



IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION AT STATE VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL 4 TEBING TINGGI

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is a strategic government policy aimed at improving the quality of education, particularly vocational education that is oriented toward graduates' work readiness. This study aims to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi in improving the quality of education, as well as to identify the inhibiting factors in its implementation. This research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. Data collection techniques include observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The research informants consist of the principal, vice principals, teachers, and students of Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi. The results show that administratively, the Merdeka Curriculum has been implemented at Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi; however, its implementation has not yet been optimal. This is indicated by the continued dominance of conventional learning patterns, teachers' limited understanding of project-based learning, and students' lack of understanding of the objectives and mechanisms of the Merdeka Curriculum. The inhibiting factors in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum include ineffective policy communication, limitations in human resources and facilities, as well as uneven readiness among policy implementers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Improving the quality of education is one of the main objectives of Indonesia's national development. Education plays a strategic role in shaping superior human resources who are competitive and able to adapt to changing times. In the context of formal education, the curriculum serves as a key instrument that determines the direction, objectives, and quality of the learning process. Therefore, curriculum reform and development are inevitable responses to social, economic, and labor market dynamics.

According to Nasution (2010), a curriculum is a set of plans and arrangements concerning objectives, content, and learning materials, as well as the methods used as guidelines for organizing learning activities in order to achieve specific educational goals. This perspective emphasizes that the curriculum does not merely function as an administrative document, but also as an operational guideline that determines the quality of learning in educational institutions. In line with this view, Mulyasa (2013) states that the success of a curriculum is largely determined by teachers' ability to implement it appropriately in accordance with the characteristics of students and the school environment.

As an effort to improve educational quality, the Indonesian government, through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, introduced the Merdeka Curriculum policy. This curriculum emphasizes competency-based learning, learning flexibility, and character development through the Profile of Pancasila Students. Operationally, the Merdeka Curriculum provides autonomy for educational institutions to develop curricula that are aligned with students' needs and the local school context (Decree of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology No. 371/M/2021 on the School Driving Program).

In the context of vocational education, the Merdeka Curriculum is regarded as a strategic policy because vocational high schools (SMK) play an important role in preparing graduates who are job-ready and relevant to the needs of the business and industrial sectors (DUDI). The Merdeka Curriculum in vocational schools is directed toward strengthening project-based learning, Teaching Factory programs, and link-and-match collaboration between schools and industry. Thus, the quality of vocational education is not only measured by academic aspects, but also by the mastery of technical skills, soft skills, and graduates' work readiness.

The success of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation as a public policy cannot be separated from the policy implementation process itself. Edward III (1980) explains that policy implementation is influenced by four main factors, namely communication, resources, disposition or attitudes of implementers, and bureaucratic structure. If one of these factors does not function optimally, policy objectives are difficult to achieve. This theory is relevant for analyzing the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in educational institutions, including vocational high schools.

Various previous studies indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in vocational schools has not yet been fully optimal. Luthfi et al. (2024), in their study at SMKN 1 Solok, found that although the Merdeka Curriculum had been implemented through internship (PKL) and Teaching Factory programs, the school still faced challenges in improving teacher competence and aligning the curriculum with industry needs. Research by Mujab, Rosa, and Gumar (2023) at SMK Al Huda Kedungwungu Indramayu also showed that limitations in facilities and teacher competence were the main obstacles to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Meanwhile, Yaelasari and Yuni Astuti (2022) emphasized the importance of focused group discussions (FGD) for teachers in enhancing their understanding of Merdeka Curriculum learning.

Although these studies have examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in various vocational schools, each educational institution has distinct characteristics and challenges. Therefore, this study focuses on Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi as one of the public vocational high schools that has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive method to comprehensively describe the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in improving the quality of education at Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi. This approach was chosen to enable the researcher to understand the curriculum implementation process as it naturally occurs within the school environment.

The research was conducted at Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi, with informants selected through purposive sampling, consisting of the principal, vice principals, teachers, and students who are directly involved in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. These informants were selected based on their relevant knowledge and experience related to the research focus.

Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Data analysis was carried out interactively through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was ensured through source and technique triangulation to maintain the consistency and credibility of the research findings.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Improving the Quality of Education at Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi was analyzed to determine the extent to which the policy has been implemented and has contributed to improving the quality of education. The analysis refers to the policy implementation theory proposed by George C. Edward III (1980), focusing on two main indicators used in this thesis, namely communication and resources. These two indicators are considered relevant in describing the actual conditions of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation at the school.

Communication

According to Edward III (1980), communication is the process of conveying policy to implementers so that the objectives, content, and mechanisms of the policy can be clearly and consistently understood. The success of

policy implementation is largely determined by the clarity of information and shared understanding between policy makers and implementers in the field.

Based on the research findings, communication related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi has been carried out through socialization activities, school meetings, and teacher mentoring. Information regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum was gradually delivered by the school management to teachers. However, the findings indicate that teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum concepts has not yet been evenly distributed, particularly regarding project-based learning and competency-based assessment. This condition has resulted in the Merdeka Curriculum not being optimally implemented in classroom learning activities.

Resources

Edward III (1980) explains that resources are a crucial factor in policy implementation, encompassing human resources, facilities and infrastructure, as well as other supporting elements. The availability of adequate resources determines the effectiveness of policy implementation at the operational level.

The research results show that in terms of human resources, Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi has teachers whose qualifications align with their respective fields and who are directly involved in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. However, limitations in learning facilities and infrastructure—particularly vocational practice facilities and equipment to support project-based learning—remain a significant constraint. In addition, limited access to technology and learning media has affected the optimization of Merdeka Curriculum implementation in improving the quality of education.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi has been carried out structurally, but has not yet been fully effective in improving the quality of education. The Merdeka Curriculum is still more often perceived as an administrative obligation rather than as an instrument for transforming learning practices. In fact, as stated by Tilaar (2012), curriculum reform should be able to drive changes in learning culture, teachers' mindsets, and pedagogical practices in schools.

Therefore, the success of the Merdeka Curriculum at Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi is highly dependent on improving policy communication systems and strengthening resources, both in terms of teacher competence, availability of facilities and infrastructure, and institutional support. Without improvements in these two aspects, the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum to enhance learning quality and students' work readiness will be difficult to achieve optimally.

Inhibiting Factors in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Improving the Quality of Education at Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi

Based on the research findings, the inhibiting factors in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi are primarily related to communication and resources. From the communication aspect, the uneven understanding among teachers regarding the concepts and technical implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has become an obstacle in learning implementation. From the resource aspect, limitations in facilities and infrastructure, practice facilities, and learning media hinder the support of project-based learning and the improvement of learning quality. These conditions have caused the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum to not yet be optimal across all subjects.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research and discussion, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi has been carried out structurally and administratively; however, it has not yet been fully effective in improving the quality of education. The Merdeka Curriculum is still largely perceived as an administrative obligation, and therefore has not fully encouraged changes in learning patterns that are oriented toward strengthening students' competencies and character. From the communication indicator, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has been socialized through various internal school activities. However, teachers' understanding of the concepts and technical implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has not been evenly distributed, particularly in the application of project-based learning and competency-based assessment. This condition constitutes one of the main inhibiting factors, as it affects the inconsistency of Merdeka Curriculum implementation in learning activities.

From the resource indicator, Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi has human resources that are appropriate to their fields of expertise and are directly involved in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Nevertheless, limitations in learning facilities and infrastructure, vocational practice facilities, as well as support for technology and learning media remain inhibiting factors in supporting project-based learning and improving the quality of education. Thus, the inhibiting factors in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Vocational High School 4 Tebing Tinggi are primarily related to communication and resources. Therefore, the success of the Merdeka Curriculum in improving the quality of education is highly dependent on improvements in policy communication systems and the strengthening of learning support resources. Without

improvements in these two aspects, the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum to enhance learning quality and students' work readiness will be difficult to achieve optimally.

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