

Implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the Elementary School Level in Balimbing Village, Rambatan District, Tanah Datar Regency

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ABSTRACT: The Indonesian government introduced the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Merdeka Curriculum) in 2022 as a major educational reform to foster student-centered, flexible, and context-relevant learning. This study explores the real-world implementation of this national policy at the grassroots level. Using a qualitative approach, this research investigates how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented in three elementary schools (UPT SDN 08, 14, and 18) in Nagari Balimbing, a rural area in West Sumatra, and examines the perceptions of teachers, students, and parents. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that implementation is a gradual process marked by both enthusiasm and significant challenges. While teachers appreciate the curriculum's flexibility and its positive impact on student engagement, they struggle with a limited understanding of differentiated learning, inadequate resources, and persistent administrative burdens. Students respond positively to active, project-based learning but experience confusion due to a lack of consistent teaching materials. Parents support the new focus on creativity but are hindered by a limited understanding of the curriculum and economic constraints, which affects their ability to be optimally involved. The study concludes that successful implementation is not merely a top-down mandate but an interactive process heavily shaped by the capacity, disposition, and collaborative efforts of local actors. It underscores the critical need for context-specific training, improved resource allocation, and stronger school-community communication to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

KEYWORDS: Independence Curriculum, education policy implementation, curriculum reform, elementary education, Indonesia

1. INTRODUCTION

Education systems worldwide are in a constant state of transformation to meet the demands of an increasingly complex and globalized society. In Indonesia, this is reflected in a history of curriculum changes, each aiming to refine the national educational vision. The latest and most significant reform is the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (which translates to "Emancipated" or "Freedom" Curriculum), officially launched for the 2022/2023 academic year. This policy marks a paradigm shift away from a rigid, content-heavy curriculum towards a more flexible, adaptive, and competency-oriented framework that empowers educational units to design learning experiences aligned with student needs and local contexts.

The Merdeka Curriculum is philosophically rooted in the ideas of Ki Hadjar Dewantara, Indonesia's foremost education philosopher, who advocated for an education that "liberates" students according to their natural disposition and the demands of their time. Its core objectives are to simplify content, focus on essential competencies, and provide space for deep learning through diverse methods, particularly project-based learning designed to foster the "Pancasila Student Profile"—a set of character traits including critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and global awareness.

However, the transition from national policy to classroom practice is fraught with challenges, especially at the elementary school level, which serves as the foundation for a child's educational journey. Educators, as the primary agents of implementation, are required to rapidly adapt their pedagogical approaches, a task complicated by varying levels of readiness, resources, and institutional support.

This study delves into the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in a specific and culturally rich context: the elementary schools of Nagari Balimbing, a rural sub-district in Tanah Datar, West Sumatra. This region, with its strong Minangkabau socio-cultural identity, provides a unique setting to explore how a national education policy is interpreted, negotiated, and adapted at the local level. Using a approach, this research seeks to understand the lived experiences of those at the heart of this reform. The study is guided by two central research questions:

1. How is the Merdeka Curriculum being implemented at UPT SDN 08, 14, and 18 in Nagari Balimbing?

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2. What are the perceptions of teachers, students, and parents regarding this implementation?

By examining the dynamics of policy implementation at the grassroots, this article aims to contribute a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and obstacles facing Indonesia's ambitious curriculum reform, offering insights for policymakers and practitioners alike.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE COMPLEXITIES OF POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

The successful rollout of a new curriculum is a complex process that extends beyond the mere dissemination of policy documents. This study frames its analysis within established theories of public policy implementation, primarily the models proposed by Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) and the concept of street-level bureaucracy by Lipsky (1980).

Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) posit that successful policy implementation is contingent on six interrelated variables: (1) **Policy Standards and Objectives**, the clarity and consistency of the policy itself; (2) **Resources**, including financial, human, and technological support; (3) **Inter-organizational Communication**, the effectiveness of information transfer between implementing agencies; (4) **Characteristics of Implementing Agencies**, such as the capacity and structure of the schools; (5) **Disposition of Implementers**, the attitudes and commitment of those executing the policy (i.e., teachers and headmasters); and (6) **The Economic, Social, and Political Environment**. This model provides a comprehensive framework for diagnosing the factors that facilitate or hinder the Merdeka Curriculum's adoption in Nagari Balimbing.

