IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN INDONESIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT
The curriculum is constantly changing to keep up with existing trends. Since Indonesia officially became an independent country in 1945, there have been 12 changes to the national education curriculum. The most recent change occurred with the Curriculum 2013, commonly known as K13, which now incorporates the Merdeka Learning Curriculum. The Merdeka Learning Curriculum is introduced as a learning method that follows a talent and interest-based approach. Students can choose the subjects they want to study based on their passions, aiming to produce a younger generation in Indonesia ready to face the future and global challenges. This research falls under the category of a case study with a qualitative approach. Opportunities in the implementation process of the independent learning policy in the classroom allow teachers the freedom to fully control the class. With this independent learning curriculum, teachers have more flexibility to provide opportunities to students based on their capacities, and students are not required to be uniform in their learning experiences. One of the challenges in implementing the independent curriculum is the attitudes/tendencies of the implementers. The understanding of implementers regarding general goals, basic standards, and policy objectives is crucial. In conclusion, the independent learning curriculum provides freedom to both students and teachers in their learning patterns. In the independent learning curriculum, students are required to be more active and interactive in the learning process. An important factor for each individual is to have a complete understanding of the independent learning curriculum, making it easier to achieve the expected goals.

KEYWORDS:
Merdeka Curriculum, Challenges, Opportunities

INTRODUCTION
Education is a crucial element in the development of a country, including Indonesia. Education in Indonesia has undergone various changes and adjustments in line with the evolving times and societal needs. One of the recent and significant changes is the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia (Kemendikbud RI) (Devian et al., 2023).

In alignment with this, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) globally promotes a campaign to create Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which includes the field of education within the SDGs framework. Education is then designated as Goal 4 (four) of the SDGs, focusing on quality education with the hope of ensuring inclusive and equitable education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. The UNDP emphasizes that education is a catalyst for achieving all other goals of the SDGs (un.org, 2010). An individual with good knowledge and
education has great potential to break the cycle of poverty, attain a decent life, secure good employment, and become a more tolerant person, aligning with the achievement of other SDGs. It also establishes implementation principles to be followed by all countries, including increasing funding for the education and health sectors, introducing risk reduction strategies, building international cooperation, and encouraging local community participation in sustaining life.

The curriculum is constantly changing to keep up with the trends of change. Since Indonesia officially became an independent country in 1945, the national education curriculum has undergone 12 changes. The most recent change occurred with the Curriculum 2013, commonly known as K13, which now incorporates the Merdeka Learning Curriculum. The Merdeka Learning Curriculum is introduced as a learning method that follows a talent and interest-based approach. Students can choose the subjects they want to study based on their passion, aiming to produce a younger generation in Indonesia that is ready to face the future and global challenges. As mentioned earlier, the curriculum's function is designed to prepare for future development and encourage learners or school children to have better skills in the process, not just focused on results.

Ministerial Regulation No. 57 of 2014 on the Elementary School/Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Curriculum mandates that the success of the curriculum clearly requires a lengthy process, starting from the study and strengthening of various ideas, thoughts, and ideal concepts about education. The Merdeka Curriculum, also known as "Freedom to Learn," is a new policy program launched by the Minister of Education and Culture of the Indonesia Maju Cabinet, Nadiem Anwar Makarim. This curriculum is designed to address the challenges of education in the era of the 4.0 industrial revolution. The goal of this curriculum is to integrate literacy skills, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and technology mastery (Devian et al., 2023).

However, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is not without challenges. One of the main challenges is how to develop and implement this curriculum in the diverse context of Indonesian education. Cholilah et al. (2023) show that the development of the Merdeka Curriculum requires specific steps to accelerate its development in schools. Teachers need to play a role as learning leaders who can utilize the Merdeka Mengajar Platform and prioritize project-based learning.

Furthermore, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is also influenced by the local context and specific conditions of schools. For example, Raiyan et al. (2023) demonstrate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at MAN 3 Bireuen, a public high school in Indonesia, has not been fully executed. The implementation started only in grade X in the academic year 2022-2023. One major challenge is that students are required to use Android mobile phones for learning purposes, which may not be available to all students.

Moreover, the Merdeka Curriculum has significant implications for learning evaluations. Mughni (2023) indicates that the Merdeka Curriculum has shifted the focus of national exams from students' cognitive competence to assessing minimum competencies conducted halfway through the education level process. Additionally, the national standard school exams, previously regulated by the state, are now assigned to relevant educational institutions under the Merdeka Curriculum.
Despite these challenges and changes, the Merdeka Curriculum offers new opportunities for innovation and improvement in education in Indonesia. For instance, Zarkasi et al. (2023) show that the use of the Quizizz application in learning can assist in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This application can help teachers implement the Merdeka Curriculum and also aid students in learning and developing their cognitive skills and concentration.

