned is associated with real life. In line with that, Fullan et al. (2017) explain that 21st century education requires a deep learning approach that allows students to develop competencies in depth through authentic learning experiences. This perspective is reinforced by UNESCO (2021) which emphasizes the importance of education that is able to form creative, collaborative, responsible, and ready individuals to face global change.

Despite offering various advantages, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at various levels of education still faces a number of challenges, such as teacher readiness, understanding of the new learning paradigm, the availability of supporting facilities, and the ability of educational units to adapt the curriculum. Jannah et al. (2022) stated that various implementation obstacles are still found in the early stages of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, so the right strategy is needed to ensure the success of its implementation. Therefore, the study of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at various levels of education is important to provide an overview of the characteristics, opportunities, challenges, and efforts to optimize the implementation of the curriculum in supporting the improvement of the quality of national education.

2. | RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to gain a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at various levels of education. The SLR method was chosen because it allows researchers to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize various research results, policy documents, and scientific literature relevant to the research topic. This approach is used to produce an objective picture of the characteristics of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, the opportunities offered, the challenges faced, and strategies that can be carried out to optimize its implementation in various educational units.

The literature review process is carried out through several structured stages. The first stage is the formulation of a focus of study directed at the implementation of the

Independent Curriculum at various levels of education, ranging from early childhood education, primary education, to secondary education. The second stage is the search for literature sources through reputable academic databases, especially Google Scholar. The search was conducted using several keywords, including "Independent Curriculum", "Independent Learning", "implementation of the Independent Curriculum", "differentiated instruction", "learning loss", "21st century learning", "educational transformation", and "curriculum development". The use of these keywords aims to obtain literature that has a direct or indirect relationship with the implementation of the Independent Curriculum.

The inclusion criteria used in this study include: (1) scientific articles, academic books, reports of international institutions, and education policy documents relevant to the research theme; (2) publications published in the last 5 years; (3) literature that discusses the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, Independent Learning, differentiated learning, learning recovery, 21st century competencies, and curriculum development; and (4) sources that are fully available so that an in-depth analysis can be carried out. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria include publications that do not have substantive relevance to the research focus, articles that only contain opinions without a clear academic basis, and publications outside the predetermined time frame.

After the identification and selection process is carried out, literature that meets the criteria is then analyzed using content analysis techniques. The analysis was carried out by grouping information based on the main themes related to the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, such as curriculum characteristics, differentiated learning, strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile, the role of teachers, implementation opportunities, implementation challenges, and optimization strategies. Furthermore, the results of analysis from various sources are compared and synthesized to find patterns, similarities, differences, and trends that arise in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at various levels of education.

Through the Systematic Literature Review approach, this study is expected to be able to provide a comprehensive picture of the development of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum based on published scientific findings. In addition, this method allows for the preparation of more comprehensive conclusions because it is based on various credible academic sources and relevant to the context of Indonesia's educational transformation in the early implementation period of the Independent Curriculum.

3. | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum is part of an educational transformation designed to answer various 21st century learning challenges while supporting post-pandemic learning recovery. This curriculum is developed by emphasizing learning flexibility, strengthening essential competencies, character development through the Pancasila Student Profile, and providing a wider space for teachers and educational units in designing learning according to the needs of students.

The presence of the Independent Curriculum is not only seen as a change in the curriculum document, but also as a change in the educational paradigm that places students as the main subject in the learning process. In this context, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is one of the efforts to realize an education system that is more adaptive to the development of the times and future needs (Rahayu et al., 2022; OECD, 2018).

The main characteristics of the Independent Curriculum can be seen in its focus on competency-based learning and learning differentiation. This approach provides an opportunity for teachers to adjust strategies, methods, materials, and assessments based on students' levels of readiness, interests, and learning profiles. According to Tomlinson (2017), differentiated learning is an approach that allows each student to obtain a learning experience that suits their needs so that individual potential can develop optimally. The implementation of this concept in the Independent Curriculum shows a shift from a uniform learning approach to more personalized and student-centered learning. This condition also strengthens the goal of Freedom of Learning which places freedom of learning as one of the main foundations in the development of national education (Sherly et al., 2021).

In addition to learning differentiation, the Independent Curriculum also emphasizes the importance of contextual and meaningful learning. Students are not only directed to master the subject matter, but also able to relate the knowledge gained to real situations in daily life. Contextual learning allows students to develop critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration skills that are important competencies in the 21st century. Suhartoyo et al. (2020) explained that contextual learning is able to increase students' involvement in the learning process because they can understand the relevance of the material to their experiences. This view is in line with the concept of deep learning put forward by Fullan et al. (2017), which emphasizes the importance of deep learning experiences to form sustainable competencies.

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at various levels of education shows that there are adjustments according to the characteristics of student development. In early childhood education, learning emphasizes meaningful play activities, environmental exploration, and basic character development. At the basic education level, the implementation of the curriculum focuses on strengthening literacy and numeracy skills, differentiated learning, and character formation through various project activities. Meanwhile, in secondary education, learning flexibility is increasingly visible through providing opportunities for students to develop interests, talents, and career plans according to their respective potentials. This difference in focus shows that the Independent Curriculum is designed adaptively to meet the developmental needs of students at each level of education (Rahayu et al., 2022).

One of the important components of the Independent Curriculum is the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project which aims to develop students' character and competencies through cross-disciplinary learning. Through the project, students are

encouraged to develop the values of faith and fear of God Almighty, global diversity, mutual cooperation, independence, critical reasoning, and creativity. This approach is in line with UNESCO's (2021) recommendations that emphasize the importance of education that is not only oriented to academic aspects, but also to the development of character, social responsibility, and life skills in an increasingly complex society. Thus, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum seeks to create a balance between academic achievement and the formation of students' character.

