


Evaluation of the Independent Curriculum Policy: A Literature Review on Theoretical Foundations and Implementation Practices

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to evaluate the Merdeka Curriculum policy through a literature review of its theoretical foundations and implementation practices in educational institutions. The Merdeka Curriculum represents an educational reform effort that promotes flexible, character-based, and student-centered learning approaches. Employing a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method, this research analyzes scientific publications from 2020 to 2024. The findings reveal that the curriculum is grounded in strong philosophical underpinnings, particularly the ideas of Ki Hadjar Dewantara, humanistic education, and constructivist pedagogy. Despite its robust conceptual basis, implementation faces several challenges, including teacher readiness, leadership capacity, infrastructure limitations, and regional disparities. Some schools have successfully adopted differentiated instruction and character-building projects, especially when supported by transformative leadership and active teacher learning communities. However, the implementation gap remains significant, particularly in underdeveloped and remote areas. This study recommends strengthening context-based training, establishing responsive evaluation mechanisms, and fostering collaboration among schools, parents, and local communities. In conclusion, the success of the Merdeka Curriculum depends on adaptive policy support, full engagement of the educational ecosystem, and a strong commitment to equity in access to quality education.

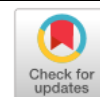
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INTRODUCTION

National education transformation continues to experience paradigm shifts in line with rapidly evolving global dynamics and local needs. The 21st century has brought about significant changes in how knowledge is produced, accessed, and applied – demanding that education systems cultivate adaptive, creative, and collaborative learners. These shifts were further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted conventional educational practices and exposed structural gaps in learning access and quality. In response to both the urgent need for post-pandemic recovery and the long-term goal of preparing students for future challenges, the Indonesian government launched the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*). This curriculum seeks to provide educational institutions with the flexibility to design learning activities tailored to the diverse needs, abilities, and contexts of students.

Initially introduced as an emergency learning alternative during the pandemic, the Independent Curriculum has since evolved into a national policy direction in the post-pandemic era. Its implementation reflects a fundamental shift from rigid, standardized models to more flexible, contextual, and student-centered approaches. This shift aligns with the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) vision promoted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. The government emphasizes the importance of learning that fosters the holistic development of students through the **Pancasila Student Profile** –

highlighting core values such as critical thinking, independence, mutual cooperation, and global citizenship. As such, this policy is not merely technical in nature, but also strategic and ideological (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

Conceptually, the Independent Curriculum is grounded in humanistic and constructivist approaches to learning. These perspectives regard students as active agents who construct knowledge through experience, exploration, and reflection. This is consistent with Bruner's (1996) theory of learning, which argues that meaningful learning occurs when students are directly engaged in cognitive and social activities. In this framework, teachers serve as facilitators, guiding students in discovering their strengths and developing their potential. Key components of the curriculum include differentiated instruction, project-based character education, and formative assessment. These elements are designed to accommodate learner diversity and promote student agency in the learning process. However, implementing such principles requires a cultural shift in teaching and school practices, which remains a substantial challenge in many educational settings.

Although the Independent Curriculum is grounded in progressive educational values, its implementation on the ground has faced significant obstacles. Many schools report difficulties in understanding and operationalizing key concepts such as differentiated learning, diagnostic assessments, and project-based activities. Teachers, as the frontline implementers of the curriculum, often lack adequate preparation and ongoing support. As a result, many express low confidence and limited ability to fully adopt the new pedagogical approaches. A study by Isnaini and Rohiat (2023) found that over 60% of teachers in several provinces had yet to fully grasp the core principles of the Independent Curriculum. This gap between policy design and actual classroom practice highlights the urgency of conducting policy evaluations that address not only theoretical intentions but also practical realities.

Policy evaluation is an essential instrument in assessing the effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance of an educational reform. In the context of the Independent Curriculum, evaluation efforts should extend beyond document analysis and encompass the lived experiences of educators and school communities. Nugroho (2018) stresses that educational policy evaluation must be approached systematically, considering the interplay of social context, policy actors, and institutional structures. Within this framework, literature reviews serve a critical function in synthesizing empirical findings, identifying implementation trends, and highlighting best practices. A well-executed literature review provides a strong foundation for evidence-based policymaking and continuous curriculum improvement.

A major challenge in implementing the Independent Curriculum is the disparity in school readiness across Indonesia. Schools located in remote, frontier, and underdeveloped regions (3T areas) often face significant obstacles due to shortages in trained educators, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to digital resources. According to Yusuf and Fauziah (2022), many 3T schools lack essential tools such as learning devices, teacher training opportunities, and quality teaching materials. Geographic isolation and poor connectivity also hinder the rollout of project-based learning and formative assessments. These systemic inequalities demand more inclusive and context-sensitive interventions to prevent the curriculum from further exacerbating educational disparities.

