

Driving Teachers as Catalysts of Innovation: A Literature Review on Teacher Leadership in Indonesia's Merdeka Belajar Reform

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of Driving Teachers (Guru Penggerak) in advancing innovative work behavior among educators within the context of Indonesia's Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) policy. Employing a qualitative approach through literature review, this paper synthesizes insights from policy documents, scholarly publications, and training frameworks to understand how teacher leadership, reflective practice, and technological adaptation contribute to educational transformation. The review highlights that Driving Teachers act not only as classroom facilitators but also as mentors, collaborators, and change agents within professional learning communities. Their ability to foster student-centered, inclusive, and contextually relevant instruction is central to the success of Merdeka Belajar. The analysis also identifies challenges such as policy-practice gaps, limited institutional support, and the need for sustained professional development. This study offers practical implications for education policymakers, school leaders, and teacher educators in enhancing teacher capacity and system-wide innovation. It also contributes to the academic discourse on teacher agency and reform in emerging education systems.

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the major challenges in today's education system is the growing importance of innovation in learning and how to optimize teachers' abilities in utilizing technology. Innovation is widely recognized as a key driver of economic growth, institutional excellence, and organizational sustainability. In the field of education, the rapid development of technology and communication demands that teachers—who act as the main agents of change—possess the necessary creativity, skills, and knowledge to integrate innovation into their teaching practices. Innovative teachers can create learning

environments that are engaging, enjoyable, and capable of sparking students' curiosity, thereby contributing to improved learning outcomes [1], [2], [3]. This growing emphasis on innovation in the classroom necessitates a deeper understanding of the systems and policies that cultivate such behavior, particularly through teacher leadership initiatives.

Innovation in education refers to the creation of something new, different, or improved from previous methods. According to Sa'ud [4], innovation is a creative activity involving the management of people and resources using unique methods to achieve certain goals. Abubakar also defines innovation as a set of activities encompassing research, development, and engineering aimed at progress. When applied in the classroom, innovation facilitates a smoother, more interactive, and enjoyable learning process that helps to achieve learning goals effectively [5], [6], [7], [8]. Within the broader context of education reform, such definitions underscore the importance of equipping teachers with the mindset and support systems to become innovators, not just implementers.

However, innovation in teaching does not occur automatically. It is the result of a continuous process influenced by various factors such as leadership, teamwork, organizational culture, and human resource management. One critical factor that supports teachers' innovative work behavior is professional development, particularly through education and training programs. Studies have shown that providing competency-based training can enhance teachers' capacity for innovation by equipping them with new ideas, tools, and creative strategies. Innovative teachers are more likely to design impactful learning experiences that help students excel academically [9], [10], [11]. Accordingly, literature on teacher development increasingly emphasizes the strategic role of structured programs in fostering teacher agency and instructional transformation.

To enhance teacher competencies, the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) has initiated several training and development programs, one of which is the *Pendidikan Guru Penggerak* (Driving Teacher Education Program, or PGP). This program is a strategic initiative outlined in the Ministry's 2020–2024 Strategic Plan and is aimed at preparing teachers to become learning leaders capable of mobilizing learning communities within and beyond the school environment. The PGP also aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum, which seeks to create more autonomous and meaningful learning experiences. Teachers involved in this program are expected to embody five core values: student-centeredness, independence, collaboration, reflection, and innovation [2], [6], [12]. As a subject of educational policy innovation, the PGP program has become a focal point in scholarly discussions about teacher leadership and systemic reform.

Despite these efforts, many teachers still demonstrate low levels of innovative behavior. Several contributing factors include the misalignment between training content and classroom needs, insufficient resource support, time constraints, and high teacher workloads. These issues highlight the gap between training implementation and actual teaching practices in schools [13], [14], [15]. A growing body of literature acknowledges these systemic barriers and calls for a critical review of how national programs like PGP are being interpreted, adapted, and sustained at the school level.

According to pre-research conducted up to early 2023, there were 56,457 certified *guru penggerak* (driving teachers) across Indonesia (kemdikbud.go.id). In Serdang Bedagai Regency alone, more than 100 teachers across elementary, junior high, and senior high/vocational schools have participated in PGP, spanning cohorts 2, 5, 7, 8, and 9. Their innovative work behavior is reflected in school-based initiatives such as real action programs, technology-integrated learning, and differentiated instruction. These actions serve as evidence of their efforts to embody the values promoted by the PGP. Although the *Pendidikan Guru Penggerak* (PGP) program is designed to improve teacher competency and foster innovative work behavior, there is a lack of in-depth research exploring its actual impact on teachers' innovation in the classroom, especially in the context of Serdang Bedagai Regency. This creates a gap in understanding the program's effectiveness and relevance to the real challenges faced by teachers on the ground. How does participation in the *Pendidikan Guru Penggerak* (PGP) program influence the innovative work behavior of teachers in Serdang Bedagai Regency?

