



Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in 3T Areas: A Study at Orasi Indo Sinasih Private Junior High School, Silau Kahean District, Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra Province

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Abstract

Abstract:

Research on the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the 3T (Underdeveloped and Disadvantaged Regions) at Orasi Indo Sinasih Private Junior High School, Silau Kahean District, Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra Province, provides flexibility for educators in designing learning that is tailored to the needs and characteristics of students, as well as local conditions. This study aims to determine the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the 3T (Underdeveloped and Disadvantaged Regions) areas, specifically at Orasi Indo Sinasih Private Junior High School, Silau Kahean District, Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra Province. This study used a qualitative approach with descriptive methods. The research subjects consisted of the principal and teachers. Data collection techniques included observation, interviews, and documentation. Data analysis techniques used the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results indicate that the Independent Curriculum has been implemented quite well, although obstacles remain, such as limited infrastructure, low technology utilization, and the community's socioeconomic conditions. Principals play an active role in developing strategies to improve educational quality, such as teacher training, implementing project-based learning, and strengthening student character through the values of the Pancasila Student Profile. The conclusion of this study is that the Independent Curriculum can be implemented effectively in 3T (third-to-third) areas and can be a solution to improving educational quality in these areas if accompanied by optimal support from all parties.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a means of enhancing the capacity of every individual. It is a process of developing a person's potential to become intellectually, affectively, and psychomotorically educated so that they can live and sustain their lives. Human life is closely dependent on education. Quality education forms the foundation of a developed nation. Education is a process of shaping individuals into useful members of society and the state. This process is not easy, and its results are long-term, as education is an enduring investment. Educated individuals will be able to carry out their roles in the future to contribute to the progress of the nation and the state in any field they pursue.

According to Lismania (2019), the curriculum reflects the foundation or worldview of a nation in education. The curriculum used determines the educational goals of that nation. In this perspective, the curriculum functions as a guiding foundation or philosophy of life. Such a foundation clearly illustrates the educational goals to be achieved in the future, as the results of education are not immediately visible but will emerge over decades. A well-structured curriculum provides a strong basis for education, enabling educators from primary to higher education to teach with clear direction. Ultimately, education will achieve its intended goals.

The Merdeka Belajar (Independent Learning) curriculum is a new curriculum introduced by the Indonesian government in 2020 to replace the 2013 Curriculum, which had previously been used for elementary, junior high, and senior high school students. The Merdeka Belajar curriculum emphasizes the importance of student independence and courage in learning, while giving teachers the freedom to adapt their teaching methods to students' needs (Ansari et al., 2022). It also pays attention to students' talents and interests and facilitates independent learning in a relaxed and enjoyable manner.

The Merdeka Curriculum was designed as a government effort to improve the quality of education, aiming to enhance students' abilities and knowledge in facing global challenges (Suryaman, 2020). Nadiem Makarim, as the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia in the Indonesia Maju Cabinet, developed the concept of independent learning to create a pleasant learning atmosphere without the burden of rigid scoring systems. Since each child has unique talents and intelligences, the learning environment becomes more comfortable, allowing students to engage in activities such as outdoor learning and interactive discussions with teachers. This approach also helps to build students' character, making them brave, independent, socially intelligent, polite, and competent. Moreover, it reduces dependence on ranking systems, which, according to several surveys, often cause anxiety among parents and students. Over time, this system is expected to produce individuals who are capable, talented, and morally grounded in society (Widya, 2020).

In Indonesia, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum policy still faces various problems and challenges. Among them are unprepared teachers (Mujab et al., 2023), insufficient resources (such as teaching materials, learning tools, and facilities), lack of parental support due to limited understanding of the importance of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum (Pertwi et al., 2022), and limited collaboration among schools in learning methods.



Indonesia is a country rich in diversity. Its varied social, geographical, and cultural conditions directly contribute to the diversity of its society. The country stretches from Nias Island to Rote Island, and from Sabang to Merauke. Across Indonesia, geographical barriers affect the quality of education. Education is a driving force for social and economic development in every country. Despite the vast geographical and sociocultural differences within the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, many educational challenges persist, especially in regions known as 3T areas: frontier, outermost, and underdeveloped regions.

Currently, three major problems are faced by education in Indonesia: unequal access to education, low quality of education, and insufficient budget allocation and commitment from local governments to improve educational quality. With these challenges, the central government must give special attention to education, as mandated by the 1945 Constitution to educate the nation.

