

Descriptive Qualitative Analysis: Implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SMKN 1 Kedawung

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ABSTRACT

This study describes the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMKN 1 Kedawung and examines the role of teachers in its execution. The Merdeka curriculum emphasises flexibility, independence of thought, and character development of learners. Teachers have a central role as designers, implementers, and evaluators of learning in this curriculum. This qualitative research uses a literature review method and in-depth interviews with Vice Principals, senior teachers, and curriculum experts at SMKN 1 Kedawung. The results showed that although teachers have understood the concept of the Independent curriculum that has been running for almost two years, there are still obstacles in analyzing learning outcomes (CP), formulating learning objectives (TP), preparing the flow of learning objectives (ATP) and teaching modules, as well as making diagnostic assessments and learning evaluations. To overcome these obstacles, teachers implement strategies such as discussions with the MGMP team or peers and participating in online and offline training. Applying various learning models and methods, such as Problem-Based Learning (PBL), Project-Based Learning (PjBL), and inquiry, is emphasised to train students' cognitive and psychomotor abilities and develop character. Evaluation of learning focuses on cognitive aspects, but also the character of learners through P5 (project for strengthening Pancasila student profile). Training and professional development are very influential in improving teachers' ability, as evidenced by 80% of teachers at SMK 1 Kedawung who have implemented the Independent curriculum well after attending various trainings.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education makes this generation a role model for the teaching of previous generations. Until now, education has no limits to fully explain the meaning of education because it is as complex as its target, namely, humans. The challenges of the Indonesian

education world explode various problems faced, starting from the old-style educational environment ecosystem that places stakeholders in schools too administrative, regulated, and ignores the role of parents. This situation is further complicated by the practice of learning that places the teacher as the centre of knowledge in his pedagogical role, only making students objects with traditional approaches. Likewise, the curriculum is limited to rigid content that rejects development flexibility, only focusing on academic activities, denying the real development of students' character and competencies, and punitive learning assessments [1]. Education is a program composed of several elements, such as curriculum, facilities and infrastructure, methods, students, and teachers that are interrelated to achieve educational goals, one of the most important elements being the teacher element [2]. A learning process requires a teacher's involvement in teaching and learning activities in education. Education is a transmission of knowledge, values, and functions to maintain and develop the diversity of cultures in a society that occurs through personality formation. This creates humans who can stand independently in the culture and the surrounding society [3]. With education, a person can have knowledge and understanding about something critically thinking and acting. Success in education can be known based on the role of students as students, teachers as educators, the learning materials provided, teaching methods, and the availability of the necessary infrastructure facilities [4].

In his address during the 2019 National Teacher's Day (HGN) commemoration, the Minister of Education and Culture, Nadiem Anwar Makarim, introduced the concept of Independent Learning Education (Merdeka Belajar). This paradigm emphasises educational autonomy as a means to enhance the quality of education, incorporating flexibility, openness, and institutional self-direction in shaping future generations, particularly within the context of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and Society 5.0. Nadiem's vision of independent learning underscores that educational institutions, teachers, and students should be granted the freedom to innovate, engage in self-directed learning, and exercise creativity [5].

The introduction of this concept necessitated curriculum reform to align with the principles of intellectual freedom, enabling learners to develop competencies in information retrieval, management, communication, and the effective use of information and technology, consistent with the constitutional mandate of the 1945 Constitution and the values of Pancasila. Initially, the issuance of Circular Letter No. 1 of 2020 concerning the Independent Learning policy in determining student graduation sparked both support and opposition. This discourse centred on the interpretation of Merdeka Belajar, which grants educational institutions the authority to foster student innovation and stimulate creative thinking. Within the learning process, both teachers and students are encouraged to exchange knowledge and experiences actively [6]. Ultimately, the concept has reached a consensus and gained wider acceptance, as it aligns with the overarching vision and mission of Indonesian education, namely, the cultivation of high-quality human capital capable of competing across diverse spheres of life.

The concept of the independent learning curriculum is inseparable from the role of teachers, who are the main figures in learning, who have the task of educating, guiding, training, and developing various aspects contained in students. The implementation of the curriculum should be able to create conducive learning independence, namely independence

that has elements of fun, interesting, provides a sense of security, active, creative, and innovative in exploring the abilities of its students so that they can achieve learning goals [7]. Implementing the concept of independent learning encourages the role of teachers in both developing the applicable curriculum and the learning process. Teachers' contributions in the curriculum development process are important to adapt the content of the curriculum to the needs of students in Merdeka. Teachers as a learning resource need to understand student psychology, the application of learning methods and strategies that will be used [8]. Collaborative and effective involvement of teachers in developing the school curriculum to organise and independently manage materials, textbooks, and learning content. In addition to being one of the learning resources, the role of teachers in the curriculum concept, namely as a facilitator of independent learning, can be supported by the competence of knowledge, skills, and fundamental values, whose reflection is in the ability to think and act, which is included in pedagogic compensation [9]. With these competencies, teachers can realise the implementation and objectives of the implementation of the independent learning policy.