Internal school factors also influence the extent to which the Independent Curriculum can be successfully implemented. The leadership capacity of school principals, particularly their ability to function as instructional leaders, is crucial in fostering a school culture that embraces innovation and change. Sari and Maulana (2023) found that transformational leadership positively impacts teacher collaboration and curriculum adoption. Moreover, the willingness and motivation of teachers to engage with new pedagogical practices directly affect implementation outcomes. Teachers who are open to change are more likely to pursue professional development and experiment with creative instructional methods. Thus, human resource development must be prioritized to build resilient and responsive learning communities.

The curriculum's theoretical foundation is rooted not only in modern pedagogy but also in Indonesia's educational philosophy. The ideas of Ki Hadjar Dewantara, which

emphasize educational freedom, character development, and community-based learning, remain central to the Independent Curriculum. Dewantara (2004) envisioned education as a means to nurture independent individuals who are socially responsible and morally grounded. From this perspective, curriculum is not merely a set of instructional tools, but a reflection of national identity and cultural values. Therefore, evaluating curriculum policies must also examine the alignment between philosophical foundations and actual implementation, requiring an interdisciplinary and holistic approach.

The success of the curriculum also hinges on the quality of training and support mechanisms provided to educators. Teachers frequently report that existing professional development programs are overly generic and lack contextual relevance. Setiawan and Lestari (2023) highlight the need for sustained mentorship and learning communities to help teachers internalize curriculum values. Furthermore, collaboration between schools, supervisors, and local education authorities is vital in building implementation capacity. Without effective support systems, the risk of superficial or symbolic compliance with curriculum guidelines increases.

The Independent Curriculum emphasizes project-based learning as a vehicle to cultivate 21st-century competencies—such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. According to Trilling and Fadel (2009), these skills are essential for navigating a rapidly changing global environment. However, many schools struggle to design meaningful projects due to time constraints, lack of clear guidelines, and insufficient assessment literacy. Therefore, successful innovations from pioneering schools must be documented, evaluated, and shared to inform broader implementation efforts.

Additionally, parental and community involvement is a critical component of the curriculum's holistic vision. Hapsari (2022) stresses that education should be a collaborative effort between schools, families, and communities. Community-based projects and parental guidance enrich learning experiences and enhance student engagement. However, such collaboration remains uneven and requires stronger policy frameworks to institutionalize community participation in education.

Teachers also face challenges in aligning formative assessments with curriculum goals, especially given the bureaucratic burdens of school administration. Fauzi (2022) points out that excessive reporting requirements limit teacher autonomy and hinder innovation. Therefore, simplifying administrative tasks and creating coherent assessment systems are necessary to ensure that evaluations contribute meaningfully to student learning.

Evidence from several studies suggests that the Independent Curriculum can yield positive outcomes when combined with local innovations. Rahmawati and Darmawan (2023) observed that environmental-based projects in certain schools enhanced students' engagement and social awareness. However, such practices remain localized and have not yet become widespread. Greater efforts are needed to mainstream these contextual adaptations and encourage grassroots innovation.

Despite the curriculum's potential, resistance to change persists. Common barriers include skepticism, passive compliance, and lack of understanding of the curriculum's deeper values. Fullan (2007) argues that genuine educational change requires shifts in mindset, capacity, and motivation among implementers. Therefore, a comprehensive communication strategy and continuous professional support are essential for successful reform.

In evaluating the Independent Curriculum, a multidimensional and systematic framework is required. Stufflebeam's (2003) CIPP model—Context, Input, Process, Product—offers a useful structure for assessing curriculum effectiveness. Literature reviews provide a strategic entry point for building this framework by mapping existing research and identifying knowledge gaps. A literature-based evaluation helps policymakers refine implementation strategies and align curriculum objectives with real-world conditions.

Ultimately, this article conducts a literature review of the Independent Curriculum to examine its theoretical underpinnings, implementation challenges, and opportunities for improvement. By synthesizing insights from diverse sources, the study contributes to both academic discourse and educational policymaking in Indonesia. The review serves as a critical

reflection for stakeholders aiming to ensure that the curriculum fulfills its transformative goals and remains responsive to the nation's evolving educational landscape.

METHOD

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to thoroughly examine scientific publications related to the implementation of the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) in Indonesia. The aim of this approach is to summarize, organize, and synthesize previous research findings in a systematic, transparent, and academically rigorous manner. It enables a comprehensive understanding of how the policy has been implemented, the challenges encountered, and the innovative practices that have emerged. Additionally, the SLR method facilitates the identification of research gaps that can inform future studies.

