



IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MERDEKA BELAJAR (FREEDOM TO LEARN) CURRICULUM POLICY AT SMP NEGERI 1 AIR BATU, ASAHAN REGENCY

Yunita Sari Sirait¹, Yanhar Jamaluddin², Walid Musthafa Sembiring³
^{1,2,3}Master of Public Administration, Universitas Medan Area, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) Curriculum is a national education policy that grants schools flexibility to design learning oriented toward strengthening students' competencies and character. This article examines the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 1 Air Batu, Asahan Regency, in reference to Asahan Regent Regulation No. 1 of 2023. The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Research informants consisted of the school principal, the vice principal, subject teachers, students, administrative staff, and parents. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification within the framework of Edward III's four implementation variables: communication, resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure. The findings indicate that implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 1 Air Batu has proceeded reasonably well, marked by a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning, the adoption of project-based learning, and the strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile. Policy dissemination has been carried out through training and workshops, yet a number of teachers still encounter technical difficulties in preparing teaching modules and assessments. Learning-technology facilities remain unevenly distributed, implementers generally display a positive attitude, and school coordination is fairly supportive, although the flexibility inherent in the curriculum produces variation in its application across classrooms. The study recommends strengthening continuous mentoring for teachers and equalizing the distribution of learning-technology facilities.

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Corresponding Author:

Yunita Sari Sirait
Master of Public Administration
Universitas Medan Area
ysrt147@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Reform of the national education curriculum has been an ongoing government effort intended to ensure that the quality of school learning continually improves, moving from the school-Level Curriculum (KTSP) of 2006, to the 2013 Curriculum, and most recently to the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. In the interest of improving the quality of education, Government Regulation No. 4 of 2022 amended and supplemented several provisions of Government Regulation No. 57 of 2021 so that curriculum implementation would remain consistent with prevailing education legislation.

Historically, the 2013 Curriculum was the single curriculum used by education units before the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic year of 2020, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) issued a policy allowing schools to use either the 2013 Curriculum or an Emergency Curriculum. By 2021, the Ministry broadened this policy further, permitting the 2013 Curriculum, the Emergency Curriculum, and the Merdeka Curriculum to be used, the latter initially in Sekolah Penggerak (Mobilizing Schools) and Vocational Centers of Excellence. This staged rollout reflected the government's intent to accommodate the learning-recovery needs created by the pandemic while gradually preparing the education system for a more flexible curriculum model.

The Merdeka Curriculum was developed as a more flexible curriculum framework, concentrating on essential material while strengthening students' character and competencies. Its defining characteristics are project-based learning aimed at reinforcing the Pancasila Student Profile, and a differentiated approach that groups student learning achievement according to developmental phases six phases (A through F) plus a foundational phase for early-childhood learners. According to the curriculum's developers, this phase-based structure represents a genuinely significant departure from earlier curricula, because achievement targets keyed to developmental phase, rather than to grade level alone, had never previously been articulated so explicitly by the Ministry. In principle, phase-based achievement targets are intended to help teachers design more effective classroom instruction, since they can differentiate materials and pacing according to the actual developmental stage of their students rather than a uniform grade-level assumption.

Education units are also permitted to add local content determined by regional government in accordance with local characteristics, and may add further content suited to the character of the institution through three options: integrating such content into other subjects, integrating it into the themes of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project, or developing it as an independent subject. This flexibility, however, has also necessitated further ministerial regulation Ministerial Decree No. 56/M/2022 concerning Guidelines for Curriculum Implementation in the Context of Learning Recovery was itself judged not to have fully accommodated students' interests, talents, and abilities, nor the adjustment of teacher workload and certification linearity, and therefore required revision.

At the regional level, Asahan Regent Regulation No. 1 of 2023 governs the Sekolah Penggerak Program and the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the kindergarten, elementary, and junior secondary levels within the Asahan Regency government, covering the objective of strengthening student competence and character in line with the Pancasila Student Profile; targets comprising teachers and supervisors; dissemination carried out by the Education Office; mentoring in coordination with the Education Quality Assurance Center; monitoring of program implementation; and evaluation conducted by the ministry responsible for education together with regional government.

