

Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in Transforming Primary and Secondary Education

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum represents an important part of Indonesia's educational transformation aimed at creating flexible, contextual, and competency-oriented learning. This article aims to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at primary and secondary education levels by examining its concepts, implementation practices, challenges, and strengthening strategies. This study employed a descriptive qualitative method through a literature review approach by analyzing relevant academic sources published in the last five years related to curriculum policy, differentiated learning, assessment, and character development. The findings indicate that the Merdeka Curriculum provides opportunities for schools and teachers to develop competency-based learning through student-centered approaches. At the primary level, implementation emphasizes literacy, numeracy, and the development of the Pancasila Student Profile, while at the secondary level, it focuses on critical thinking, creativity, and independent learning skills. However, several challenges remain, including teacher readiness, institutional support, and the need for continuous professional development. Therefore, the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires collaboration among all educational stakeholders to ensure sustainable improvement in learning quality.

Keywords: *Differentiated Learning, Education Transformation, Merdeka Curriculum, Primary Education, Secondary Education.*

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1. | INTRODUCTION

Technological developments, social changes, and the demands of 21st century competencies have encouraged various countries to transform their education systems, including Indonesia. Education is no longer only directed at mastering academic knowledge, but also on the ability to think critically, creatively, communicate, collaborate, and form students' character. This paradigm shift requires curriculum updates that are able to provide space for learning flexibility and adjust to the needs of students. The OECD (2019) explains that future education needs to develop competencies that enable learners to adapt to complex changes through the ability to think, act, and interact effectively. In line with this, education reform requires systemic changes that not only focus on policies, but also the readiness of all components of education in implementing them (Fullan, 2019).

In the Indonesian context, educational transformation is realized through the implementation of the Independent Curriculum as one of the strategic policies to improve the quality of learning. The Independent Curriculum comes with an approach that emphasizes competency development, learning flexibility, and strengthening students' character through the Pancasila Student Profile. This curriculum provides an opportunity for educational units and teachers to design a learning process that is more in accordance with the characteristics of students, compared to previous approaches that tend to use uniform learning patterns. The implementation of the Independent Curriculum is part of efforts to recover learning after various educational challenges due to the pandemic and the need to strengthen students' literacy and numeracy skills (Sumarsih et al., 2022).

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the elementary school level has its own characteristics because the basic education stage is the main foundation in building students' academic abilities and character. At this level, the implementation of the curriculum is directed at more contextual learning, strengthening literacy and numeracy, differentiated learning, and developing projects that support the dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile. Alimuddin (2023) stated that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in elementary schools provides opportunities for teachers to develop more creative learning and be oriented to the needs of students. However, the success of its implementation is greatly influenced by teachers' understanding of the curriculum concept, the ability to prepare learning tools, and the school's readiness to make changes.

At the secondary school level, the Independent Curriculum is directed to strengthen students' ability to think critically, solve problems, and develop their potential according to their interests and talents. Curriculum flexibility provides space for schools to develop more meaningful learning experiences through project-based learning and cross-disciplinary approaches. Zendrato and Agatha (2023) explained that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is not only related to changes in

curriculum documents, but also the transformation of learning culture that places students at the center of the educational process.

Despite having progressive goals, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum still faces various challenges. One of the main challenges is the readiness of teachers to understand and apply the principles of the new curriculum. Teachers are required to be able to design differentiated learning, conduct diagnostic assessments, and develop learning strategies that suit the needs of students. Tomlinson (2019) emphasized that differentiated learning requires the ability of teachers to understand the variations in abilities, needs, and characteristics of students so that the learning process can take place effectively. In addition, limited training, learning resources, and institutional support are also factors that affect the effectiveness of curriculum implementation (Ulinuha & Pujiastuti, 2023).

Various previous studies have examined the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in certain educational units, but studies are still needed that look at the implementation more comprehensively at the elementary and secondary school levels. The study is important to understand how the characteristics of the Independent Curriculum are applied, what is the role of teachers in the learning transformation process, and what are the challenges that need to be considered so that the implementation of the curriculum can run optimally. Therefore, this article aims to analyze the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in primary and secondary schools through a literature review approach, by highlighting aspects of concepts, implementation practices, challenges, and strategies for strengthening curriculum implementation in the context of Indonesian education.

2. | RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a library research method to analyze the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the elementary and secondary school levels. The descriptive qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand, describe, and interpret various phenomena related to the implementation of curriculum policies based on the results of studies on various relevant literature sources. Through this approach, the research does not focus on statistical measurement, but on an in-depth understanding of the concepts, implementation processes, challenges, and strategies for strengthening the Independent Curriculum in the context of education.