SMKN 1 Kedawung is one of the vocational education institutions that adheres to the Independent Curriculum. It is also hoped that it can become an effective implementer of the Independent Curriculum. However, in the implementation process, various challenges such as teacher readiness, facilities and infrastructure, as well as teachers' and students' understanding of changes in learning approaches, can be inhibiting factors. Therefore, the researcher is interested in further studying with a descriptive qualitative analysis study to determine how the Independent Curriculum is implemented at SMKN 1 Kedawung. This research aims to describe in depth the implementation process, obstacles faced, and strategies carried out by the school in making the curriculum a success.

2. METODE

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design utilising a phenomenological approach. As noted by Nuryana et al. [10], the phenomenological approach centers on capturing and interpreting subjective experiences, emphasising individuals' perspectives on the world and their interpretations of encountered events. It seeks to comprehend phenomena as experienced by individuals without imposing preconceived notions or theoretical presuppositions [11]. The research participants comprised teachers, vice principals, and curriculum specialists. Secondary data sources included relevant documents, scholarly articles, and academic journals. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and in-depth observations focusing on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. These encompassed teachers' conceptual understanding of the curriculum, the challenges and strategies encountered in its application, and teachers' evaluations of student learning outcomes within this framework. Additionally, the study examined the influence of professional training and development programs on teachers' competencies in executing the Merdeka Curriculum.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on observations and interviews with several informants, it was found that SMKN 1 Kedawung has used the Independent curriculum. In its implementation, teachers

certainly understand the concept of the independent curriculum because it has been running for almost 2 years. However, teachers continue to adapt to the independent curriculum because the mindset of the 2013 curriculum is still inherent in learning. The Independent Curriculum is a good curriculum that emphasises the concept of character development of students to be better than before. However, the role of teachers is needed in a series of processes of implementing character education in the Independent Curriculum.

In the independent curriculum, it is also inseparable from the obstacles faced by SMKN 1 Kedawung teachers face difficulties in analyzing CP, formulating TP, compiling ATP and teaching modules, making diagnostic assessments to measure students' initial abilities and evaluating learning and several strategies used by teachers at SMKN 1 Kedawung in implementing the Independent curriculum, including teachers continuing to practice and learn about administration in the Independent curriculum with discuss with the MGMP TEAM or colleagues, and take part in training on the Merdeka curriculum both online and offline.

The teaching methods used at SMKN 1 Kedawung tend to apply varied models and methods in learning that train students' cognitive and psychological abilities, such as PBL, PJBL, and Inquiry. This is in line with Rona Taula Sari (2018) stating that PjBL provides opportunities for learners to research, plan, design, and reflect on the creation of technology projects [12]. Meanwhile, PBL can provide an increase in student activities and learning outcomes, as shown with the results of its research that this model affects social mobility materials in class VIII C SMP Negeri 20 Tasikmalaya, Academic Year 2019/2020 [13].

The teaching methods used in the Merdeka curriculum must make students active and emphasise character development by implementing differentiated or problem-based learning. However, suppose it is related to student learning outcomes. In that case, it is necessary to evaluate by teachers, in other words, in the learning of the Merdeka curriculum, not only the cognitive aspect but also the character aspect, the character of students can be evaluated by applying a learning model that focuses on character development, interviews, portfolios, project-based learning, and case study analysis.

In Pramudita's (2023) research, applying a learning model that is not appropriate to students' conditions is one of the causes of low mathematical problem-solving skills [14]. Thus, the role of teachers in implementing learning models is essential to help students improve their abilities in solving problems and other skills [15]. The learning model used must involve student activity during the learning process. Based on most teachers at SMKN 1 Kedawung who have applied, the evaluation carried out, in addition to the teacher's cognitive ability, must also evaluate and assess the development of students' character through P5. In their curriculum, evaluations are carried out per KKTP (criteria for achieving learning objectives), so if the KKTP has not been completed, it cannot proceed to the next chapter.

In addition, training and professional development also have an equally important role in improving teachers' ability to implement the Independent Curriculum. The training provides teachers with up-to-date knowledge of the Independent Curriculum principles and the practical skills necessary to implement them. By increasing teachers' knowledge, skills, and confidence, this training contributes to the success of the curriculum in creating a more

relevant and impactful learning experience for students. It is very influential, with the training that can keep up with the times, technology, and curriculum developments. Teachers who do not participate in training tend not to develop and continue to use old and monotonous learning methods. Teachers who often participate in teacher training and professional development are more open to accepting the concept of the Independent curriculum and can easily apply it. By participating in training both through the platforms provided, webinars and even face-to-face about the Merdeka curriculum tend to be more able to apply the aspects contained in the Merdeka curriculum quickly to students, compared to teachers who have never/rarely participated in training, so the essence of the aspects in the Merdeka curriculum is not seen and applied to students. In the findings of the research, Yahiji, Anwa, and Otaya (2025) stated that well-organised training can be a means of reflection, share good practices, and strengthen collaborative skills between teachers [16].