Although this policy has been carefully designed, pre-research conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Air Batu, Asahan Regency, revealed a number of field-level obstacles: the school's understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum's learning-achievement targets was not yet fully in-depth; some students felt burdened by additional learning-achievement demands; dissemination activities were conducted concurrently with curriculum-implementation training, leaving little space to absorb either; school coordination in carrying out the policy was still new and not fully settled; and supporting facilities such as computer laboratories still required attention. Beyond these operational obstacles, the pandemic-era shift in learning arrangements also produced some incidental benefits worth noting closer engagement between children and parents, with parents becoming more involved in their children's schooling, and improved familiarity among students with learning technologies benefits that this study also takes into account when evaluating the policy's overall impact.

Strengthening implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is therefore a strategic step so that the principles of Merdeka Belajar are not merely understood in a normative sense but are genuinely realized in classroom practice. This requires attention to the readiness of human resources, teachers' comprehension of the curriculum's structure, and school management's support for planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning. Based on the foregoing, the research problem addressed in this study is: how has the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum been implemented at SMP Negeri 1 Air Batu, Asahan Regency?

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a descriptive method with a qualitative approach in order to understand, in depth, the process of implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum within the school's natural setting (Sugiyono, 2014). A qualitative approach was chosen because curriculum implementation is a complex social and education-policy phenomenon that cannot be measured merely through numbers or statistical variables, but instead requires an understanding of the meanings, perceptions, and experiences of those who carry the policy out. According to Bungin (in Ibrahim, 2018), the qualitative approach is a research process whose object of study may be narrow in scope, yet whose depth of data is unlimited the deeper and more substantive the data collected, the higher the

quality of the resulting research. Moleong (in Ibrahim, 2018) adds that the qualitative approach rests on the assumption that the subject matter of the social sciences is fundamentally different from that of the natural sciences, and therefore requires a different aim of inquiry and a different set of investigative methods.

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Air Batu, Sei Alim Ulu, Air Batu Sub-district, Asahan Regency, North Sumatra, through stages that included title proposal, proposal guidance and seminar, data collection, results seminar, and final examination.

Informants were selected purposively and divided into three categories following Moleong (2006): key informants, comprising subject teachers and students, who were directly and intensively involved in the interaction under study; main informants, comprising the school principal and vice-principal, who possess broad and authoritative knowledge of policy implementation; and additional informants, comprising school administrative staff/operators and parents, who supplied complementary information that enriched understanding and supported data triangulation, even though not directly involved in the classroom interaction under study.

Data collection drew on four techniques identified by Sugiyono (in Ibrahim, 2018): observation, interviews, documentation, and a combined/triangulated approach. Systematic observation was carried out in accordance with a pre-designed procedure to examine classroom practices and school activities directly. Semi-structured interviews combining prepared questions with the flexibility to probe further or modify questions in situ were used to elicit informants' views and experiences regarding implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Documentation was used to strengthen the data through analysis of official documents such as lesson-planning tools and school policies. Data collection was organized around Edward III's four variables: communication, resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure, drawing on both primary data (observation and interviews) and secondary data (documentation).

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), comprising three interrelated activities. Data reduction involved sorting, summarizing, and classifying field data in relation to the research focus, so as to determine which data were relevant and which were not. Data display involved organizing the reduced data into clear categories through narrative text, matrices, or charts so that relationships among categories could be readily seen and gaps in the data identified. Conclusion drawing and verification were carried out inductively, informed by patterns observed in the data display, with conclusions re-checked against the field whenever the existing data appeared insufficient to answer the research focus.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

School Profile, Vision, and Supporting Facilities

SMP Negeri 1 Air Batu is one of the junior secondary institutions in Asahan Regency, holding the vision of realizing a school community that is intelligent, faithful, and of strong character. In pursuit of this vision, the school's mission includes cultivating a conducive climate for religious practice; encouraging students and staff to strive continuously for the best achievement; carrying out learning and guidance effectively and professionally; enhancing synergy and optimal performance; strengthening laboratory, library, and extracurricular activities together with test-preparation and study guidance; instilling discipline throughout the school community; fostering harmonious relationships among school members; developing student talent in the arts, sports, science, and technology; building school-owned enterprises; and cultivating a stronger reading, research, and writing culture among all school members.