Complementing this top-down perspective, Lipsky's (1980) theory of **street-level bureaucrats** offers a bottom-up lens. It recognizes that frontline service providers—in this case, teachers—are not passive implementers but active agents who exercise considerable discretion in interpreting and applying policies. Teachers make daily decisions that shape how the Merdeka Curriculum is experienced by students, adapting its principles to the realities of their classrooms, the availability of resources, and the perceived needs of their learners. This study utilizes this theory to understand how teachers in Nagari Balimbing navigate the freedoms and challenges presented by the new curriculum.

The Merdeka Curriculum itself emphasizes several key pedagogical shifts. It moves towards **student-centered learning**, promoting methods like *project-based learning* and *inquiry-based learning*. It is grounded in a **constructivist** view where students actively build knowledge through experience and social interaction. A central component is the implementation of **differentiated instruction**, where teachers tailor content, process, and assessment to meet the diverse needs of learners. Furthermore, the curriculum stresses the importance of **formative and diagnostic assessment** over purely summative evaluation to guide the learning process. This study examines how these theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings are translated into practice.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a **qualitative methodology** with a **approach** to gain a deep and holistic understanding of the experiences of those directly involved in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This approach was chosen for its strength in exploring the subjective meanings that individuals attach to their lived experiences, which is crucial for understanding the nuanced realities of policy implementation beyond official rhetoric.

3.1. Research Site and Participants The study was conducted in Nagari Balimbing, Kecamatan Rambatan, Kabupaten Tanah Datar, a region characterized by its strong Minangkabau culture and agrarian economy. Three state elementary schools (UPT SDN 08, UPT SDN 14, and UPT SDN 18) were selected as research sites. These schools represent a spectrum of conditions within the nagari, from a more centrally located and better-resourced school (SDN 08) to more remote schools with limited facilities (SDN 14 and SDN 18), providing a comprehensive view of implementation across different contexts.

Participants were purposively selected and included headmasters, senior and junior teachers, students from various grades, and parents. This multi-stakeholder approach ensures a well-rounded perspective on the curriculum's impact. In total, 9 educators (headmasters and teachers), 4 students, and 3 parents were formally interviewed.

3.2. Data Collection Data were gathered using three primary techniques to ensure richness and triangulation:

1. **In-depth, semi-structured interviews** were the main data source. Interviews with headmasters and teachers focused on their understanding of the curriculum, strategies for implementation, challenges encountered, and perceived effects on teaching and learning. Interviews with students explored their learning experiences and engagement, while parent interviews investigated their perceptions and level of involvement.
2. **Classroom observation** was conducted to see the curriculum in action. This involved observing teacher-student interactions, the use of teaching modules and media, and the application of project-based and collaborative learning methods.

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3. **Document analysis** involved reviewing official documents such as the School's Operational Curriculum (KOSP), teacher-developed teaching modules, lesson plans (RPP), and student assessment reports. This provided insight into the formal planning and evaluation aspects of the implementation.

3.3. Data Analysis The data were analyzed thematically following the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of three concurrent flows of activity:

1. **Data Reduction:** This involved transcribing interviews, summarizing observation notes, and selecting, focusing, and simplifying the raw data to identify key themes and patterns.
2. **Data Display:** The reduced data were organized into matrices, charts, and narrative summaries to facilitate understanding and further analysis. For instance, tables were created to compare implementation strategies and evaluation methods across the three schools.
3. **Conclusion Drawing and Verification:** From the displayed data, initial conclusions were drawn and then continuously verified and refined by revisiting the data and theoretical framework, ensuring that the findings were well-grounded and credible.

4. FINDINGS

The research findings are presented in two main sections, corresponding to the research questions: the practical implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and the perceptions of key stakeholders.

4.1. The Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Practice

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the elementary schools of Nagari Balimbing is a dynamic and multi-faceted process, characterized by gradual adaptation rather than a complete overhaul. The process can be understood through the key stages of the pedagogical cycle: planning, instruction, and evaluation.

Planning and Materials: The schools have formally adopted the curriculum, as evidenced by their Kurikulum Operasional Satuan Pendidikan (KOSP) documents which outline the integration of the Pancasila Student Profile and competency-based learning. However, a significant challenge emerged regarding teaching materials. Teachers reported that centrally-provided teaching modules (*modul ajar*) were often incomplete or not fully relevant to their local context. In response, schools demonstrated agency. As the headmaster of SDN 08 stated, "Because not all teaching modules were available, teachers created their own modules tailored to the students' characteristics". This bottom-up initiative, while commendable, places a considerable burden on teachers who often lack adequate training in curriculum development. Lusniarti, the headmaster of SDN 18, highlighted this struggle: "...[some] teachers find it difficult to develop what to teach from the Learning Outcomes (Capaian Pembelajaran)".