The literature search was conducted using several academic databases, including Google Scholar, Garuda, SINTA, and DOAJ. Keywords used in the search process included "Kurikulum Merdeka," "curriculum implementation," "education policy evaluation," and "Merdeka Belajar education." A total of 35 peer-reviewed articles were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) published between 2020 and 2024; (2) explicitly discussing the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the Indonesian education context; (3) based on empirical data; and (4) written in either Indonesian or English. Articles were excluded if they were editorials, opinion-based, or lacked empirical evidence.

The selected articles were analyzed using thematic analysis. Each article was carefully read and coded to identify recurring themes such as the theoretical foundations of the curriculum, implementation processes, encountered challenges, pedagogical innovations, and measurable impacts on learning outcomes. The findings were categorized and synthesized into a coherent narrative, which serves both academic and practical purposes. To ensure validity and consistency, the analysis process involved multiple readings and triangulation of data across sources.

Through this structured review, the study aims to provide a holistic and evidence-based overview of the Independent Curriculum's implementation and contribute to the development of effective education policy and practice in Indonesia.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a synthesis of the literature review findings on the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum) in various educational institutions. The findings compiled here do not merely refer to descriptive data from previous studies, but are also analyzed thematically to illustrate the dynamics of the policy from both theoretical and practical aspects. The discussion integrates relevant educational theories and empirical research findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum's implementation. Drawing from various sources, this section aims to identify common patterns, critical challenges, and opportunities for development in the curriculum's application in the field.

Theoretical Foundations

The Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum) represents a significant philosophical shift in Indonesia's education system. Rooted in the humanist pedagogical philosophy of Ki Hadjar Dewantara, it aims to empower students as holistic individuals. Dewantara emphasized that education should liberate learners and develop their character, intellect, and cultural identity. This vision repositions schools as spaces of liberation rather than conformity.

In practice, this philosophical foundation encourages educators to facilitate rather than dictate learning. Students are no longer passive recipients but active participants in constructing knowledge. This aligns with constructivist educational theories, which posit that learning is most effective when it is meaningful, experiential, and socially embedded. The curriculum also integrates character education through the framework of "Pelajar Pancasila," emphasizing six key competencies including global citizenship and creativity.

Ideologically, Kurikulum Merdeka seeks to align Indonesian education with global 21st-century competencies. This includes critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and digital literacy. By prioritizing these skills, the curriculum hopes to produce learners who are adaptable, ethical, and capable of thriving in a rapidly changing world. The emphasis on lifelong learning is particularly vital in an era defined by technological disruption.

Furthermore, the curriculum provides autonomy to schools and teachers, giving them space to design contextually relevant learning. This decentralization reflects a rejection of previous one-size-fits-all models and allows education to respond to local needs. For instance, rural schools can incorporate agricultural knowledge into science lessons, while urban schools might focus on digital entrepreneurship.

Despite this strong philosophical grounding, implementation often falls short due to varying interpretations of core concepts. Many educators struggle to distinguish between traditional teaching practices and the facilitative role expected under the new curriculum. There is a need for a paradigm shift in teacher beliefs and attitudes, which cannot occur without deliberate professional development strategies.

Moreover, the transformation envisioned by Kurikulum Merdeka depends on sustained ideological alignment among stakeholders. Without consistent messaging and shared values among policymakers, teachers, and parents, philosophical principles can become lost in translation. Teachers, in particular, need support in internalizing these values to avoid reverting to conventional, rote-learning practices.

Another foundational issue is the mismatch between the curriculum's philosophical ideals and the realities of classroom infrastructure and resources. While the curriculum calls for creative, interdisciplinary, and project-based approaches, many schools lack the facilities and time to implement them. This practical gap threatens to dilute the transformative potential of the curriculum.

Assessment practices also pose a philosophical challenge. Kurikulum Merdeka advocates for formative assessment as a tool for reflection and growth. However, entrenched reliance on summative testing still dominates schools, which hinders the goal of individualized, feedback-driven learning. Bridging this divide requires systemic change in how student progress is evaluated.

Lastly, the philosophical foundation of Kurikulum Merdeka challenges policymakers to think beyond short-term political cycles. Curriculum reform must be seen as a long-term investment in the nation's future. Ensuring its success will require enduring political will, cross-sectoral collaboration, and a commitment to educational justice across diverse Indonesian contexts.

