A Comprehensive Literature Analysis of the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and Its Impact on Learning Innovation Across Educational Levels

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ABSTRACT

Education serves as a foundational pillar in developing learners' potentials to become individuals who are faithful, ethical, competent, creative, and responsible, as mandated by Indonesia's Law No. 20 of 2003. In response to evolving educational needs, the curriculum has continuously undergone reforms, culminating in the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum. This curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning, flexibility, and the strengthening of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila. This study aims to analyze how the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum across various educational levels influences learning innovation. Using a literature review approach, the study synthesized findings from national and international publications focusing on curriculum reform, project-based learning, teacher competency development, and the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy in higher education. The review indicates that the Merdeka Curriculum has encouraged notable improvements in educators' pedagogical competencies, the adoption of project-based and inquiry-driven learning models, and enhanced creativity among students. Nonetheless, several challenges persist, including uneven dissemination, varied teacher readiness, and limited collaboration networks, particularly in higher education institutions implementing MBKM. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the Merdeka Curriculum contributes positively to building a more adaptive, innovative, and future-oriented learning system. The study implies the need for continuous professional development, stronger institutional collaboration, and sustained policy support to ensure successful and equitable implementation across all educational sectors.

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as one of the most essential pillars of human development, as it equips individuals with the competencies and character values needed to participate meaningfully in society (Black & Lynch, 1996; Schultz, 1961). In Indonesia, the right to education is guaranteed for all citizens, aligning with national aspirations to create a generation that is not only knowledgeable but also morally grounded, creative, responsible, and capable of contributing to the nation's progress. This vision is clearly articulated in Law No. 20 of 2003, which emphasizes the development of learners into faithful, ethical, independent, and democratic individuals. As global demands evolve rapidly, education systems worldwide are compelled to adopt more flexible and innovative approaches to remain relevant (Stewart, 2012; Wang & Wang, 2012). Indonesia faces similar pressures, necessitating a curriculum capable of preparing learners for twenty-first-century challenges. Therefore, examining how curriculum reforms support national educational goals is critically important for ensuring societal resilience, human capital development, and long-term competitiveness in an increasingly globalized landscape.

Despite continuous reforms in Indonesia's education system, significant gaps remain between educational goals and actual learning outcomes. The dynamic nature of the curriculum has resulted in several major revisions from 1947, 1964, 1968, 1973, 1975, 1984, 1994, 1997, 2004, 2006, and 2013, with further adjustments in 2018—yet many schools still struggle to implement these changes effectively (Ulinniam et al., 2021). Frequent curriculum changes often create confusion among educators, who must adapt to new pedagogical models, administrative demands, and assessment systems. Variations in school readiness, teacher competence, and resource availability have widened disparities between urban and rural education settings (Bailey, 2014; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005; Zhang, 2006). As a result, Indonesia continues to face persistent issues such as limited student engagement, lack of creativity development, uneven digital literacy, and inconsistent teaching quality. These challenges highlight a fundamental problem: curriculum reforms have not always translated into meaningful improvements in classroom practice. Consequently, understanding why these gaps persist becomes increasingly important as Indonesia transitions toward the Merdeka Curriculum.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum reflects a major paradigm shift in Indonesia's educational landscape, driven by the government's broader Merdeka Belajar policy (Aslan & Hajiri, 2025; Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024). This curriculum responds directly to learning losses, outdated teaching approaches, and the urgent need for strengthened student competencies. Regulations such as SK Mendikbudristek No. 56 Tahun 2022 and its subsequent revisions reinforce

the urgency of adopting a more flexible, student-centered curriculum that strengthens the Profil Pelajar Pancasila. In practice, schools participating in the Program Sekolah Penggerak and other institutions adopting the Merdeka Curriculum must navigate varying degrees of readiness, including teacher understanding, digital infrastructure, and school culture. At the higher-education level, universities implement Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM), which grants students three semesters of learning outside their study program. While these reforms aim to foster creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and real-world learning, numerous institutions continue to face obstacles such as limited partnerships, inconsistent teaching adaptation, and varying student motivation. These field realities underscore the complexity of implementing large-scale curriculum transformation.