Available facilities are reasonably comprehensive. Classrooms are equipped with basic amenities whiteboards, adequate furniture, and appropriate ventilation and lighting that create a conducive learning environment, and a number of classrooms are further supported by projectors for digital-based instruction. Science and computer laboratories support practicum activities and strengthen students' digital literacy, in line with the active-learning approach favored by the Merdeka Curriculum. The school library, stocked with textbooks, reference materials, and supplementary reading, functions as an important learning resource that supports independent study consistent with the principles of Merdeka Belajar. Non-academic supporting facilities a sports field, a school health unit, staff rooms, and an administrative office further contribute to students' holistic development in health, social skills, talent, and interest. Overall, the school's facilities are fairly adequate for supporting Merdeka Curriculum implementation, although continued development and maintenance are still required to keep pace with evolving educational needs, particularly with respect to digital-learning technology, which is not yet evenly distributed across all classrooms.

Communication

Findings indicate that dissemination of the Merdeka Curriculum has been carried out through training, workshops, and internal school meetings, with information on curriculum change conveyed to teachers in stages, giving them a reasonably solid grasp of its concepts and objectives. The school principal, Drs. Armansyah, M.Si., described the communication process as follows:

“The information we have received has been fairly helpful in understanding the direction of the Merdeka Curriculum policy; the general concept is clear enough, but in practice some teachers are still confused for instance, in preparing teaching modules and the assessment system.”

This statement suggests that although the principal's communication to teachers has generally functioned, differing interpretations sometimes arise among teachers and require repeated clarification from the school. One subject teacher, Ruslan Sirait, S.Pd., M.Pd., offered a complementary perspective:

“This curriculum places greater emphasis on developing students' competence, creativity, and character. Students are also given more opportunity to be active in the learning process, so learning is no longer solely teacher-centered. However, at the beginning of implementation there were still some differences in understanding among teachers, particularly regarding the preparation of teaching modules and assessment techniques.”

From the students' side, Jun Riski Sipayung noted that teachers explained the shift toward more discussion, group work, and practical activity, and that students were given more room to voice their opinions, with parents also drawn into the process. Parents corroborated this account: the school held a socialization meeting at the start of the academic year, with further information communicated through a class WhatsApp group covering upcoming learning changes and activities. Even so, differences in the depth of understanding persisted among both internal actors (teachers) and external actors (students and parents), particularly regarding the technical procedures of implementation confirming that dissemination alone does not guarantee uniform comprehension across all levels of the school community.

Resources

On the resources dimension, the principal regards the readiness of human resources as one of the school's principal strengths, describing teachers as motivated and willing to adapt to change, enthusiastic about training, though senior teachers in particular require extra mentoring. Ruslan Sirait similarly recalled early difficulty in preparing teaching modules because the required format differed from the previous curriculum, but reported gaining confidence after training and studying sample modules; he further noted that facilities such as projectors and internet access were reasonably helpful, though technology-based learning media still required improvement.

Students and parents raised complementary concerns. Jun Riski Sipayung observed that facilities were generally helpful but that network connectivity occasionally hindered online learning activities. Ibu Pida, a parent, added that certain additional needs internet data quotas, stationery, and other learning materials fell to families to provide, a burden that, while not excessive, nevertheless represents an uneven distribution of the resource load associated with the new curriculum. Taken together, these accounts point to a persistent resource gap: uneven teacher training, budgetary limitations for learning innovation, and facilities not yet fully adequate to support project-based and technology-based learning. This reflects a broader reality of policy implementation at the school level that success depends not only on the good intentions and commitment of implementers but equally on the adequacy, management, and sustainability of the resources made available to support them.