This study aims to analyze the impact of the PGP program on teachers' innovative work behavior and to provide policy recommendations that can help improve teacher quality in the future. Through a qualitative synthesis of relevant literature, this review seeks to bridge the conceptual and practical dimensions of innovation in teaching. Through a comprehensive examination of how professional training influences innovation, this research is expected to contribute meaningfully to educational stakeholders in designing more effective and relevant development programs that respond to the dynamic needs of education. Furthermore, the study seeks to provide significant contributions to Indonesia's broader educational transformation efforts by supporting the development of creative, independent, and future-ready teaching professionals [1], [16], [17].

2. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach based on an extensive literature review. The objective is to analyze the role and impact of the Driving Teacher Education Program (*Pendidikan Guru Penggerak* – PGP) on teachers' innovative work behavior, especially within the context of Indonesia's "Merdeka Belajar" (Freedom to Learn) education policy. Instead of collecting primary empirical data through field surveys or experiments, this study synthesizes findings from existing literature to generate conceptual insights and practical implications.

Data Sources

The data used in this study were obtained from secondary sources, including:

- a. Peer-reviewed journal articles,
 - b. Government policy documents (especially from Kemendikbudristek),
 - c. Educational reports,
 - d. Books and conference proceedings,
 - e. Official PGP training modules and public datasets are available on the Ministry of Education's platforms.
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These sources were selected based on their relevance to the following key themes:

- a. Teacher professional development and capacity-building;
- b. Educational leadership and innovation;
- c. The implementation and outcomes of the Driving Teacher Education Program (PGP);
- d. Theoretical and practical perspectives on Merdeka Belajar.

Literature Selection Criteria

The literature reviewed in this study was identified using purposive sampling, prioritizing works that:

- a. They were published between 2015 and 2024 to ensure relevance to recent policy developments.
- b. Addressed Indonesian or comparable Southeast Asian educational contexts;
- c. Provided empirical evidence, policy analysis, or conceptual discussion about teacher innovation, leadership, and curriculum reform;
- d. They were accessible through academic databases (Google Scholar, Scopus, DOAJ), government portals (kemdikbud.go.id), and institutional repositories.

To ensure credibility, only literature from reputable sources with clear methodology or official status was included.

Analytical Framework

This review employed a thematic content analysis approach, whereby the selected literature was coded and grouped into recurring themes such as:

- a. Teacher innovation and creativity,
- b. The role of teacher leadership,
- c. Policy-practice gaps in professional development programs,
- d. Implementation strategies and challenges of Merdeka Belajar,
- e. Key characteristics and expectations of Driving Teachers.

Themes were then synthesized and interpreted to identify patterns, contradictions, and emerging perspectives relevant to improving instructional quality and teacher agency in Indonesia.

Ethical Consideration

As this study is based solely on secondary data, no direct involvement with human subjects was conducted, and therefore, no ethical approval was required. However, all sources are duly cited to maintain academic integrity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

Freedom or autonomy is a fundamental element across nearly all facets of human life. It remains a core concern in human existence. Historically, people from diverse social strata have mobilized and protested to obtain autonomy in various domains. Within education, learning has consistently been a focal point in discussions of liberty. Colin

Lankshear, a professor at the University of Auckland, noted that the relationship between freedom and learning has been a significant theme in Western educational philosophy since the era of Ancient Greece and continues to be highly relevant in 21st-century education discourse. The notion of self-directed learning is not novel in global education. Countries like the United States, Brazil, and the Philippines have long adopted this paradigm. In Indonesia, the concept gained momentum with the appointment of Nadiem Makarim as Minister of Education. His vision emphasizes intellectual freedom and fostering a joyful learning environment without the stress of achieving specific academic scores [18].

Implementing self-directed learning must begin with a transformation in the teacher's mindset before it can be effectively instilled in students. According to the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), academic freedom involves not just liberation from restrictions, but also the ability of educators and learners to thrive within an academic community and cultivate intellectual and personal growth in a dynamic democracy and robust economy. Educators are expected to foster an open and independent classroom climate, enabling students to engage in meaningful dialogue that enhances comprehension and knowledge. Learners should develop resilience, independent thought, social aptitude, ethical values, and critical thinking abilities. A robust education system empowers learners to explore their distinct abilities and potential. This approach promotes autonomy in learning, shaping a dynamic classroom setting where imagination, inquiry, and creativity are nurtured. Within this framework, teachers must promote collaborative learning and encourage students to question and investigate problems across disciplines [19], [20]. By cultivating creative thinkers, students are equipped to explore diverse possibilities and unconventional thinking methods. Such strategies form a strong academic base and enhance cognitive and interpersonal skills like empathy, comprehension, and communication. The integration of varied educational resources accommodates different learning styles, facilitating better understanding [21]. Learning flourishes through multifaceted interactions between students and teachers. To develop autonomy, learners need unrestricted time for play, exploration, and discovery aligned with their interests.