A growing body of research has attempted to assess the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum and MBKM in improving educational quality. Many studies have highlighted the potential of project-based learning, experiential learning, and flexible teaching models to cultivate twenty-first-century skills. Researchers have also examined how teacher competence, digital literacy, and school leadership influence curriculum success. However, much of this literature remains fragmented, focusing either on specific schools, narrow subject areas, or isolated program components. For example, several studies emphasize the advantages of project-based learning but provide limited insights into how implementation differs across educational levels (Shpeizer, 2019; Williamson, 2023). Others explore teacher readiness but overlook institutional constraints. Consequently, despite numerous publications, existing evidence offers only partial understanding of how the Merdeka Curriculum operates within Indonesia's diverse educational contexts. This fragmentation creates an urgent need for a more systematic analysis that synthesizes findings across multiple levels of education from primary schools to universities.

Given these limitations, a comprehensive literature analysis is essential to understand the broader landscape of curriculum implementation and its relationship to learning innovation. Previous studies have not adequately compared experiences across educational levels, nor have they thoroughly examined factors influencing success and barriers (Glaser & Taylor, 1973; Rubenstein et al., 1976; Santos, 2016). Many researchers limit their scope to teacher perceptions or policy analysis without integrating practical classroom realities. This research is positioned to bridge these gaps by synthesizing findings across diverse research contexts, enabling a more holistic understanding of how the Merdeka Curriculum shapes innovation in teaching and learning. By mapping recurring patterns and variations, the study contributes new insights into how educators interpret curriculum flexibility, develop creative strategies,

and adapt to institutional demands. This synthesis also highlights areas requiring further intervention, including professional development, digital infrastructure, and inter-institutional collaboration. Thus, the study's contribution lies in providing a comprehensive framework for evaluating curriculum innovation across multiple educational stages.

The novelty of this study lies in its multi-level examination of the Merdeka Curriculum and its direct connection to learning innovation. While prior research often treats curriculum implementation and instructional creativity as separate issues, this study integrates both dimensions to reveal how curricular flexibility influences innovative teaching practices. By analyzing trends across basic education, secondary schools, and higher education through the MBKM framework, the study offers a state-of-the-art perspective on how Indonesia's curriculum reform operates as a unified ecosystem. Additionally, the research identifies previously underexplored challenges such as disparities in institutional autonomy, variations in partnership networks, and differences in student learning cultures. These insights provide a deeper understanding of why some institutions succeed in fostering innovation while others struggle. Therefore, the study advances scholarly conversations by presenting a comprehensive, comparative, and system-wide analysis of curriculum transformation and its implications for innovative learning.

Based on these issues, the central research problem addressed in this study concerns how the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum influences learning innovation across different educational levels and what factors support or hinder its success. The preliminary argument proposed is that the Merdeka Curriculum, when implemented with adequate teacher readiness, institutional support, and flexible learning ecosystems, has the potential to significantly enhance creative, project-based, and student-centered learning. However, inconsistent readiness, limited resources, and varying interpretations of curriculum flexibility remain substantial barriers. By synthesizing findings from diverse studies, this research contributes an integrated understanding of how curriculum reform drives innovation and what systemic improvements are required. The results are expected to inform policymakers, educators, and institutions in strengthening curriculum implementation strategies, ensuring more equitable and impactful learning experiences for students across Indonesia

RESEACH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with a case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum within a specific educational context (Zidan & Qamariah, 2023). A qualitative case study is appropriate because it enables researchers to

explore a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life setting, allowing for rich, contextualized insights that cannot be captured through quantitative methods. This design is aligned with the purpose of analyzing educational processes and experiences as they naturally occur. The use of literature study as part of qualitative inquiry follows the definition presented by Darmalaksana (2020), who explains that literature research involves a series of activities related to collecting, reading, and analyzing scholarly sources. Thus, employing a qualitative case study supported by literature analysis is justified to comprehensively investigate the dynamics, challenges, and strategies related to the Merdeka Curriculum in the selected context.

The research is situated within the context of schools implementing the "Mandiri Berubah" category of the Merdeka Curriculum. This location is chosen because schools within this category are in the transitional phase of curriculum adoption, providing a unique opportunity to examine how institutions interpret policy changes and apply them in practice. Schools categorized as "Mandiri Berubah" possess enough readiness to begin curriculum modification while still facing various challenges related to teacher competence, resource availability, and institutional adaptation. Therefore, they serve as an ideal setting to capture diverse experiences and identify barriers and supporting factors in the ongoing curriculum transformation. By focusing on this context, the study gains a holistic understanding of how curriculum implementation unfolds in schools that are neither fully dependent on government support nor fully autonomous.