Implementation Successes

Implementation Successes Implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka has shown promising outcomes, especially in schools that are part of the "Sekolah Penggerak" program. These schools benefit from targeted government support, stronger leadership structures, and often a more innovative school culture. As a result, they are able to translate curriculum principles into tangible classroom practices more effectively.

One major success lies in the adoption of differentiated learning approaches. Teachers in these schools report increased awareness of student diversity, and they actively adapt teaching strategies to accommodate various learning needs. This includes using formative assessments to track student progress and designing lesson plans that offer flexibility in pacing and content.

Another achievement is the implementation of project-based learning. Many schools have successfully integrated interdisciplinary projects that connect academic content with real-world issues. These projects foster collaboration, critical thinking, and student autonomy. For example, students may be tasked with creating community maps, conducting local research, or launching small social initiatives.

Strong leadership has been a decisive factor in successful implementation. School principals who act as instructional leaders and change agents create an environment

conducive to experimentation and reflection. They provide time and space for teachers to collaborate, offer mentorship, and support a growth mindset culture.

Collaboration among teachers through learning communities or “komunitas belajar” has further enhanced implementation. These communities provide a platform for teachers to share best practices, reflect on challenges, and co-develop learning materials. This peer support network fosters a sense of shared ownership and continuous improvement.

Parental and community involvement has also been identified as a key enabler. In successful schools, families are engaged in student learning through school events, character development programs, and communication platforms. This partnership helps reinforce values and learning outcomes outside the classroom.

Technological integration is another area of progress. Some schools have effectively used digital platforms to deliver content, assess learning, and provide feedback. The flexibility of the Kurikulum Merdeka allows schools to innovate with tools like learning management systems, online project showcases, and digital portfolios.

Moreover, the curriculum’s emphasis on character education has led to creative initiatives that promote empathy, resilience, and responsibility. Schools organize activities such as service-learning projects, storytelling sessions, and reflective journaling, all aligned with the values of Pelajar Pancasila.

Importantly, the recognition and dissemination of best practices have helped scale impact. The Ministry of Education has highlighted model schools and shared their approaches through webinars, workshops, and online platforms. This creates a knowledge-sharing ecosystem that supports continuous development.

Overall, these successes demonstrate that with adequate support, professional learning, and stakeholder engagement, the Kurikulum Merdeka can move from theory to practice. They serve as proof points that the curriculum is not only aspirational but also operational when contextualized effectively.

Implementation Challenges

One of the foremost challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum is the gap in educators' understanding of its core concepts. Many teachers are unfamiliar with approaches like formative assessment, differentiated instruction, and project-based learning. This lack of conceptual clarity results in misinterpretation and surface-level application of the curriculum’s principles, which undermines its intended transformative impact.

Another major issue lies in the absence of localized and sustained training for educators. Most training sessions tend to be one-off or centralized, failing to account for the diverse needs of schools across Indonesia’s vast archipelago. Without continuous professional development and mentoring, teachers often return to conventional teaching methods out of necessity or habit.

Administrative burdens also hinder the curriculum's implementation. Teachers are expected to manage a heavy load of documentation and reporting, which detracts from their focus on actual instruction and student engagement. This workload, compounded by a lack of classroom support, leads to burnout and reduced motivation to explore innovative practices.

Resource limitations are particularly acute in remote and underdeveloped regions, commonly referred to as 3T areas (Tertinggal, Terdepan, dan Terluar). In these schools, basic infrastructure such as internet access, teaching aids, and qualified personnel is either scarce or non-existent. As a result, implementing a flexible and digital-oriented curriculum becomes nearly impossible.

The centralized nature of curriculum policymaking often ignores the realities faced by schools at the grassroots level. The top-down approach, while efficient on paper, does not empower local actors to adapt the curriculum meaningfully. Without space for co-creation or feedback loops, schools feel like passive recipients rather than active implementers of change.

Another challenge is the lack of intergovernmental coordination. The responsibilities between the Ministry of Education, local education offices, and school administrators are not always clearly delineated. This leads to duplication, confusion, and delays in delivering support, training, or funding where it is most needed.

Bureaucratic rigidity further compounds the issue. Schools are expected to follow standard operating procedures that may conflict with the flexible nature of the Merdeka Curriculum. This creates tension between policy innovation and administrative compliance, leaving educators caught in a contradictory system.

School leaders, who play a vital role in curriculum implementation, often receive minimal support. Many principals lack exposure to leadership training aligned with the new curriculum. This gap affects their ability to guide teachers, foster collaboration, and create a conducive learning environment based on Merdeka principles.