This process enhances students' analytical and evaluative reasoning, especially when navigating complex and opposing viewpoints. The right to learn independently is inherently linked to the freedom of educators to teach. Thus, contemporary educational systems must adopt innovative strategies that align with educational objectives while safeguarding the liberty to teach and learn. The essence of independent learning is to instill a spirit of autonomy—intellectually, emotionally, and physically. Such an environment fosters a healthier educational ecosystem, nurturing innovation and cultivating high-quality, character-driven human resources. This philosophy also honors the unique cognitive strengths and personal attributes of each learner.

Several of Nadiem Makarim's policies illustrate this philosophy of independent learning: a) the discontinuation of National Standard School Examinations. Under Ministerial Regulation No. 43 of 2019, national-level examinations were phased out by 2020. School-based assessments were reinstated as the core evaluation method, giving autonomy to schools and teachers to determine graduation. Local governments are now responsible for overseeing exam implementation and ensuring quality standards by training

educators in question design aligned with national criteria. b) The replacement of the National Examination with the Minimum Competency Assessment (AKM) and Character Survey. As of 2021, AKM and character evaluations serve as the new metrics of student performance.

In the AKM framework, students are expected to exhibit both literacy and numeracy competencies. In literacy, they should not merely recall and apply reading content, but critically analyze and interpret it. In numeracy, beyond memorizing formulas, students must grasp core concepts to solve complex problems. The AKM emphasizes the development of critical thinking using students' cognitive capacities.

The character survey evaluates how well students internalize and apply Pancasila principles in their social interactions at school. According to Nadiem Makarim, such assessments are vital to measuring students' sense of security, tolerance, cooperation, and mutual respect. The format includes self-reflective questions regarding core civic values and behaviors. Unlike previous standardized testing, the focus shifts to projects and portfolios, allowing students to express individual talents and passions. The goal is to move beyond stigmatizing intelligence and instead celebrate diverse, innate potentials. Recognizing every child's uniqueness, assessments must move away from one-size-fits-all testing.

The emergence of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and Society 5.0 has brought rapid technological change, transforming education among other sectors. Teachers now face challenges in an era where information and resources are readily accessible. Despite these advances, the irreplaceable human qualities of teachers—empathy, emotional connection, and moral guidance—remain essential. Education occurs both at home and at school, with parents and teachers serving as primary educators. As Nadiem Makarim (2019) emphasized, the essence of education lies in the human connection, which technology cannot replicate. Hence, regardless of its sophistication, technology cannot substitute the teacher's role. In response to technological advancements, educators must continually learn to remain current, ensuring students are not left behind. Teachers are also expected to guide learners in responsibly using technology to enhance educational outcomes [22].

Educators must evolve and adapt to the accelerating pace of technological progress. They need to be receptive to change and proactively prepare students to navigate diverse life challenges, particularly those posed by the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Teachers must shift their perspectives and envision future-oriented, high-quality learning environments. Student quality is inherently tied to teacher quality; only exceptional educators can cultivate exceptional learners. Beyond delivering content, teachers should exemplify leadership and vision in education. Driving teachers must not only plan and deliver lessons but also lead innovation and change within the school system [23].

Teachers leading the independent learning movement must be proficient in utilizing modern technology, fluent in English to elevate education quality, and committed to continuous self-reflection and improvement [24]. These educators must be innovative, enthusiastic, and capable of fostering strong connections between schools and broader communities, positioning themselves as lifelong learners and change agents.

The role of the driving teacher in education is [25], [26], 1) the teacher becomes a driving force in the learning community for fellow teachers in the school and region. Being a coach for fellow teachers is the role of the driving teacher. It is hoped that the presence of driving teachers will bring about a good change for driven teachers, especially in the quality of teaching students and teacher independence in developing themselves independently. 2) Driving teachers play a role in training fellow teachers in developing student-centered learning. Teachers who are driven by driving teachers must be able to design and manage their learning as attractively as possible so that students are motivated to learn and be creative according to their talents and abilities. The motivation that exists within students enables them to improve their academic achievements independently. 3) Driving teachers become agents of change in terms of improving the quality of student leadership in schools. 4) Driving teachers must be able to create a space as a forum for discussion and collaboration with fellow teachers and those who have interests or stakeholders in the school education environment, and outside school, with the aim of improving the quality of learning. 5) The driving teacher must be a guide in the learning process, which creates a comfortable and peaceful atmosphere in the learning ecosystem. With comfortable learning, students are encouraged to develop themselves into individuals who reason critically, are creative, have a noble heart, and have an attitude of tolerance. 6) Develop yourself actively. Driving teachers must always upgrade themselves to keep up with the times. Teachers must be able to improve and develop their competence as teachers independently. 7) Become a motivator. The teacher is a motivator in learning, spurring learning activities. Driving teachers must be role models who are able to direct and change the behavior and character of students for the better. To give birth to a quality generation of people who have knowledge and spiritual depth as the spearhead for the nation's progress.

