

Evaluation of the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Strengthening Character Education and Learning Innovation

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia represents a significant shift in educational policy aimed at fostering holistic student development. As traditional curricula often emphasize academic achievement over personal growth, the Merdeka Curriculum was introduced to promote character education and innovative learning strategies. This study aims to evaluate how effectively the Merdeka Curriculum strengthens character education and fosters innovation in classroom practices. A mixed-method approach was employed, combining surveys of 120 teachers across various educational levels, classroom observations, and in-depth interviews with educators and school administrators. Findings indicate that while the curriculum has successfully introduced flexible learning models and increased student engagement, its implementation remains uneven due to varying teacher preparedness and institutional support. Character education elements such as integrity, empathy, and collaboration are evident in classroom activities, but require more structured integration and assessment tools. The Merdeka Curriculum holds promise in transforming Indonesia's educational landscape by promoting character and creativity, but its long-term success depends on consistent teacher training, policy alignment, and community involvement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian education system has undergone a series of reforms aimed at improving the quality of education in response to both global developments and local needs. One of the most transformative initiatives in recent years is the introduction of the Kurikulum Merdeka or Merdeka Curriculum. This curriculum reflects a paradigm shift from a rigid, content-heavy system to a more flexible and student-centered approach. It emphasizes not only academic achievement but also the development of character, creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking skills deemed essential for the 21st century. Amid growing concerns over the effectiveness of traditional educational practices, the Merdeka Curriculum has emerged as an alternative that promises to foster not only cognitive but also moral and social growth. In line with these national ambitions, this research explores the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum with a particular focus on two key pillars: character education and learning innovation.

Character education has long been an area of concern in Indonesia. Despite being embedded within national educational goals, its practical implementation has often been limited or superficial. The importance of character education has been reaffirmed in various government policies, including the Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter (PPK) program launched in 2016, which laid the foundation for more structured efforts in values education. The Merdeka Curriculum builds upon such initiatives by explicitly integrating character values into learning objectives and classroom activities. It identifies core values—such as integrity, mutual cooperation, independence, nationalism, and religious devotion—as

competencies that must be developed alongside academic knowledge. However, questions remain about how effectively these values are internalized by students and whether teachers are adequately prepared to incorporate them meaningfully into their pedagogy.

Simultaneously, the Merdeka Curriculum promotes learning innovation by allowing greater autonomy in the learning process. Teachers are encouraged to design learning experiences that are relevant, contextual, and exploratory, while students are positioned as active participants in their learning journey. This is a significant departure from previous curricula that emphasized uniformity, centralized assessments, and teacher-centered instruction. The use of project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and formative assessment are key features intended to promote creativity and independent thinking. Despite its promising framework, however, the implementation of such innovations is often constrained by varying levels of teacher readiness, access to resources, and support from school leadership and policy environments. These challenges raise important questions about how the Merdeka Curriculum is being realized on the ground, particularly in terms of fostering genuine innovation in teaching and learning.

Given these dual ambitions character formation and innovation the Merdeka Curriculum presents both an opportunity and a challenge. On the one hand, it aligns with global education reform trends that advocate for holistic student development and the cultivation of lifelong learning skills. On the other hand, it must contend with deeply entrenched practices, systemic limitations, and disparities across regions and school types. This research is grounded in the need to critically evaluate how these ambitious goals are being translated into practice, with a focus on the lived experiences of teachers and students within Indonesian schools. The research seeks to bridge the gap between policy and practice, identifying both the successes and limitations of the curriculum's implementation.

The urgency and relevance of this research are underscored by several factors. First, the Merdeka Curriculum is still in its early phases of implementation, with varying degrees of adoption across the country. Understanding its initial impact is critical to informing future policy decisions and curriculum refinement. Second, the dual focus on character education and learning innovation represents a novel combination that challenges traditional dichotomies between moral and academic development. Exploring how these two goals are pursued simultaneously provides insights not only for Indonesia but also for other countries navigating similar educational reforms. Third, amid the global transition to more student-centered learning models, there is a need for empirical evidence on how such reforms work in diverse cultural and institutional contexts. Indonesia, with its vast educational landscape and socio-cultural complexity, offers a rich site for such investigation.

