The Transformation of Indonesia's National Curriculum in the *Merdeka Belajar* Era

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Abstract

This study explores the development of Indonesia's national curriculum between 2019 and 2023, focusing on the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy and the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Employing a historical research method, this paper analyzes academic literature and policy documents to examine the direction of curriculum transformation within evolving social, cultural, and technological contexts. The findings indicate that the *Merdeka* Curriculum represents a pivotal shift from a content-based approach to competency- and freedom-based learning, reflecting Indonesia's broader educational reform agenda. The reform emphasizes school autonomy, authentic assessment, and project-based learning to strengthen the "Pancasila Student Profile," which integrates moral, intellectual, and civic values into the learning process. Nevertheless, implementation challenges persist, including teacher preparedness, unequal digital infrastructure, and managerial capacity gaps among schools. Furthermore, the ongoing adaptation of learning models and assessment systems requires continuous professional development and policy alignment. Overall, this study concludes that Indonesia's curriculum transformation reflects a strategic effort to build an adaptive, innovative, inclusive, and character-oriented education system that aligns with the aspirations of Society 5.0 and the future of sustainable education.

1. Introduction

Education is the main instrument in shaping adaptive and competitive human resources in the midst of rapid global change. In the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 towards Society 5.0, the world of education not only functions as a means of knowledge transfer, but also as a tool for social and cultural transformation (Lase, 2019). The curriculum, as the core of the education system, plays an important role in directing the development of students' competencies to meet the demands of an increasingly complex era (Kahar et al., 2021). Therefore, curriculum renewal and adaptation are strategic needs for the nation that wants to prepare a superior, creative, and characterful generation in the midst of technological and information disruption.

Historically, curriculum policies in Indonesia have undergone various changes that reflect the social, political, and economic dynamics of the nation. From the post-independence period to the 2013 Curriculum, the direction of the curriculum has always moved from a content-based approach to competency-based learning. The latest transformation occurred through the *Merdeka* Learning policy introduced in 2019, marking a new phase in the journey of the national education system (Ananda & Hudaidah, 2021). This initiative emphasizes the autonomy of educational units, teaching flexibility, and authentic assessments oriented towards developing students' potential (Supriati et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic that has hit since 2020 has accelerated these changes by encouraging the integration of digital technology in the learning process. The sudden shift towards online learning reveals the inequality of infrastructure,

teacher competence, and readiness of educational institutions at various levels (Rahman et al., 2020). On the other hand, this crisis is an important momentum to rethink the design of the national curriculum to be more resilient and relevant to the needs of the 21st century. The government through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology then launched the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes the concept of freedom-based learning with thematic approaches, projects, and assessments based on Pancasila student profiles (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022).

The Independent Curriculum is oriented towards the independence of educational units to develop a learning plan that is in accordance with the characteristics of students and the potential of their region (Yudhawasthi & Christiani, 2021). This approach is in line with the direction of global education that emphasizes lifelong learning and 21st century competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration (UNESCO, 2021; Goulart et al., 2022). In the national context, this policy also represents the government's efforts to address the challenges of learning loss due to the pandemic as well as the gap in education quality between regions.

However, behind the optimism towards this new paradigm, various challenges still arise. Teachers' readiness to design and implement project-based teaching modules, limited technology facilities in schools, and differences in managerial capacity between educational units are obstacles that must be overcome (Ningrum & Suryani, 2022). Within this framework, curriculum transformation is not just a change in administrative documents, but a sustainable process that

demands synergy between government policies, teacher participation, and the adaptation of the education community at large. Thus, this study aims to analyze the direction and dynamics of the development of the Indonesian national curriculum in the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Independent Curriculum, as well as examine its implications for the quality of education in the digital and post-pandemic era.

2. Methods

This research uses a historical research method that focuses on tracing, analyzing, and interpreting various literature sources related to the development of the educational curriculum in Indonesia. This method was chosen because it allows the author to understand the process of curriculum policy evolution as a result of social, political, economic, and technological dynamics in the context of national education. The historical approach helps to decipher the relationship between past events and present policies, so that it can provide a comprehensive picture of the direction of curriculum transformation in the modern era.

The first step in this study is heuristic, which is the process of collecting secondary data that is relevant to the topic. The author searches various scientific sources, such as national and international journal articles, academic books, policy reports from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, as well as official documents from global institutions such as UNESCO and the OECD. All sources were selected based on credibility criteria, relevance to the 2019–2023 period, and suitability with the theme of national curriculum transformation.