Therefore, it is essential to develop new methods that are accessible, high-quality, and affordable for everyone. Education is a social instrument that can help communities improve their quality of life by promoting equality, freedom, and the ability to manage their environment. The government prioritizes education in 3T (frontier, outermost, and underdeveloped) areas. In these regions, highly complex problems arise, including the shortage of teachers due to geographical factors and limited educational infrastructure. Geographical challenges such as remote locations that require crossing rivers, forests, or seas with limited transportation further complicate access (Wahidah & Istiyono, 2020).

Other issues in 3T areas include inadequate facilities and infrastructure, low parental awareness regarding children's education, and low student motivation (Mahmudah & Putra, 2021). In addition, teachers assigned to 3T areas often request transfers to urban areas after becoming civil servants, for reasons permitted by law, such as marriage. Education is essential for creating high-quality human resources and building a productive society for national progress. Therefore, education must not be neglected, especially in the modern world that is full of competition. It plays a crucial role in shaping the future, as it provides solutions to development challenges. Thus, education is expected to produce competent and high-quality individuals.

However, education in 3T areas remains very limited, particularly in terms of facilities and infrastructure. Educational facilities include equipment and resources that directly support the teaching and learning process, such as school buildings, classrooms, desks, chairs, instructional media, and teaching tools. When school facilities are inadequate, they become a major barrier to effective learning. In reality, remote areas often face severe limitations in educational infrastructure, which not only disrupt teaching and learning activities but also hinder the development of human resources.

This situation creates disparities, where students in remote areas cannot enjoy the same level of comfort and facilities as those in urban areas. The quality of education in Indonesia remains low in 3T areas due to various challenges, including a shortage of educators, slow development of educational infrastructure, limited access to facilities, underdeveloped social conditions, and limited social mobility. Therefore, the government must strive to optimize education in these regions.



METHODS

Research Approach and Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach, which emphasizes understanding phenomena in natural settings and interpreting meanings based on participants' perspectives. Qualitative research is rooted in post-positivist philosophy and is suitable for examining social and educational realities that are complex and contextual (Bara, n.d.). In this approach, the researcher acts as the main instrument in collecting and analyzing data.

Data collection in this study was conducted through observation, interviews, and documentation using triangulation techniques to ensure data validity. Triangulation is important in qualitative research to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of findings (Bara, n.d.). The sampling techniques used were purposive and snowball sampling, which allow the researcher to select informants who are considered most knowledgeable about the research problem.

The selection of a qualitative method is based on the research objective, which is to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and strategies to improve educational quality. Educational quality is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that cannot be measured solely through quantitative indicators but must be understood through processes, interactions, and experiences in the learning environment (Fatmawati, 2021). Therefore, qualitative research provides an in-depth and holistic understanding of how teachers and school leaders carry out their roles in educational development.

Furthermore, qualitative research enables the researcher to directly engage with participants and observe the learning process continuously. The data obtained are then analyzed inductively, where patterns and meanings emerge from the field data. The findings are interpreted using relevant theoretical perspectives related to curriculum implementation and educational management (Masri & Gistituati, 2023).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

Based on the findings, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Orasi Indo Sinasih Private Junior High School shows that the curriculum is highly relevant for schools in 3T areas. One of its main advantages is the flexibility it offers, allowing teachers to adapt learning to students' needs and local conditions. This finding is consistent with Afifah (2023), who states that the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes adaptive and student-centered learning.

The study also found that teachers utilize local potential such as culture, environment, and community practices as learning resources. This aligns with the concept that the Merdeka Curriculum encourages contextual learning and the integration of local wisdom into the teaching process (Kurniati et al., 2022). Similarly, Anggraini et al. (2022) highlight that teachers play a crucial role in developing curriculum implementation that is relevant to students' real-life contexts.

However, the implementation is not without challenges. Limited infrastructure, lack of learning facilities, and low digital literacy remain major obstacles. This finding supports previous studies which indicate that the success of curriculum implementation



is strongly influenced by the availability of resources and teacher readiness (Mutia et al., 2023; Nirmala et al., 2024). In addition, students' limited learning time due to socio-economic responsibilities also affects the effectiveness of learning, especially in 3T areas (Ulfa, 2023).