Instructional Strategies and Processes: In the classroom, a discernible shift towards student-centered learning is underway. Teachers are increasingly employing innovative methods such as project-based learning, collaborative group work, and contextual learning that connects lessons to students' daily lives. Effi Maslinda, a teacher at SDN 08, described her approach: "With the existing tools, they can be creative, more enthusiastic, and work together". Another teacher, Fitri Yeni from SDN 18, emphasized contextual learning: "...the Merdeka Curriculum is directed towards practice so that students can feel the learning... understanding nature is what is actually expected".

This process often begins with a diagnostic assessment to gauge students' initial abilities, allowing for some level of differentiated instruction. However, the full application of differentiation remains a hurdle. Teachers acknowledged difficulties in managing diverse learning needs simultaneously, a challenge compounded by limited resources and large class sizes.

Evaluation: Evaluation practices are also evolving. There is a conscious effort to move away from purely summative tests towards more holistic and formative assessments. Teachers use observation, class projects, and student reflections to gauge progress. As one teacher explained, "I don't just assess from tests, but also from observations when the children work in groups. I note who is active, who needs help, and from there I adjust the next lesson". Laporan hasil belajar (student progress reports) are becoming more descriptive, focusing on competencies rather than just numerical scores. Despite this progress, teachers reported needing more training on how to design and implement effective formative assessments consistently.

4.2. Perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum

The perceptions of teachers, students, and parents provide a rich, multi-faceted view of the curriculum's impact.

Teacher Perceptions: Teachers' perceptions are generally positive, albeit with significant reservations. They overwhelmingly appreciate the **flexibility and autonomy** the curriculum affords. A teacher from SDN 14 noted, "This curriculum invites teachers to focus not only on material but also on the process. I have become closer to my students because learning is more enjoyable and not rigid". This freedom is seen as a vehicle for fostering student creativity and engagement.

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However, this positivity is tempered by several challenges. A primary concern is the **lack of sufficient and continuous training**. One teacher remarked, "We try to implement the spirit of merdeka belajar, but facilities and training are still lacking. We need guidance so that this curriculum's implementation is not just a formality". Many teachers feel they have a basic understanding but struggle with the practical application of complex concepts like differentiated instruction and formative assessment. Another major issue is the **administrative burden**, as teachers must now invest significant time in developing their own teaching materials. Finally, **inadequate infrastructure and resources**, especially in the more remote schools, hinder the implementation of technology-supported and project-based learning.

Student Perceptions: Students have responded with enthusiasm to the new learning approaches. They find the emphasis on **active, collaborative, and project-based learning** to be more engaging and enjoyable than traditional, teacher-centric methods. A fifth-grade student from SDN 08 shared, "Learning is more fun now because we often do projects together. Sometimes we study outside the classroom. I like it because we don't just sit and listen to the teacher". Students also feel more empowered, as the curriculum encourages them to voice their opinions. A student from SDN 14 said, "We are often asked to give our opinions. I used to be afraid to speak, but now the teacher says it's okay to be wrong as long as you dare to try".

The primary challenge for students is the **lack of consistency in learning materials**. A sixth-grader noted, "Learning involves more games and group work. But sometimes I get confused because there is no fixed textbook. But I'm happy because it's freer". This indicates that while the freedom is appreciated, a lack of clear structure can sometimes lead to confusion.

Parent Perceptions: Parents are broadly supportive of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly its focus on developing **creativity, confidence, and character** in their children. One parent observed, "We see our child becoming more active and confident". They appreciate that learning is becoming more relevant to daily life.

However, parental involvement is hampered by two main factors. First, there is a **limited understanding of the new system**. Many parents expressed confusion about the new types of assignments and their role in supporting their children. One parent confessed, "My child is more enthusiastic about school, but I don't really understand the system. Sometimes my child says the task is to make a video or a craft, and I'm confused about how to help". Second, **socio-economic constraints** pose a real barrier. Project-based assignments can sometimes require additional costs for materials, which is a burden for some families. This indicates a critical need for better communication and partnership between schools and parents.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings from Nagari Balimbing offer a compelling case study of education policy implementation, highlighting the interplay between top-down directives and bottom-up realities. When analyzed through the theoretical lenses of Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) and Lipsky (1980), the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum appears as a negotiated process shaped by local capacity and context.