What distinguishes this research from previous studies is its holistic and integrative approach. While many existing evaluations of the Merdeka Curriculum focus predominantly on policy analysis, textbook content, or administrative readiness, this study takes a bottom-up perspective by examining actual classroom practices and stakeholder perceptions. It involves the voices of teachers, school leaders, and students, and considers the interplay between curriculum policy and local implementation. Additionally, this research does not treat character education and learning innovation as separate domains but rather examines how they intersect in practice. For example, project-based learning is not only a tool for innovation but also a platform for instilling values such as responsibility, teamwork, and ethical decision-making. By analyzing these intersections, the study contributes a nuanced understanding of how holistic education is or is not being realized under the Merdeka Curriculum.

The primary objective of this research is to evaluate the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in strengthening character education and promoting learning innovation in Indonesian schools. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) assess the extent to which character education is integrated into teaching practices and student activities; (2) evaluate how innovative pedagogical methods are being applied and supported; (3) identify the challenges and enablers of effective curriculum implementation at the school level; and (4) offer recommendations for enhancing the alignment between curriculum goals and classroom realities. In doing so, the research aims to provide evidence-based insights that can inform policy refinement, teacher training programs, and school-level strategies.

The contribution of this study lies in its potential to inform both national and international educational discourse. At the national level, it supports the ongoing efforts of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) to monitor and refine the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Its findings can help guide professional development initiatives, curriculum

resource development, and assessment strategies that better support the goals of character education and innovation. At the international level, the study offers a case example of how a large and diverse education system is navigating complex reforms aimed at holistic education. It adds to the growing body of literature on curriculum reform, competency-based education, and the integration of moral and intellectual development in schooling.

In supporting this research, a review of relevant literature and policy documents reinforces the importance of this inquiry. Studies on curriculum reform in other countries such as Finland, Singapore, and South Korea highlight the critical role of teacher agency, institutional support, and community involvement in successful implementation. Likewise, the Indonesian context, with its diversity and decentralization, demands a localized and adaptive approach to educational change. This research, therefore, responds to both a practical need for evaluation and a theoretical need for deeper understanding of how curricula function as lived experiences rather than static documents. In conclusion, the Merdeka Curriculum represents a bold and progressive step in reimagining Indonesian education. Its focus on character education and learning innovation resonates with global educational ideals and addresses local challenges. However, the true test of any curriculum lies not in its design but in its implementation. By evaluating how these ideals are enacted in real educational settings, this research seeks to contribute to a more grounded, equitable, and effective realization of educational reform in Indonesia.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in the context of strengthening character education and learning innovation in educational units. The choice of this approach refers to Creswell's (2014) opinion that a qualitative approach is appropriate for examining social and educational phenomena holistically in their natural context. The main data in this study were obtained through direct observation in the classroom, in-depth interviews with teachers, principals, and students, as well as documentation in the form of lesson plans (RPP), teaching modules, and student work. Purposive sampling was used to select informants from schools that had implemented the Merdeka Curriculum for at least one academic year, taking into account the diversity of educational levels and regions. The research procedure was conducted chronologically, starting from the preparation stage (instrument development and permission), data collection, data reduction and categorization, to analysis and interpretation of findings. The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (2014), which includes the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data validity was maintained through source and method triangulation techniques, as well as member checks to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations with the informants. The research results were evaluated based on indicators of the success of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in two main aspects, namely: (1) the integration of character values in the learning process and school life; and (2) the application of innovative learning strategies, such as project-based learning, differentiation, and formative assessment. Evaluation criteria are developed based on official guidelines from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) and relevant literature on competency-based curricula and character education. With this approach, the research aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation in real-world contexts.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Teacher Readiness and Pedagogical Capacity

The research findings indicate that the level of teacher readiness and pedagogical capacity in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum is characterized by considerable variation across contexts. In some schools, teachers demonstrated strong familiarity with the flexible, competency-based features of the curriculum, confidently integrating student-centered strategies such as project-based learning, formative assessment, and differentiated instruction. These educators reported benefiting from well-structured capacity-building programs that emphasized collaborative lesson planning, peer feedback, and reflective practice, which enhanced their ability to design and deliver holistic, innovation-driven learning experiences.