Another important issue is the need for further support in developing contextual teaching materials. Although teachers have the flexibility to innovate, many still require training and guidance. This is in line with Suryaningrum (2023), who emphasizes the importance of strengthening teacher capacity in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in disadvantaged regions.

2. Principal's Strategy in Improving Educational Quality

The findings show that the principal plays a significant role in improving educational quality through several strategic efforts. One of the main strategies is strengthening teacher competence. Teachers are encouraged to continuously develop their skills and adopt innovative teaching methods. This is consistent with previous studies which state that teachers are key actors in the success of curriculum implementation (Fadillah, 2023; Sumanti et al., 2022).

In addition, the principal promotes contextual and student-centered learning approaches. This strategy is important in ensuring that learning is meaningful and relevant to students' lives. According to Indriani and Suryani (2023), the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum can effectively shape students' character and discipline when learning is designed in a contextual manner.

Another important strategy identified in this study is collaboration with the community. The involvement of parents and local community leaders contributes to the enrichment of learning through local values and cultural practices. This finding is supported by Lestari et al. (2024), who argue that community involvement is essential in strengthening education in 3T areas.

Furthermore, improving educational quality is also linked to the availability of facilities and continuous teacher training. Although limitations still exist, efforts to optimize available resources demonstrate the school's commitment to educational improvement. This aligns with Asiska and Nurmahmudah (2022), who emphasize that educational management in 3T areas requires adaptive strategies and strong leadership.

From a broader perspective, the principal's strategy reflects a holistic approach that integrates pedagogical, managerial, and social aspects. This is in line with Masri and Gistituati (2023), who state that successful educational policy implementation requires synergy between leadership, teachers, and the community.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, several important conclusions can be drawn regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and the strategies employed to improve educational quality at Orasi Indo Sinasih Private Junior High School, which is located in a 3T area (frontier, outermost, and underdeveloped region).

First, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Orasi Indo Sinasih Private Junior High School is considered highly relevant and adaptive to the conditions



of 3T areas. This curriculum provides broad flexibility for teachers to design and implement learning activities in accordance with students' needs and the local context. Such flexibility allows teachers to move away from rigid, standardized teaching methods and instead develop more contextual, creative, and innovative approaches.

In practice, the Merdeka Curriculum encourages a learning process that is more active, enjoyable, and meaningful. Students are no longer positioned merely as passive recipients of knowledge but as active participants in the learning process. They are given opportunities to express ideas, explore their interests and talents, and engage in project-based activities that foster critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity. Furthermore, the integration of local potential such as culture, environment, and community life enhances the relevance of learning, making it more understandable and beneficial for students.

However, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in 3T areas also faces several challenges. These include limited infrastructure, inadequate learning facilities, low levels of digital literacy, and restricted access to learning resources. Therefore, the success of this curriculum implementation is highly dependent on support from various stakeholders, particularly the government, in providing adequate facilities, teacher training, and policies that are responsive to the needs of remote areas.

Second, the principal's strategy in improving educational quality at Orasi Indo Sinasih Private Junior High School reflects a comprehensive and adaptive approach to the challenges of a 3T environment. The principal plays not only an administrative role but also acts as an instructional leader who is capable of mobilizing all components of the school.

One of the main strategies implemented is strengthening teacher capacity through various training and professional development programs. Teachers are encouraged to continuously improve their pedagogical and professional competencies in order to effectively implement the Merdeka Curriculum. In addition, the principal strives to create a supportive learning environment, both physically and psychologically, to enhance the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process.

Another key strategy is the integration of local wisdom and cultural values into the learning process. This approach serves as a unique strength for schools in 3T areas, as it makes learning more contextual while also instilling character values in students. Collaboration with parents, community members, and local leaders is also an important element in supporting educational success.

To achieve sustainable improvements in educational quality, more systematic and continuous efforts are required. These include improving educational facilities and infrastructure, providing ongoing teacher training and mentoring, strengthening cross-sector collaboration (with government and community stakeholders), and implementing effective, transparent, and accountable school management practices.

In conclusion, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, supported by visionary and collaborative school leadership, has demonstrated a positive impact on improving educational quality despite the limitations of a 3T context. With sustained support and commitment, this approach has strong potential to become a strategic



solution for achieving equitable and improved educational quality in remote and underdeveloped regions.

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