The second step is source criticism, which includes external and internal criticism. External criticism is carried out to assess the authenticity and authenticity of the source, while internal criticism serves to test the accuracy, reliability, and consistency of the content of the source. This process ensures that the data used has scientific validity and can be used as a basis for interpretation. The third step is interpretation, which is interpreting the facts obtained from various sources in order to form a coherent understanding of the development of the curriculum. The researcher relates the search results to the context of policies, social conditions, and educational technological advances in Indonesia. The analytical approach is carried out thematically and chronologically to identify significant changes in each phase of the curriculum.

The last stage is historiography, which is the preparation of the results of the analysis in the form of a logical and systematic narrative description. At this stage, the author assembles the facts, policies, and implications of education into a single unit that describes the direction of the transformation of the national curriculum from the 2013 Curriculum to the Independent Curriculum. The entire research process is carried out with the principles of scientific objectivity, critical analysis, and contextual relevance so that the research results can make a real contribution to the development of education science and curriculum policies in the future.

3. Results

The journey of the education curriculum in Indonesia in the 2019–2023 period shows significant changes both in terms of policy orientation, learning paradigms, and implementation practices in the field. This transformation is rooted in the demands of globalization, technological advancement, and the need for an education system that is adaptive to social dynamics. During this period, the Indonesian government through the *Merdeka* Learning policy seeks to create an education system that is more flexible, humanistic, and competency-oriented. This shift in direction is also a response to the limitations of the previous curriculum, namely the 2013 Curriculum, which was considered too dense and content-oriented so that it does not provide space for the development of students' creativity (Ananda & Hudaidah, 2021).

The implementation of Freedom of Learning since 2019 has become an important milestone in the history of national education because it marks the beginning of a new paradigm that places schools and teachers as the main decision-makers in designing the learning process (Supriati et al., 2022). This change is driven by the awareness that the centralistic education system is no longer relevant in the midst of the diverse needs of society. By giving freedom for education units to determine the curriculum according to the context, the government hopes that innovation and learning that are more contextual and fun for students will emerge. According to Tabroni et al. (2022), this policy opens up opportunities for the creation of an "autonomous learning ecosystem" that allows teachers to play the role of learning experience designers, not just implementers of the national syllabus.

However, the dynamics of curriculum policies in this period are inseparable from the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The global crisis has radically changed the way of teaching and learning at all levels of education. The dependence on the online system poses a major challenge in the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum which is still based on face-to-face. On the other hand, the pandemic has also encouraged the acceleration of digital transformation of education and strengthened the argument for the need for a more flexible and resilient curriculum design (Rahman et al., 2020). The government responded to this condition by issuing the Emergency Curriculum in 2020, which then became the basis for the transition to an Independent Curriculum. Through this policy, teachers are given space to simplify learning outcomes to focus on essential competencies that are relevant to crisis conditions (Hofer et al., 2021).

The *Merdeka* Curriculum was officially introduced in 2021 and is gradually implemented in driving schools. The main approach focuses on project-based learning that is oriented towards strengthening the profile of Pancasila students. This model is expected to form students who are faithful, independent, mutual cooperation, and have the ability to think critically and creatively. In practice, the Independent Curriculum no longer emphasizes the number of subjects, but on the integration between themes and contextual relevance (Yudhawasthi & Christiani, 2021). This shift shows a philosophical transformation from content-based learning to competency-based learning and finally to freedom-based learning, where teachers and students alike have the freedom to determine the direction of learning.

The policy is in line with the global vision of 21st century education that emphasizes lifelong learning and curriculum flexibility. Goulart et al. (2022) report emphasizes that the future education system must be able to balance academic knowledge, social skills, and adaptive ability to technological change. Similarly, UNESCO (2021) through the Futures of Education report highlights the need for a new social contract in education that places people at the center of innovation and lifelong learners. In the Indonesian context, this idea is translated through the *Merdeka* Curriculum which provides space for the development of local creativity as well as global readiness.

However, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum cannot be separated from a number of structural and cultural obstacles. The results of the study by Ningrum and Suryani (2022) show that most teachers still have difficulties in designing Learning Outcomes, compiling teaching modules, and managing project-based learning. In addition, uneven digital infrastructure between urban and rural schools creates implementation gaps. In some cases, the limitations of technological devices cause project activities to not run as expected. Another obstacle arises from the managerial aspect of schools, where coordination between teachers, principals, and supervisors has not been fully synergistic (Basson & Mestry, 2019).