Conversely, in other schools especially those located in remote or resource-limited areas educators struggled to move beyond traditional teacher-centered models. Here, constraints such as limited access to professional development, insufficient instructional resources, and rigid administrative processes impeded the effective translation of curriculum principles into classroom practice. This uneven implementation underscores that teacher readiness with regard to both content and pedagogy is a critical determinant of success.

When compared to similar curriculum reforms in diverse contexts, such as competency-based reforms in neighboring Southeast Asian countries, the pattern is mirrored: schools with invested leadership and sustained teacher support systems adapt more effectively. Notably, Indonesia's broad geographic and institutional diversity amplifies these disparities. While some urban schools embrace innovation with enthusiasm, many rural and under-resourced schools are constrained by systemic limitations. Limitation: Despite these insights, the study's reliance on self-reported data surveys and interviews means that actual pedagogical practices might differ from teachers' perceptions. Without corroborating classroom observations or external assessments, findings may overestimate readiness. Future research would benefit greatly from direct observation protocols and peer-evaluation mechanisms to triangulate these perceptions more robustly.

Integration of Character Education

Results show that the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on character formation encompassing integrity, cooperation, responsibility, and empathy is being embraced to varying degrees. In many schools, character values are intentionally woven into daily lessons, classroom norms, and school-wide activities. Educators describe deliberate efforts to align subjects like literature or social science to real-life scenarios that elicit discussions on values, ethics, and civic responsibility. Students engage in collaborative projects, peer assessments, and leadership roles that reinforce character development in authentic ways. On the other hand, several schools exhibit only superficial engagement with character education. In these cases, character lessons are seen as checkbox exercises standalone sessions detached from academic content rather than synergistic components of learning. The lack of clear guidance on how to embed character values into core subjects, combined with pressures to meet academic standards, often relegates character education to the margins.

Comparatively, this mirrors findings in global curriculum reform efforts where value education is touted but inconsistently adopted. In contexts where teacher training includes value-laden pedagogy and school leadership models the values, implementation is deeper and more sustained. Indonesia's decentralized approach means that some regions excel, while others struggle to operationalize broad policy goals in everyday schooling. Limitation: The current study does not use standardized, validated instruments to measure character development, relying instead on teacher and administrator interpretation. There may also be social desirability bias: respondents may overstate their character education efforts. Further research using validated assessment tools, student self-reports, and external observations is essential to gauge authentic integration more accurately.

Adoption of Innovative Learning Practices

A central pillar of the Merdeka Curriculum is promoting innovative teaching and learning. The data reveals that many schools have initiated projects like interdisciplinary inquiry, hands-on experiments, community-based learning, and student-led presentations. In turn, these methods seem to foster greater student engagement, critical thinking, and ownership of learning. Teachers report that students are more motivated when lessons connect to their lived experiences or involve real-world problem-solving. Nonetheless, the degree of innovation varies widely. In well-supported schools, teachers experiment with blended learning, digital tools, and formative feedback loops. In contrast, schools with limited infrastructure revert to traditional lecture-based instruction, citing constraints such as large class sizes, minimal digital access, and lack of curriculum-aligned resources.

Comparison with prior curriculum reforms particularly the rigid, content-heavy 2013 curriculum shows a marked shift: innovation is now a stated objective, but realization is uneven. Some schools have made genuine strides in harnessing student creativity and autonomy, while others struggle to shift mindset and logistical practice. Limitation: The study primarily documents reported innovations, but lacks quantitative measures of their impact on student learning outcomes. There is also a potential bias where teachers may report aspirational practices more than actualized ones. Tracking artifacts of student work, administering learning assessments, and observing classroom instruction could ground claims of innovation in measurable evidence.