Research data was obtained through the study of various secondary sources consisting of scientific journal articles, academic books, educational policy documents, and scientific publications relevant to the research theme. The literature used is limited to publications in the last five years to maintain the relevance of the study to the development of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Literature sources were selected based on several criteria, namely having a direct relationship with the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, discussing learning transformation,

teacher readiness, differentiated learning, educational assessment, character strengthening, and curriculum paradigm changes in primary and secondary education.

The data collection process is carried out through the stages of identification, selection, and analysis of various literature in accordance with the focus of the research. The identification stage is carried out by looking for scientific sources that discuss the concept and practice of implementing the Independent Curriculum. Furthermore, the selection stage is carried out by selecting references that have conceptual and empirical relevance to the research objectives. The selected literature is then systematically analyzed to find patterns, concept relationships, and various problems that arise in the curriculum implementation process.

Data analysis is carried out using content analysis techniques through the process of critical reading, classifying information, interpreting findings, and compiling a synthesis based on the main themes of the research. The analysis is focused on several aspects, namely the characteristics of the Independent Curriculum, implementation in primary and secondary schools, the role of teachers in learning transformation, the application of assessments, and challenges and strategies for optimizing implementation. The content analysis approach is used because it is able to identify the meaning and tendencies of various literature sources so as to produce a more comprehensive understanding of an educational phenomenon.

To maintain the validity of the study, the study applied the principle of source selection by considering the credibility, relevance, and novelty of the literature. A comparison of the results of various previous research was carried out to obtain an objective picture of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Thus, the descriptive qualitative method through this literature study is expected to be able to provide a systematic analysis of opportunities, challenges, and strategies to strengthen the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the elementary and secondary school levels.

3. | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the Elementary and Secondary School Levels

The Independent Curriculum is a form of education policy transformation that places students as the center of learning through a competency-based approach, curriculum flexibility, and character strengthening. This paradigm shift shows that the curriculum is no longer only understood as a set of learning materials, but as a system that directs the creation of meaningful learning experiences according to the needs of students. OECD (2019) explains that 21st century education requires the development of competencies that enable students to have adaptability, problem-solving, creativity, and collaboration. Therefore, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is part

of efforts to strengthen the relevance of education to the demands of social change and global development.

In the process of implementation, the Independent Curriculum provides flexibility to educational units and teachers to develop learning according to the characteristics of students. This approach differs from previous curriculum models that emphasize uniformity of content and learning processes. According to Fullan (2019), the success of educational change is not only determined by policy design, but also by the ability of education actors to translate these policies into learning practices. This shows that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum requires a change in the mindset of teachers, school principals, and the entire education community in order to be able to create a more flexible and innovative learning culture.

At the elementary school level, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is directed to build a foundation of basic competencies through strengthening literacy, numeracy, character, and learning in accordance with the development of students. Alimuddin (2023) explained that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in elementary schools provides space for teachers to develop more creative and contextual learning strategies. Teachers not only play the role of delivering material, but also as designers of learning experiences that are able to accommodate the differences in students' abilities. This is strengthened by Prabaningrum and Sayekti (2023) who stated that flexibility in the Independent Curriculum allows elementary schools to make learning adjustments based on the needs and conditions of students.

One of the important characteristics of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the elementary school level is the implementation of differentiated learning. This approach emphasizes that each student has different abilities, interests, learning styles, and needs so that learning cannot be done with one approach in the same way. Tomlinson (2019) explained that differentiated learning allows teachers to make adjustments to content, processes, and learning products so that each student has the opportunity to develop optimally. In the context of the Independent Curriculum, these principles are the basis for the preparation of teaching modules and learning strategies that are more responsive to the diversity of students.

In addition to differentiated learning, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is also strengthened through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). This program aims to develop students' character through project-based activities that connect learning with real problems in the surrounding environment. Hernawan and Mulyati (2023) explained that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is closely related to the formation of the Pancasila Student Profile because the learning process is directed not only to academic achievement, but also to character development, creativity, independence, and the ability to work together. The same thing was stated by Wahyudi et al. (2023) that the integration of the values of the Pancasila Student Profile is one of the important aspects in realizing national education goals through the Independent Curriculum.

At the secondary school level, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum has a stronger orientation towards the development of high-level thinking competencies, learning independence, and students' readiness to face future challenges. Students at this level are given space to explore their interests and potentials through more flexible learning. Zendrato and Agatha (2023) stated that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in secondary education is not only an administrative change in the curriculum, but a transformation of the learning culture that places students as the main subject of education.