Disposition

With respect to disposition, most teachers display a positive attitude toward, and commitment to, implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The principal noted that the curriculum encourages student creativity and independence, though a small number of teachers still tend to rely on older methods, not yet fully confident with the new approach. Students reported heightened interest in learning as a result of the shift toward more discussion and hands-on practice, while parents generally supported the curriculum because it encourages children to be more active and creative, even as some parents noted that children occasionally struggled with, or deferred to parents on, project tasks they found confusing. This combination of positive teacher disposition and supportive external engagement has allowed implementation to proceed more smoothly, sustaining a more creative, critical, and participatory model of learning, notwithstanding the residual pocket of resistance among a minority of teachers.

Bureaucratic Structure

On bureaucratic structure, task division and responsibility among teachers have been clearly established, and internal coordination runs through routine meetings and periodic evaluation, though the principal noted that variation in application across classrooms sometimes occurs and requires more intensive supervision. Ruslan Sirait reported that coordination among teachers functions reasonably well through routine meetings, teacher working-group discussions, and experience-sharing activities that allow teachers to exchange information and solutions regarding implementation obstacles, and he further emphasized the principal's active role in providing direction, motivation, and supervision, as well as support for teacher training and professional development.

Students observed that assessment now draws not only on examinations but also on project work, active participation, and group collaboration, with a reasonably well-organized schedule and clear subject material for each session. Parents reported that communication with the school runs fairly well through classroom teachers and WhatsApp groups, with meetings convened when necessary, and expressed hope that the Merdeka Curriculum will continue to be implemented and refined, with sustained mentoring for both students and parents so that learning objectives can be more fully achieved and children can become more independent, creative, and prepared to face the demands of the future.

Synthesis of Findings

Overall, implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum at SMP Negeri 1 Air Batu, Asahan Regency, has proceeded reasonably well, though it continues to face a number of obstacles. Viewed through Edward III's framework, implementation success in this case is shaped by the effectiveness of communication, the adequacy of resources, the positive attitude of implementers, and a supportive bureaucratic structure; these four variables are interlinked and jointly determine the extent to which the intended objectives of the education policy are achieved. The most consistently supportive factor across informant groups was the commitment and enthusiasm of the principal and teachers; the most persistent constraint was the uneven distribution of learning-technology facilities. This finding is consistent with prior studies (Arwiyanti et al., 2023; Purwanti & Faisal, 2023) showing that successful Merdeka Curriculum implementation depends not merely on the existence of formal policy but on the interaction of communication, resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure at the school level.

The flexibility that is the Merdeka Curriculum's defining strength its emphasis on differentiated, project-based, student-centered learning was also found to be a source of implementation variability: because schools and individual teachers retain considerable latitude in how they interpret and apply the curriculum, some variation in practice across classrooms is difficult to avoid, and requires closer supervision and more structured guidance than a more prescriptive curriculum would demand. This dual character of flexibility as both an enabling condition and a source of inconsistency is an important nuance that emerges from the SMP Negeri 1 Air Batu case and merits attention in future policy refinement.

4. CONCLUSION

Implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum at SMP Negeri 1 Air Batu, Asahan Regency, has been carried out in accordance with government policy, marked by learning based on defined achievement targets, the use of teaching tools adapted to students' characteristics, and the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). Reviewed against Edward III's four variables, the following conclusions can be drawn.

First, on communication: policy dissemination has been carried out through training and workshops, but some teachers continue to experience technical difficulty in preparing teaching modules and assessments. Second, on resources: the readiness of human resources is fairly good, but learning-technology facilities remain unevenly distributed across classrooms. Third, on disposition: implementers generally display a positive and supportive attitude, although a small number of teachers continue to rely on conventional methods. Fourth, on bureaucratic structure: task division and school coordination run fairly well, although the flexibility inherent in the curriculum produces variation in application across classrooms that requires more intensive supervision.

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has had a positive effect on the learning process: students have become more active and creative, and parental involvement in supporting learning has likewise increased. In general, the dominant factor supporting successful implementation is the commitment and enthusiasm of the principal and teachers, whereas equalizing learning-technology facilities and strengthening continuous mentoring for teachers remain the aspects most in need of improvement if the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum are to be achieved to the fullest extent.

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