At SMKN 1 Keduwung, there have been many trainings, webinars, and seminars with the theme of the Independent curriculum, such as in IHT activities and Webinars with the theme of the Independent Curriculum. So that 80% of teachers at SMKN 1 Kedawung have implemented the Merdeka curriculum correctly and adequately, following the essence of the Merdeka curriculum itself. This is in line with the theory of Fullan (2001), in Ahmad Suryadi (2025), emphasising that continuous teacher training is a key component in every education reform [17]. Teachers will find integrating new approaches into the learning process challenging without adequate training. It is not enough to be theoretical only, but it must be applicable, contextual, and based on real needs [18]. The role of teachers in implementing the independent curriculum at SMKN 1 Kedawung can be seen in designing learning programs, especially in the use of learning strategies applied. In addition to learning activities, teachers of SMKN 1 Kedawung still have to train teachers about the Merdeka curriculum, both online and offline, to help them master the administration of learning related to the Merdeka curriculum.

An article by Muhammad Iqbal (2023) found that applying the REDECE (reading, answer, discuss, create, and evaluation) model in independent learning helps students remember and understand the learning material. In addition, character such as responsibility, honesty, hard work, meticulousness, and courage are developed. The independent learning policy also gave birth to the driving teacher program initiated by the Ministry of Education and Culture [19]. The goal is to improve teacher competence through student-centred learning. The driving teacher carries out his role as a driving force of the learning community for teachers in schools/regions, as a facilitator of teaching practices for teachers, as a driver and facilitator of leadership for students, discussing and collaborating with fellow teachers and various parties in improving the quality of learning as a learning leader who facilitates the good of the educational community [20].

The Role of Teachers in the Independent Learning Curriculum Policy. The main assumption is to give trust to teachers so that teachers feel independent in carrying out learning [21]. Implementing policies in the independent learning curriculum strengthens the various roles of teachers in the learning process. Teachers cannot play just one role, but various roles are carried out by teachers in designing, implementing, and evaluating learning to help students achieve the expected competencies. Based on Jayu Alkautsar Rabbani's [22]

presentation, teachers play a significant role in carrying out their duties as educators to design teaching and learning activities in the classroom and teaching materials prepared systematically and in detail with a formal written curriculum. Moreover, referring to various sources, the relevant roles of teachers in implementing the independent learning curriculum policy can be stated. In other words, an independent learning curriculum reduces the burden on teachers who struggle with creating educational administration, from the pressure of politicisation of education to be more free and free to implement and assess student learning outcomes [23]. Nevertheless, what teachers feel today is the difficulty in making learning administration and assessments for students. One of the roles of teachers is to implement learning innovations to answer the needs of students and create a liberating learning climate.

The teachers' role in driving instructional innovation is instrumental in fostering the emergence of innovative educators. As highlighted by James M. Cooper [24], innovative teachers bear the responsibility of facilitating students' ability to learn and adapt in novel and diverse ways. Such educators must possess a solid foundation of knowledge, skills, and professional values. Regular participation in professional development programs related to the Merdeka Curriculum is essential, enabling teachers to master a range of contemporary pedagogical methods, instructional strategies, and advanced learning media [25]. Furthermore, proficiency in educational technologies is imperative to effectively support teaching and learning processes, thereby ensuring the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the above explanation, there are conclusions, implications, and research suggestions as a result:

- a. Main conclusion: The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SMKN 1 Kedawung went quite well, characterized by training, the use of active learning methods, character evaluation, and collaboration between teachers, the positive impact can be seen from the increase in students' ability to develop critical thinking skills, which overall supports the learning process to be more effective. In addition, the independent curriculum also encourages students to create a more conducive and productive learning environment.
 - b. Practical implications:
The Independent Curriculum also has several negative impacts because various obstacles remain in its implementation. Therefore, this curriculum still needs to be evaluated and studied further so that its implementation can be more optimal and follow the field's needs. Schools, together with the government and education stakeholders, need to provide technical support, advanced practical training, and, according to field needs, as well as open consultation and reflection spaces for teachers. Thus, teachers understand theoretically and can apply the Independent Curriculum contextually and directly impact the quality of learning and student development.
 - c. Follow-up research suggestions:
Further studies are needed to evaluate the impact of the Independent Curriculum on learning outcomes and student character quantitatively.
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