In the context of secondary school learning, assessments have also undergone a paradigm shift. The Independent Curriculum emphasizes that assessments are not only used to assess the final learning outcomes, but also as part of the process to understand student development. Sufyadi et al. (2021) explained that assessment in learning needs to be carried out through diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments so that teachers obtain comprehensive information about students' learning needs. This approach allows teachers to improve learning in a sustainable manner and not only oriented towards achieving academic grades.

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum is also greatly influenced by the quality of school leadership and the readiness of educators. School principals have an important role in creating an environment that supports learning innovation and teacher professional development. Angga and Iskandar (2022) explained that school leadership is an important factor in encouraging the success of the Merdeka Learning program because school principals play a role as a driver of change at the education unit level. In addition, teachers also need professional development support to be able to understand concepts, design learning, and evaluate according to the principles of the Independent Curriculum.

Challenges and Strategies for Strengthening the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum

Although the Merdeka Curriculum offers a more flexible and student-oriented approach to learning, its implementation still faces various challenges. One of the main challenges is the readiness of teachers to understand the change in learning paradigm. The change from a material-based learning approach to competency-based learning requires adaptability that is not simple. Sibagariang et al. (2021) explained that teachers have a strategic position in the success of the Merdeka Learning program because teachers are the main actors who translate curriculum policies into learning practices.

In addition to the aspect of teacher competence, another challenge is related to the school's ability to provide a learning environment that supports curriculum implementation. Ulinuha and Pujiastuti (2023) found that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum still faces obstacles in the form of uneven understanding of concepts, readiness of learning tools, and the need for assistance for teachers. These problems show that the success of curriculum implementation is not enough only

through regulations, but requires a strategy to strengthen the capacity of all school elements.

Learning planning is also an important challenge in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Teachers are required to be able to develop learning tools that are more flexible but still oriented towards competency achievement. Ariesanti et al. (2023) explained that teachers' ability to prepare lesson plans is one of the factors that determine the quality of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in elementary schools. Therefore, improving teacher competence through continuous training and community learning is an important need in supporting the successful implementation of the curriculum.

In addition to internal school factors, the development of global education also shows the importance of student-centered learning innovation. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) affirm that effective learning must consider the social, emotional, and cognitive development of learners. This principle is in line with the direction of the Independent Curriculum which strives to create more meaningful learning and according to individual needs.

The strategy to strengthen the implementation of the Independent Curriculum can be carried out through increasing teacher capacity, strengthening school leadership, and utilizing educational technology. Sahlberg (2021) explains that sustainable educational change requires a balance between national policies, teacher professionalism, and school culture that supports learning. Thus, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum needs to be seen as a long-term transformation process, not just a change in curriculum documents.

Strengthening implementation also requires continuous evaluation of learning practices in schools. Schools need to reflect on the process of implementing the curriculum, identify obstacles, and develop improvement strategies as needed. With the support of a collaborative education system, the Independent Curriculum can be an important instrument in improving the quality of learning at the elementary and secondary school levels.

4. | CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the elementary and secondary school levels is part of an educational transformation oriented towards strengthening competencies, learning flexibility, and character development of students. This curriculum presents a paradigm shift from learning centered on material delivery to more student-centered learning through a contextual, adaptive, and meaningful approach. At the elementary school level, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum provides space for strengthening literacy, numeracy, differentiated learning, and character formation through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project. Meanwhile, at the secondary school level, this curriculum supports the development of critical thinking skills, creativity, independence, and exploration of students' interests and talents.

The success of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum does not only depend on the policies set, but also on the readiness of teachers, school leadership, support for the educational environment, and the ability of educational units to adapt. Teachers have a central role as learning designers who are able to create learning experiences according to the needs of students. Therefore, improving teacher competence through continuous professional development is an important factor in ensuring that the curriculum can be applied optimally.

Despite having various advantages, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum still faces challenges, especially related to understanding concepts, readiness of learning tools, assessment capabilities, and equitable distribution of support for schools. These challenges show that curriculum implementation is a sustainable process that requires collaboration between the government, schools, teachers, and all education stakeholders. With the right strengthening strategy, the Independent Curriculum has the potential to improve the quality of learning and create an education system that is more responsive to the needs of students and the demands of the times.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Ethical approval was obtained for this study. The manuscript represents original work and has not been previously published, nor is it under consideration by another journal.

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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