A related issue is the lack of practical tools and contextual examples for implementation. While the curriculum promotes flexibility, many schools struggle with translating that flexibility into actionable strategies. Teachers often ask: “What does this look like in practice?” Without concrete models or exemplars, implementation remains abstract and inconsistent.

Finally, the absence of a contextualized support ecosystem leaves many schools in a “technical vacuum.” They are told to innovate but are not provided with tailored guidance, mentoring, or peer learning opportunities. This disconnect between expectations and support creates frustration, resistance, and ultimately, stagnation in the curriculum’s transformative goals.

Critical Gaps

Despite the Merdeka Curriculum’s emphasis on flexibility and contextual relevance, critical gaps persist – particularly in the form of regional disparities. Schools in urban or better-resourced areas are often better positioned to implement innovative teaching strategies, while those in rural, remote, or marginalized regions (commonly referred to as 3T areas) struggle with even the most basic requirements.

The digital divide is one of the most visible manifestations of this gap. Schools in regions such as Papua, Maluku, and parts of Kalimantan often lack internet access or digital devices, making it difficult to use digital learning platforms like Merdeka Mengajar. Consequently, students in these areas are unable to access supplementary materials, teacher support, or adaptive learning systems that are more readily available elsewhere.

Infrastructure inequality also contributes to the uneven implementation. Many schools in disadvantaged areas face challenges such as unsafe buildings, lack of electricity, and inadequate classroom furniture. These conditions directly affect student well-being and teacher effectiveness, making it difficult to create learning environments that align with the ideals of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Another critical gap lies in the unequal distribution of qualified teachers. Remote areas often rely on temporary or underqualified teaching staff. This leads to significant differences in instructional quality across the country, which in turn affects student outcomes and perpetuates educational inequality. Without incentives or structural reforms to ensure equity in teacher placement, this gap will persist.

Financial disparities between regions also play a role. Schools in affluent or strategically located areas tend to receive greater support from local governments and stakeholders. Meanwhile, schools in underdeveloped regions may lack the fiscal autonomy or advocacy capacity to secure adequate funding for curriculum implementation. This imbalance restricts their ability to innovate or participate in national programs.

Language and cultural barriers can further widen the gap. The Merdeka Curriculum encourages contextualization, but in regions where local languages dominate, there is often a lack of learning materials in indigenous languages. This creates difficulties in comprehension, especially among early-grade learners, and undermines inclusivity efforts.

There is also a policy-to-practice gap, where national guidelines do not always translate into effective implementation on the ground. Local education authorities may lack the capacity or political will to adapt curriculum policies to their unique contexts. This results in a uniform approach being applied across diverse settings – an approach that often fails to address local realities.

Community engagement, a vital component of the Merdeka Curriculum, is uneven across regions. In urban schools, parents and communities may be more involved due to higher levels of education or socioeconomic stability. In contrast, in remote areas, community involvement in education tends to be limited, either due to lack of awareness, cultural norms, or economic pressures.

Assessment practices also reveal critical gaps. While the curriculum promotes formative assessment and authentic evaluation, many schools still rely heavily on traditional testing. This is especially true in regions with limited access to training or mentoring. As a result, the transformative shift in pedagogy and evaluation remains concentrated in better-resourced areas.

Ultimately, these regional inequalities threaten to widen the existing educational divide in Indonesia. While the Merdeka Curriculum aspires to create a more inclusive and equitable education system, without targeted policies and investments to address these critical gaps, it risks benefiting only a portion of the population – thus reinforcing the very disparities it seeks to overcome.

CONCLUSIONS

This review aimed to examine the theoretical foundations, successes, challenges, and critical gaps in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia. Grounded in educational humanism and the philosophy of Ki Hadjar Dewantara, the curriculum aspires to empower students as independent, character-driven learners equipped with 21st-century skills. While its principles are widely appreciated, actual practice often falls short due to a lack of understanding and preparation among educators. Successful implementation has been evident in select schools, particularly those with strong leadership, teacher collaboration, and context-sensitive practices. These cases demonstrate the curriculum's potential when paired with the right support systems. However, broader adoption is hampered by persistent implementation challenges, such as limited professional development, insufficient infrastructure, and bureaucratic rigidity – especially in disadvantaged and remote areas. Moreover, systemic gaps like regional inequality, weak monitoring mechanisms, and disconnects between policy and practice highlight the need for more targeted and responsive governance. Without meaningful interventions, these issues risk turning an ambitious reform into a symbolic exercise rather than a transformative one. To move forward, it is essential to invest in capacity-building, improve coordination between policy levels, and provide practical tools that enable all schools – regardless of region – to realize the full promise of the Merdeka Curriculum.

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