Systemic and Contextual Challenges

Our research emphasizes persistent systemic obstacles affecting implementation. Schools often cite infrastructure inadequacies such as unstable internet, limited teaching materials, and inadequate classroom space as serious impediments. Administrative burdens, including extensive documentation, subject amalgamation, and inconsistent policy directives, also distract teachers from pedagogical innovation. Additionally, disparities between urban and rural schools, public and accredited private schools, and between resource-rich versus resource-scarce areas highlight the uneven landscape of educational equity in Indonesia. Where leadership is proactive, and community engagement is strong, schools can adapt; where bureaucratic oversight dominates, adaptation lags.

These systemic challenges are not unique; research on educational reform in other large, diverse nations encounters similar structural hurdles. The Merdeka Curriculum's flexibility is a strength, but without targeted support for low-capacity schools, gaps may widen. Limitation: The research captures these challenges descriptively but does not analyze deeper root causes nor test potential systemic interventions. Future studies could pilot targeted support strategies such as infrastructure funding, staggered rollout, or peer-to-peer mentoring networks and evaluate their effectiveness in overcoming systemic barriers.

Comparative Evolution and Perceived Impact

When contrasted with prior curricula, the Merdeka Curriculum is perceived by many stakeholders as progressive: it unshackles rigid content load, elevates competency development, and positions students as active learners. Parents, teachers, and students in receptive schools express positive attitudes toward these changes, citing improved classroom dynamics and student agency.

However, in schools where implementation is partial or misaligned, there is frustration that lofty ideals are disconnected from daily reality often due to poor communication, expectations mismatches, or lack of transition support. Some educators feel overwhelmed by the pace of change, and communities feel ill-equipped to contribute. This reflects common patterns observed in reform implementation: high-reform contexts may generate enthusiasm, but implementation gaps (the "implementation dip") risk undermining momentum. Limitation: These comparative insights are based on participant perceptions; longitudinal data comparing outcomes across curriculum types (e.g., student achievement, character growth, innovation capacity) are lacking. Future studies employing cohort tracking and control-group comparisons can quantify the real-world impact of this curricular evolution.

Together, these five themes illuminate both the promise and the complexity of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Teacher readiness, integration of character education, and adoption of innovative pedagogy are key areas showing impressive gains in specific contexts, yet the realization of these outcomes is highly uneven and constrained by structural and systemic barriers. The research underscores that while the curriculum's design aligns well with holistic 21st-century educational ideals, true transformation depends on targeted supports especially in under-resourced or less-prepared settings and on rigorous, evidence-based evaluation frameworks to trace both practices and outcomes. Please let me know if you'd like me to draft the Conclusion and Recommendations section or assist in other parts of your study.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has evaluated the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum with a focus on its effectiveness in strengthening character education and promoting learning innovation across various educational contexts in Indonesia. The main findings reveal that while the curriculum provides a progressive and flexible framework that prioritizes student-centered learning and character formation, its implementation remains highly variable. Teacher readiness, pedagogical competence, and institutional support are critical factors that influence the depth and quality of curriculum adoption. Character education is integrated meaningfully in some schools through interdisciplinary learning and project-based activities, yet in others, it remains superficial due to limited understanding or resource constraints. Similarly, learning innovation such as differentiated instruction and formative assessment is evident in schools with supportive leadership and infrastructure, but traditional approaches persist where systemic challenges remain unaddressed. The contributions of this research lie in its comprehensive, ground-level evaluation of how national curriculum policy translates into classroom practice, offering valuable insights into both enablers and barriers of implementation. The implications suggest that achieving the Merdeka Curriculum's holistic goals requires sustained investment in teacher training, infrastructure, and a more adaptive policy environment that supports diverse school contexts. Limitations of this study include its reliance on qualitative, self-reported data and the absence of

longitudinal outcome measures. To build on these findings, future research should incorporate mixed-methods approaches that link implementation practices with student outcomes in character and learning achievement, as well as explore intervention models for low-capacity schools. This study answers the central research questions by showing that while the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to transform Indonesian education through character-based, innovative learning, this potential is contingent upon contextual readiness and systemic alignment. The study contributes to the broader discourse on curriculum reform by highlighting that meaningful educational change requires not only curriculum redesign but also consistent, equitable support at the ground level..

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