From the perspective of Van Meter and Van Horn's model, the implementation journey is mixed. The **policy's standards and objectives** have been communicated and are reflected in school documentation, suggesting a degree of clarity. The **disposition of the implementers**—the teachers and headmasters—is largely positive, demonstrating a willingness to embrace change. However, significant gaps exist in other variables. **Resources**, both in terms of teacher training and physical infrastructure, are a critical weakness. As studies by Sucipto et al. (2024) also found, the lack of teacher readiness and adequate facilities are major obstacles. **Inter-organizational communication**, particularly between schools and parents, is insufficient, leading to confusion and limiting the potential for a supportive home-learning environment.

This is where Lipsky's concept of **street-level bureaucrats** becomes particularly insightful. The teachers of Nagari Balimbing are not merely executing a pre-defined script; they are actively interpreting and adapting the Merdeka Curriculum. Faced with incomplete modules and diverse student needs, they exercise discretion by creating their own materials and modifying instructional strategies. This bottom-up adaptation is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength because it allows for contextualization, making learning more relevant, as seen in the integration of local Minangkabau values into projects. It is a weakness because the quality of this adaptation is highly dependent on individual teacher capacity, which, as the findings show, is inconsistent without adequate and sustained professional development.

The positive response from students confirms the pedagogical value of the curriculum's principles. Their increased engagement and confidence align with constructivist theories that posit learning is most effective when it is active, social, and experiential. However, their confusion over the lack of consistent materials points to a critical implementation gap: the need to balance flexibility with a clear, coherent learning pathway.

The research also underscores the importance of the local socio-cultural context, a factor often overlooked in macro-level policy analysis. The strong sense of community (*gotong royong*) in Nagari Balimbing is a potential asset, yet the findings show it remains

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under-leveraged due to parents' limited understanding of the new curriculum. This highlights the necessity of viewing curriculum implementation not just as a technical task but as a process of social change that requires building shared understanding and collective ownership among all stakeholders.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Nagari Balimbing reveals a complex landscape of progress and challenge. The policy has successfully catalyzed a shift towards more student-centered, engaging, and flexible pedagogy. Teachers, students, and parents perceive the potential of this reform and have responded with a mixture of enthusiasm and adaptability. However, the gap between the curriculum's ambitious vision and its practical execution is significant. This gap is defined by persistent challenges in teacher capacity, resource scarcity, inconsistent materials, and a lack of deep, systemic communication with the wider community.

The success of the Merdeka Curriculum at the grassroots level hinges on moving beyond policy dissemination to genuine capacity building and community engagement. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. For Policymakers and District Education Offices:

- a. **Develop Contextualized and Sustained Professional Development:** Shift from one-off socialization events to continuous, practice-based training and in-school coaching. This training must focus on the practical application of complex concepts like differentiated instruction and formative assessment, tailored to the resource levels of rural schools.
- b. **Strengthen Resource and Material Support:** Facilitate the development and distribution of high-quality, adaptable teaching modules. This could involve creating regional resource banks or empowering local teacher working groups (*KKG*) to create and share context-relevant materials.

2. For School Leaders (Headmasters):

- a. **Foster Professional Learning Communities:** Cultivate a school culture of collaboration where teachers can regularly share best practices, co-create teaching materials, and collectively problem-solve implementation challenges, as was beginning to happen in the observed schools.
- b. **Enhance School-Parent Communication:** Proactively engage parents through regular, clear, and accessible communication about the curriculum's goals and methods. Organize workshops or meetings to clarify parents' roles and equip them with strategies to support project-based and inquiry-based learning at home.

3. For Future Research:

- a. Longitudinal studies are needed to track the long-term impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on student learning outcomes and competencies.
- b. Comparative research between rural and urban schools could provide further insights into how socio-economic and environmental factors influence policy implementation.

Ultimately, the journey of the Merdeka Curriculum in Nagari Balimbing demonstrates that while national policies can set a new direction, the destination is reached through the daily, context-sensitive efforts of empowered local actors. True "merdeka" (freedom) in learning will only be achieved when teachers, students, and communities are fully equipped and supported to navigate this transformative path together.

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