Overall, the Merdeka Curriculum is a significant step forward in Indonesian education. Despite challenges in its implementation, the Merdeka Curriculum presents opportunities for innovation and improvement in education. Further research is needed to understand how the Merdeka Curriculum can be effectively implemented and how challenges can be overcome.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research falls into the category of a case study with a qualitative approach. A case study is an intensive study of an individual, a group, or a unit with the aim of generalizing to some extent. In a case study, the focus is based on a specific unit (Jacobsen, 2002). Another definition is that it focuses on analyzing the system studied comprehensively using one or several methods (Thomas, 2011). The case study method does not aim to analyze cases; rather, it is a good way to define cases and explore the background to understand them (Cousin, 2005). The qualitative research method is a research approach aimed at describing and analyzing phenomena, events, social activities, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and thoughts of individuals or groups.

According to Staraus and Corbin, qualitative research produces findings that can be achieved without using statistical provisions or other methods of measurement. The main purpose of qualitative research is to understand social phenomena by providing a clear description of an event or social phenomenon in the form of a series of sentences or narratives that ultimately lead to the development of a theory.

The case study research method investigates a specific case or phenomenon within a certain scope in-depth, studying its background, events, or conditions, and ongoing interactions. Case studies are conducted on a unit of the system, which can be a program, activity, event, or a group of individuals existing under certain circumstances or conditions. Case studies can be explained in various ways. According to Baskarada (2014), the case study method is not entirely understood even though it is widely used. Findings can be challenging to validate, and scientific precision can be difficult to establish.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In this research, the researcher examines the implementation of the policy on the application of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. The implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum policy is based on the policy theory model of Van Meter and Van Horn, which is divided into 6 interconnected variables: policy standards and targets, resources, organizational characteristics, organizational communication, social, economic, and political conditions.
Every policy must have clear and structured standards and policy targets, as the achievement of goals depends on these provisions. The performance of policy implementation is measured by the level of success, as well as the metrics and objectives of policies that are realistic and aligned with the socio-cultural context at the policy implementation level. Therefore, each policy target or objective must be met to ensure the effective implementation of the stated policy. If the policy targets set are not in line with the objectives or are not implemented as intended, the assessment of the policy's target level is considered unsatisfactory. This aligns with the views of Van Meter and Van Horn, who stated that measuring the performance of policy implementation requires the use of specific standards and target metrics that must be achieved by policy implementers. Policy performance essentially involves an assessment of the level of achievement within these standards and targets.

The headmaster of an elementary school in Malang city stated that the main goal of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum policy is to sharpen children's learning abilities according to their development. This curriculum liberates children to follow their abilities according to personal awareness and responsibility, making learning more meaningful. Additionally, a teacher also mentioned that the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is designed to provide flexibility to schools on how to achieve learning outcomes tailored to the school. Regarding learning, students are provided with differentiated learning emphasizing individualized learning.

The main goal of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is to shape the character of students from elementary school to junior high school, a phase referred to as “loss learning.” As mentioned by the school principal in the interview results, the purpose of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum policy has been well communicated. The goal is to provide free learning to students. The Merdeka Belajar curriculum is designed to shape students' characters from elementary to junior high school, addressing the loss of learning that students experienced from the beginning until after the pandemic ended.

Essentially, schools designated as driving schools are already aware of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum policy. The implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum aims to accelerate the achievement of national educational goals, specifically to enhance excellence and competitiveness compared to other countries. This curriculum is created because initially, the learning curriculum was rigid and binding, governed by rules related to national exams, lesson plans, rules for the use of school operational funds (BOS), and so on. Within the objectives of this policy, there are guidelines that specifically need to be implemented by schools. The goals of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum policy must be articulated specifically through the school's Vision and Mission, formulated through a process undertaken by the school.

In reality, there are some teachers who still lack an understanding of the policy standards outlined in the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. This becomes a problem in the city of Malang. Therefore, the appointment of a learning committee to conduct In-House Training (IHT) aims to provide guidance or understanding to other teachers in achieving an understanding of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. This means that the standards of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum policy are created for the educational goals of the school, which must be implemented by the school and teachers as the main sources through In-House Training. This is in line with the opinion of Van Meter and Van Horn (Tahir, 2014:55-56), stating that implementation is the operationalization of various
activities to achieve specific goals and involves all levels of management, from top management to the lowest employees. As one teacher stated, the main constraint in this school is the uneven and suboptimal commitment and competence of human resources, especially in the utilization of information technology (IT). The implementation phase does not begin when goals and targets are set by previous policy decisions; the implementation phase only occurs after the legislative process is completed, and the allocation of resources and funds has been agreed upon. The statement is further supported by Van Meter and Van Horn (Aslinda, 2023:89), stating that the actions taken by the government to achieve goals set in a policy decision. The tools here refer to the school components implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum policy, ranging from students who implement the policy, teachers playing a key role in teaching, and the learning committee that must participate in the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum.

In addition to standard metrics, another crucial aspect to consider is the aspect of resources. Resources are essential as they can contribute to the success of policy implementation. Resources in this context include funds and other necessities that facilitate and enhance the effective implementation of the policy (Situmorang, 2016:191).