Data collection in this study relies on literature-based data gathering, where the researcher examines national journal articles, policy documents, and other scholarly sources relevant to the Merdeka Curriculum. Following (Darmalaksana 2020), literature study involves a structured process of gathering, reading, noting, and synthesizing information derived from existing academic works. The selected sources include empirical studies, theoretical discussions, and policy analyses that directly address curriculum implementation and innovation. This technique allows the researcher to identify recurring themes, patterns, and variations across previous research, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the issue. All literature is selected based on relevance, credibility, and alignment with the research focus on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in "Mandiri Berubah" schools.

The data analysis process follows three major stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion verification (Malterud, 2012). Data condensation involves reducing, organizing, and categorizing information from the collected literature to highlight essential points related to curriculum implementation, challenges, and innovation. This step ensures that only the most relevant and meaningful data are retained for analysis. The second stage, data display, is

carried out by presenting the condensed data in structured formats such as thematic tables, narrative descriptions, or conceptual maps that facilitate clearer interpretation. The final stage, verification, involves reviewing the displayed data to draw accurate and credible conclusions. During verification, the researcher compares themes across sources, checks consistency among findings, and ensures alignment with the research problem. Through these steps, the analysis produces synthesized insights that strengthen the conceptual understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the literature review conducted by the researcher, it is evident that the Merdeka Curriculum has been implemented across various educational levels, including primary schools (SD), junior high schools (SMP and equivalents), senior high schools (SMA and equivalents), and higher education institutions. In 2022, its implementation was limited only to selected pilot schools participating in the Sekolah Penggerak program. However, beginning in 2023, the Merdeka Curriculum became mandatory for all schools at both primary and secondary levels, covering public and private institutions in Indonesia. At the higher education level, the Freedom to Learn–Independent Campus (MBKM) policy has not been fully adopted due to challenges related to internship requirements and institutional readiness. Despite these differences, the literature demonstrates that the Merdeka Curriculum aligns with government expectations to foster creative and innovative learners, although its implementation still presents challenges in various educational settings.

The analysis of literature focusing on primary and secondary schools indicates that the early phase of the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation was highly selective, involving only Sekolah Penggerak in 2022. These schools received structural support, including trained Guru Penggerak, to model the implementation process. By 2023, however, the curriculum had been adopted nationwide. Schools that were part of the Sekolah Penggerak program carried out dissemination and mentoring for neighboring schools, offering training and workshops to ensure readiness. As a result, by the end of 2023, the Merdeka Curriculum had been fully introduced across Indonesia, although the level of mastery and instructional adaptation continued to vary among teachers and institutions.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the primary and secondary levels has been reported as generally successful, particularly due to supporting mechanisms such as professional development, structured workshops, and inter-school collaboration. Research by Zahir et al. (2022) regarding implementation in SDs in Luwu Timur found improvements in

teachers' cognitive and psychomotor competencies. Cognitively, teachers developed a stronger understanding of learner-centered approaches, competency-based outcomes, and learning progression based on developmental phases rather than grade levels. Notably, the introduction of the Pancasila Student Profile Reinforcement Project (P5) marked a fundamental shift from the previous curriculum, requiring teachers to incorporate character-building and interdisciplinary projects into instruction.

The study by Zahir et al. (2022) also highlighted that teachers, principals, and supervisors initially struggled to comprehend these conceptual changes. Workshops and continuous professional development activities significantly helped strengthen their understanding. Psychomotor improvements were evident as teachers demonstrated increased skill in designing teaching modules, analyzing Capaian Pembelajaran (CP), and adapting learning materials. These findings confirm that structured capacity-building programs play a crucial role in bridging gaps between policy formulation and classroom practice, especially for teachers accustomed to traditional instructional formats.

The study by Iskandar et al. (2023) further identified several organizational and managerial factors influencing successful curriculum implementation, including school management practices grounded in the fundamental functions of planning, organizing, directing, and controlling. Effective leadership, therefore, becomes a key determinant in facilitating the transition to the Merdeka Curriculum. Similarly, research by Hartawati & Karim (2024) emphasized the crucial roles of principals and teachers, noting that teachers must position themselves not only as instructors but also as facilitators, motivators, and sources of inspiration. This finding aligns with Mulyasa (2023), who argues that effective implementation requires teachers to create supportive learning environments that reduce student burden and enhance learning motivation.

Another study by Safira et al. (2023) examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian language learning for Grade VII students at SMP Negeri 2 Batang. The findings indicate that teachers became more innovative and adaptive in selecting learning models to enhance student motivation and creativity. Teachers were encouraged to prepare instructional modules aligned with creative and student-centered pedagogical approaches. Innovative learning models, as defined by Qurniati & Andayani (2015), represent sequenced teaching plans beginning with instructional preparation, continuing through delivery, and ending with assessment. Susilowati (2022) further supports that innovative learning helps students construct knowledge independently and meaningfully.