Nevertheless, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is inseparable from various challenges. One of the main challenges is the readiness of teachers to understand and implement new learning paradigms. Teachers are required not only to master the subject matter, but also to be able to design differentiated learning, formulate diagnostic assessments, facilitate learning projects, and develop student-centered learning experiences. Jannah et al. (2022) stated that uneven understanding of the concept and practice of the Independent Curriculum is one of the obstacles that are often found in the early stages of implementation. This condition shows that the success of curriculum implementation is greatly influenced by the professional capacity of teachers as the main implementers of learning.

In addition to teacher readiness, school leadership factors also have an important role in supporting the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. School principals are required to be able to create a learning culture that supports innovation, collaboration, and sustainable teacher professional development. In this context, academic supervision and clinical supervision are important instruments to help teachers understand and implement curriculum changes effectively. Anridzo et al. (2022) explained that clinical supervision can improve the quality of learning because it provides an opportunity for teachers to obtain constructive feedback in developing learning practices that are in accordance with the characteristics of the Independent Curriculum.

Another challenge is related to the availability of facilities and infrastructure to support learning. The implementation of a curriculum that emphasizes creativity, collaboration, and the use of technology requires adequate facility support. Inequality of access to learning resources and technology is still a problem in various education units. Therefore, the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum requires the support of various parties, including the government, education units, and the community, to ensure the availability of a learning environment that supports the optimal development of students' competencies.

On the other hand, the Independent Curriculum also offers various opportunities to improve the quality of national education. Curriculum flexibility allows teachers to tailor learning to the needs of students and the conditions of the educational unit. This approach provides space for more relevant and meaningful learning innovations. Hattie & Clarke (2018) explained that the quality of learning is greatly influenced by the teacher's ability to provide effective feedback and create an impactful learning

experience for students. With greater flexibility, teachers have the opportunity to develop learning strategies that are more responsive to the needs of students.

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum also cannot be separated from the context of post-pandemic learning recovery. Various studies show that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a significant decline in learning outcomes in various countries. Donnelly and Patrinos (2022) stated that learning loss is a global challenge that requires adaptive education policies oriented towards restoring learning quality. In this context, the Independent Curriculum comes with a simplification of learning content and a focus on essential competencies so that it is expected to be able to help students catch up with learning lag that occurred during the pandemic.

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at various levels of education can be summarized as presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Various Levels of Education

Education Level	Implementation Focus	Key Benefits	Key Challenges
Early Childhood Education	Meaningful play and character strengthening	Holistic development of children	Educator readiness
Basic Education	Literacy, numeracy, differentiation of learning	Improvement of basic competencies	Adaptation of learning methods
Secondary Education	Development of interests, talents, and careers	More flexible learning	Individualized learning planning
All Levels	Pancasila Student Profile Project	Strengthening character and competence	Availability of resources

The success of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is ultimately greatly influenced by the synergy between policies, human resources, and the educational environment. Saleh (2020) emphasized that education transformation does not only require changes in regulations, but also changes in learning culture involving all education stakeholders. Therefore, strengthening teacher capacity, improving the quality of school leadership, providing supporting facilities, and developing learning communities are strategic steps that need to be taken in a sustainable manner.

In a broader perspective, the Independent Curriculum is in line with the direction of global education development that emphasizes future competencies, lifelong learning, and character development. The OECD (2018) highlights the importance of adaptability, creativity, and problem-solving as the main competencies that future generations must have. Meanwhile, UNESCO (2021) emphasizes the need for an education system that is able to form individuals who are responsible, collaborative, and ready to face social and technological changes. Thus, the implementation of the

Independent Curriculum can be seen as part of a strategic effort to improve the quality of Indonesian education to be more relevant to the needs of the 21st century society while supporting the achievement of sustainable education development goals.

In addition, the use of innovative learning models is also a factor that supports the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Research by Sadieda et al. (2022) shows that the application of a blended learning model that is in line with the principles of the Independent Curriculum is able to increase student involvement in the learning process and provide flexibility in accessing learning resources. The findings show that the integration of technology and learning innovation can be an effective means to realize the goals of the Independent Curriculum, especially in creating learning that is adaptive, inclusive, and oriented to the needs of students. Thus, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is not only related to changes in the curriculum structure, but also a comprehensive transformation of learning practices that take place at various levels of education.

4. | CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum is a form of educational transformation designed to answer the challenges of 21st century learning while supporting the recovery of post-pandemic learning. This curriculum presents a more flexible approach through strengthening essential competencies, differentiated learning, and developing students' character through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project. These characteristics show a change in the educational paradigm from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning by paying attention to diverse needs, potentials, interests, and learning profiles.

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at various levels of education shows adjustments that are in accordance with the characteristics of student development. In early childhood education, the curriculum is directed at play-based learning and character strengthening. In primary education, the focus of implementation lies in strengthening literacy, numeracy, and differentiated learning. Meanwhile, in secondary education, the curriculum provides a wider space for students to develop interests, talents, and career planning according to their potential. Thus, the Independent Curriculum provides opportunities for the creation of more relevant, meaningful, and contextual learning experiences.

Despite offering various advantages, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum still faces a number of challenges, especially related to teacher readiness, the ability of education units to adapt to change, and the availability of learning support facilities and infrastructure. Therefore, the successful implementation of the curriculum requires continuous support through improving educator competence, strengthening school leadership, developing learning communities, and providing adequate facilities.

The Independent Curriculum has great potential to improve the quality of national education because it is able to integrate the development of academic competencies, character, and skills of the 21st century in one more flexible and adaptive learning

framework. If implemented consistently and supported by all education stakeholders, the Independent Curriculum can be an important foundation in realizing quality, inclusive, and sustainable education.

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Data Disclosure Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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