In addition to technical factors, the success of curriculum implementation is also determined by the mental readiness and professional competence of teachers. Koul and Nayar (2021) emphasized that the change in learning paradigm requires teachers to play the role of facilitators, mentors, and innovators in creating a dynamic learning environment. For this reason, continuous training is needed that not only

emphasizes administrative aspects, but also mastery of new technologies and pedagogical approaches. Several initiatives such as the Driving Teacher and *the Independent Teaching* Platform are presented to answer this need, although their effectiveness still needs a thorough evaluation.

In addition to teacher problems, the learning evaluation factor has also undergone fundamental changes. The assessment system no longer focuses on national exams, but rather on diagnostic assessments and more contextual formative assessments. This shift creates space for students to develop high-level thinking skills and character values. Yudhawasthi and Christiani (2021) revealed that authentic assessments in the Independent Curriculum help teachers recognize students' strengths and weaknesses in a more personal way, so that the learning process becomes more adaptive and meaningful.

However, in terms of policy, challenges still arise at the synchronization stage between the central and regional governments. Some regions experienced delays in the socialization and assistance of driving schools. As a result, the variation in implementation is quite high, both in terms of the quality of planning and learning outcomes. The Ministry of Education and Culture (2022) through its evaluation report stated that around 60% of driving schools are still in the initial adaptation stage, while only 15% have shown consistency in the implementation of the principles of the Independent Curriculum.

In addition to the national context, Indonesian education is also faced with global changes characterized by the integration of artificial intelligence technology, adaptive learning, and digital analytics systems. Kahar et al. (2021) explained that

education in the Society 5.0 era must be able to combine digital technology with human values. In this framework, the Independent Curriculum is a local response to this global transformation: an effort to balance technological progress with strengthening the nation's character. Thus, the curriculum is not just an academic instrument, but a national strategy to build the identity and competitiveness of Indonesian people.

From a social point of view, Lase (2019) emphasized that the main function of education in modern society is to create individuals who are able to contribute to development and social cohesion. The Independent Curriculum Policy reflects this function by encouraging collaboration between schools, communities, and the business-industry world in cross-disciplinary learning projects. This approach not only increases the relevance of learning, but also strengthens the relationship between the world of education and the world of work.

Various field studies show that the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum is highly dependent on the leadership of the principal and the organizational culture in educational institutions. Mujiburrahman et al. (2022) found that schools with a collaborative work climate and strong management support tend to be more successful in implementing project-based learning. On the other hand, schools that are still oriented to the old pattern have difficulty adapting to the new paradigm.

In addition, the results of Yudhawasthi and Christiani (2021) observations show that student involvement has increased significantly in schools that implement a student-centered approach. Students are more active in discussions, field

explorations, and presentation of project results, demonstrating improved critical and collaborative thinking skills. However, challenges arise in terms of consistency of assessments between teachers and the limitations of digital learning resources, which affect the equitable distribution of learning quality.

Overall, the results of the analysis show that the Independent Curriculum is a progressive step that marks a major shift in Indonesia's national education policy. This transformation has succeeded in encouraging the creation of a more flexible, competency-based, and student-centered system. However, the success of this policy is highly dependent on implementing factors such as teacher training, availability of infrastructure, and cross-level policy support. Synergy between stakeholders is the key so that the Independent Curriculum does not stop as a normative document, but is truly realized in quality and inclusive learning practices.

Thus, the curriculum changes in the 2019–2023 period reflect an evolution that is not only administrative, but transformational. The shift towards the freedom-based learning paradigm shows a national awareness to place education as a space for the formation of fully intelligent, characterful, and ready to face the global challenges of the 21st century.

4. Conclusion

The development of Indonesia's national education curriculum in the 2019–2023 period shows a fundamental transformation towards a more flexible, relevant, and humanistic learning system. Through the *Merdeka Belajar* policy and the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, the government seeks to answer

the challenges of 21st century education that demand critical thinking skills, creativity, and the ability to adapt to technological changes and social conditions. The *Merdeka* Curriculum presents a new paradigm that places students as the main subjects of learning with a project-based approach, authentic assessment, and character strengthening through Pancasila student profiles.

However, this major change is still faced with various obstacles to implementation. Differences in teacher readiness, digital infrastructure gaps, and school managerial capacity are the main factors that affect the effectiveness of curriculum implementation in various regions. Assistance efforts, continuous training, and strengthening the education ecosystem are strategic steps that must be prioritized to ensure that the transformation of the curriculum runs evenly. The curriculum journey in this period shows a positive direction towards an education system that is oriented towards freedom of learning and holistic development of students' potential. With a joint commitment between the government, educators, and the community, the Independent Curriculum has the potential to become an important foundation in building an adaptive, inclusive, and competitive national education quality in the global era.

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