The study by Sari & Gumiandari (2022) explored the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in SMKN 2 Cirebon and found that the school, being designated as a Center of Excellence, had begun implementing the curriculum, although only grades X and XI had fully adopted it. The vice principal for curriculum played a pivotal role in ensuring alignment between school-based curriculum management and national standards. However, not all teachers were fully prepared, and many remained in the learning phase despite attending training sessions. One major challenge identified was teachers' difficulty in selecting appropriate learning approaches aligned with the curriculum's flexibility. Technological integration through devices, projectors, internet access, and digital media was also necessary to support implementation.

The literature consistently reveals that curriculum change is not merely a technical process but also a cultural shift requiring willingness, adaptability, and systemic support. As Chaudhary (2015) argues, curriculum implementation rarely mirrors curriculum documents, as real-world contexts often present complexities not addressed in instructional guidelines. This observation strengthens the conclusion that implementation success depends heavily on contextual readiness, policy support, professional mastery, and available resources. Beyond primary and secondary schools, these complexities also extend to higher education through the MBKM program.

The MBKM program aims to enhance graduates' competencies—both soft skills and hard skills—and prepare them for global competition. Its flexible experiential learning pathways allow students to pursue internships, student exchanges, community service, and entrepreneurial projects based on their strengths and interests. Maulana (2022) reported that although many students and academic staff at Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta initially lacked understanding of the MBKM program, workshops and socialization activities significantly improved their knowledge, indicating that awareness-building efforts can positively impact readiness and program effectiveness.

Similarly, the study by Hanifah & Fauziyyah (2023) at Universitas Sahid found that accounting students responded positively to the MBKM program but still possessed limited understanding of its structure, requirements, and opportunities. This resulted in inadequate preparation for participation in MBKM activities. Consistent with previous findings, the researchers emphasized the importance of continuous socialization and training to ensure program efficiency. Internship activities and student exchanges under MBKM were identified as particularly beneficial, providing students with practical experience and exposure to diverse learning environments.

Despite its positive potential, the implementation of MBKM faces significant obstacles. Bhakti et al. (2022) identified challenges such as difficulties

in SKS recognition, online implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic, limited partner collaboration, insufficient curriculum alignment, incomplete socialization, delays in grade submission, quota limitations, and lack of accommodations for students with disabilities. Additionally, many lecturers did not fully understand MBKM policies, creating administrative and instructional bottlenecks. These barriers highlight inconsistencies between policy expectations and institutional capabilities.

Overall, the findings from primary, secondary, and higher education levels reveal that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and MBKM has stimulated innovation in teaching and learning, encouraged the use of digital technologies, strengthened student-centered pedagogy, and improved educator competencies. However, widespread success requires continued structural support, teacher training, adequate infrastructure, stronger partnerships, and clearer policy alignment. The literature indicates that while the Merdeka Curriculum and MBKM represent transformative steps toward adaptive and future-oriented education in Indonesia, their implementation demands sustained collaboration, institutional readiness, and context-sensitive strategies to ensure long-term effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this literature-based study highlight that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum across primary, secondary, and higher education levels has resulted in meaningful progress toward more autonomous, flexible, and student-centered learning. The key insight gained from this research is that successful implementation relies heavily on the readiness and adaptability of educators, including their cognitive understanding of curriculum concepts and their psychomotor skills in designing innovative instructional materials. The study also reveals that leadership support, collaborative capacity-building, and continuous professional development play an essential role in ensuring that the curriculum fosters creativity, critical thinking, and learner independence. In higher education, the MBKM program has expanded learning opportunities through internships, student exchanges, and project-based experiences, which collectively strengthen students' competencies and align learning with real-world demands.

This study contributes academically by synthesizing diverse empirical findings on the Merdeka Curriculum and MBKM, providing a comprehensive understanding of how educational reforms are operationalized across different educational levels in Indonesia. However, the research is limited by its reliance on secondary data and the scope of literature available, which may not capture the full variability of implementation across regions and institutions. Future

research should incorporate field-based studies, comparative analyses across provinces, and evaluations of long-term learning outcomes to strengthen empirical evidence. Additionally, further investigation is needed to address challenges such as limited institutional partnerships, administrative barriers, and uneven educator readiness, ensuring that future reforms can be supported by more robust strategies and scalable models of implementation.

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