3.2. Discussion

The discourse surrounding educational transformation in Indonesia has increasingly emphasized freedom, autonomy, and the development of student-centered learning environments. Drawing inspiration from both classical Western educational philosophies and progressive global trends, the notion of self-directed learning has emerged as a vital strategy in redefining educational success [18].

The implementation of Nadiem Makarim's "Merdeka Belajar" (Independent Learning) policy signifies a pivotal shift away from rigid, exam-oriented education toward a more flexible, competency-based, and humanistic approach. This paradigm shift aligns with global educational reforms seen in countries like the United States, Brazil, and the Philippines, where learner autonomy and intellectual freedom are core to curriculum design and delivery.

However, realizing this vision requires more than policy change—it demands a deep transformation in teachers' mindsets. As emphasized by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), academic freedom is not merely about the absence of restrictions, but about the presence of enabling conditions for both educators and learners to thrive intellectually and socially. This includes fostering classroom environments that

promote inquiry, dialogue, and emotional engagement—elements crucial for building resilient, empathetic, and critical thinkers [16], [27], [28].

To achieve such transformation, driving teachers (*Guru Penggerak*) become central agents of change. These teachers are envisioned not only as instructors but also as leaders, mentors, collaborators, and lifelong learners. As Sutikno and Manizar assert, driving teachers must spearhead professional learning communities, mentor peers, and model innovative and inclusive teaching practices. Their influence extends beyond classrooms—they catalyze systemic improvement by facilitating student-centered learning, empowering fellow educators, and building connections with communities and stakeholders [28], [29], [30].

In line with this, the Minimum Competency Assessment (AKM) and Character Survey reflect a significant departure from legacy systems like the National Examination. These new tools assess students' critical literacy, problem-solving abilities, and internalization of civic values, rather than rote memorization. Projects and portfolios are now integral in evaluating student achievement, allowing learners to showcase unique talents, creativity, and personal growth—a direct challenge to one-size-fits-all assessment models.

However, the success of this reform hinges on teachers' capacity to adapt to rapid technological and social changes. The Industrial Revolution 4.0 and Society 5.0 have introduced new challenges, including the saturation of information and the growing need for digital literacy. Despite the rise of technology, the human role of the teacher remains irreplaceable. As Makarim (2019) stated, education is fundamentally a human endeavor. Therefore, while teachers must embrace digital tools, they must also retain and strengthen their roles as moral guides, empathetic listeners, and inspirational leaders.

Driving teachers, in particular, are expected to lead by example. They must be technologically proficient, fluent in English, reflective, and open to continuous professional development. Additionally, they should embody innovation, promote active learning, and support students in discovering and nurturing their strengths and identities [31], [32], [33].

Creating an ecosystem where students feel safe, respected, and intellectually stimulated is the ultimate goal. As students engage in independent learning, they develop autonomy not only academically but also emotionally and socially. This kind of learning fosters creativity, critical reasoning, ethical character, and democratic engagement—capabilities crucial for navigating the complexities of modern society.

In sum, Indonesia's educational transformation is not merely about changing assessments or policies. It is about cultivating a new culture of learning—one that honors freedom, fosters collaboration, and unleashes the full potential of both students and teachers. Driving teachers are the cornerstone of this vision. By becoming facilitators of curiosity and agents of empowerment, they shape an education system capable of producing a generation that is intellectually vibrant, morally grounded, and future-ready.

4. CONCLUSION

This literature-based analysis emphasizes the central role of Driving Teachers (Guru Penggerak) in actualizing the values and vision of Merdeka Belajar. As instructional leaders, they are expected to model innovation, promote autonomy in learning, and foster professional collaboration among educators. The success of Merdeka Belajar does not rest solely on regulatory changes—such as the elimination of national exams or the implementation of competency-based assessments—but on how teachers internalize and translate these policies into meaningful classroom practices.

The review also reveals that while the Driving Teacher Education Program (PGP) provides a promising framework for teacher development, its impact is often mediated by contextual factors such as institutional culture, policy alignment, resource availability, and teacher workload. Therefore, ongoing support mechanisms—such as mentorship, reflective practice forums, and digital infrastructure—are crucial for sustaining teacher innovation.

From a policy perspective, school leaders and education stakeholders must prioritize enabling environments that empower teachers as co-creators of learning ecosystems. Academically, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on teacher agency, innovation, and educational reform in Indonesia. Future research should consider expanding the analysis through field-based studies, mixed methods approaches, or comparative research across regions to capture more diverse implementation realities.

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