The results of the analysis obtained from interviews with various informants regarding resources indicate that there are several resources in the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum policy. The first resource is related to human resources, namely teachers, school principals, and other learning committees. Second, the schools in Malang City have sufficient human resources, especially in terms of teachers. In the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, teachers are required to be more creative, innovative, globally aware, understand and serve students according to their characteristics and needs. Teacher recruitment is determined based on qualifications and commitment. According to the school principal, personnel changes occurred due to the transfer of teachers. The school then recruited teachers based on criteria determined by qualifications and commitment. In this case, the junior high school is assisted by a foundation in recruiting teachers. Teachers also need to adapt their IT skills because the Merdeka Belajar curriculum utilizes IT to support learning. Specifically for teachers, the improvement of teacher resource capabilities is enhanced through the competence of the Teaching and Learning Personnel (GTK) through in-school training/workshops, assigning GTK to attend various seminars. This is implemented so that all teachers teaching the Merdeka Belajar curriculum can have a full understanding of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum policy.

In the implementation process, it follows the curriculum as it should. Data found in the field regarding the time allocation for Merdeka Belajar curriculum learning indicates that there is no significant change in the learning time in these two junior high schools in Malang. However, its use is more flexible according to the needs and conditions of the school. Additionally, time management includes a clear distribution, with 70%-80% for extracurricular activities and 20%-30% for the Strengthening Project of the Pancasila Student Character Profile (Character Education).

The next variable is the attitudes or tendencies of the implementers. The understanding of implementers regarding the general goals, basic measures, and policy objectives is crucial. Successful policy implementation must be accompanied by a comprehensive awareness of the
policy. This implies that the tendencies of implementers will influence policy performance (Situmorang, 2016:202).

The results of the analysis obtained from interviews with various sources regarding the attitudes or tendencies of implementers lead to the conclusion that changing habits in the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is a process that requires stages. There are steps to the implementation process. In terms of school information, schools are directed to appoint 12 learning committees consisting of the principal, curriculum section, facilities and infrastructure section, and teachers. Then, the learning committee conducts an orientation for teachers implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum to provide insights into the curriculum.

The Merdeka Belajar curriculum was initiated in 2021, and since the academic year 2021/2022, it has been implemented in nearly 2,500 schools through the School Revitalization Program (PSP). Based on Ministerial Regulation No. 5 of 2022 regarding graduation competency standards in early childhood education, basic education, and secondary education, the graduation competency standards are the minimum criteria for the unity of attitudes, skills, and knowledge that demonstrate students' abilities at the end of the education level. The graduation competency standards serve as a reference for the 2013 curriculum, emergency curriculum, and the Merdeka Belajar curriculum.

Opportunities and Challenges
Based on the results of interviews and monitoring activities conducted, it is evident that in the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar policy, teachers are given the freedom to fully manage their classrooms before the start of the lesson. Here, teachers need to understand the learning styles of their students before grouping them. With the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, teachers have more flexibility to provide opportunities to students according to their capacities, eliminating the need for students to be uniform in their learning experiences.

The school principal emphasizes that there is a comprehensive understanding of the implementation process of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, involving key components such as teachers. Additionally, the principal's understanding is crucial for the successful implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Another supportive factor is that in terms of learning, students are free to choose their own abilities. The principal of SMPN 03 also states that in the learning process, teachers must understand the characters of the students. Learning is grouped based on the abilities of each student. An initial assessment is conducted by the teacher, and the results are used to group students based on their learning abilities.

The learning created for students encourages self-discovery and study of the material taught in the new curriculum. Students are given more freedom in character development. In addition to student freedom, teachers are more flexible in providing autonomy for competencies during class hours. Moreover, the Merdeka Belajar curriculum includes a special allocation for character strengthening, as this curriculum fundamentally aims to strengthen the profile of Pancasila students, abbreviated as P5.

While there are opportunities in the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, challenges exist. Understanding students' learning styles and adjusting teaching strategies accordingly is a
challenge. Consistent and in-depth understanding of this curriculum by all parties involved is key to overcoming these challenges.

This aligns with the perspective of experts such as Van Horn and Van Meter, who state that the success of policy implementation depends on the available resources' capabilities. Humans are the most crucial resource in determining the implementation process. Based on the above analysis, it can be concluded that the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is a curriculum that provides freedom for students who want to develop their expertise in delving into a particular field of study. Additionally, with teachers being a supporting factor or the main point in the execution of learning in the classroom, they are given the freedom to provide more enjoyable lessons. Therefore, the Merdeka Belajar curriculum offers a more enjoyable learning experience and can nurture students' creativity.

One of the challenges in implementing the Merdeka curriculum is the attitudes/tendencies of the implementers. The understanding of implementers regarding the general goals, basic measures, and policy objectives is crucial. Successful policy implementation must be accompanied by a comprehensive awareness of the policy. This implies that the tendencies of implementers will influence policy performance (Situmorang, 2016:202).

The analysis from interviews with various sources related to the opposition or attitudes of the implementers leads to the conclusion that changing habits is a process that requires stages in implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. There are steps to the implementation process. In terms of school information, schools are directed to appoint 12 learning committees consisting of the principal, curriculum section, facilities and infrastructure section, and teachers. Then, the learning committee conducts an orientation for teachers implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum to provide insights into the curriculum.

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CONCLUSION

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