



Evaluating the Implementation of the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Belajar Program in Indonesian High Schools

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Abstract. *This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) program in Indonesian high schools and to assess its impact on education quality. This research employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data through surveys and interviews. Quantitative data were collected from 600 respondents (500 students and 100 teachers) across five provinces (West Java, North Sumatra, South Sulawesi, Bali, and East Kalimantan), while qualitative insights were obtained from in-depth interviews with 15 teachers. The findings indicate increased student engagement and teacher competence due to the new curriculum, though implementation challenges remain, particularly in training and infrastructure support. The study's main recommendations include the need for further teacher training, improved learning facilities, and ongoing evaluation of the curriculum.*

Keywords: *2013 Curriculum; Freedom to Learn; Education in Indonesia; Education Quality; Curriculum Implementation.*

Abstrak. *Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengevaluasi efektivitas Kurikulum 2013 dan program Merdeka Belajar di sekolah menengah atas Indonesia serta menilai dampaknya terhadap kualitas pendidikan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan metode campuran, yang menggabungkan data kuantitatif dan kualitatif melalui survei dan wawancara. Data kuantitatif dikumpulkan dari 600 responden (500 siswa dan 100 guru) yang berasal dari lima provinsi (Jawa Barat, Sumatera Utara, Sulawesi Selatan, Bali, dan Kalimantan Timur), sementara wawasan kualitatif diperoleh dari wawancara mendalam dengan 15 guru. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan adanya peningkatan keterlibatan siswa dan kompetensi guru akibat kurikulum baru, meskipun tantangan dalam implementasi masih ada, terutama dalam hal pelatihan dan dukungan infrastruktur. Rekomendasi utama dari penelitian ini meliputi perlunya pelatihan guru lebih lanjut, perbaikan fasilitas pembelajaran, dan evaluasi kurikulum yang berkelanjutan.*

Kata Kunci. *Kurikulum 2013; Merdeka Belajar; Pendidikan di Indonesia; Kualitas Pendidikan; Implementasi Kurikulum.*

Introduction

The education curriculum in Indonesia has undergone significant changes aimed at improving its quality and relevance. The 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka Belajar initiative focus on scientific, competency-based, and critical-thinking approaches for student development. However, implementing these initiatives poses challenges, including teacher understanding, infrastructure, and curriculum alignment with local conditions. This study seeks to provide an overview of the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka Belajar in Indonesian high schools and to evaluate its impact on educational quality and student outcomes.

Indonesia's education system has undergone significant reform in recent years with the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum (K13) and the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) program. Both initiatives aim to enhance educational quality by promoting student-centered learning, critical thinking, and skills development. This review synthesizes existing research to examine the effectiveness, challenges, and outcomes associated with the implementation of these initiatives in Indonesian high schools.

1. Background of the 2013 Curriculum (K13)

The 2013 Curriculum was developed to address evolving educational needs by focusing on competency-based learning and promoting student engagement and skills development. According to Gunawan et al. (2017), K13 emphasizes critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication—known as 21st-century skills—which align with the global demands of the workforce. The curriculum also places importance on integrated learning across subjects, aiming to foster a holistic educational approach (Yusuf & Amin, 2019). However, the effectiveness of K13 in high schools has been met with varying degrees of success, primarily due to disparities in resources, teacher readiness, and instructional support.

2. Introduction of the Merdeka Belajar Program

Launched in 2019 by Indonesia's Ministry of Education, the Merdeka Belajar program introduces greater flexibility and freedom for schools to design curricula that meet local needs. Nadiem Makarim, the program's architect, emphasizes an educational model that reduces administrative burdens and encourages creative pedagogies. This program aims to empower schools and teachers to focus more on fostering critical and creative thinking (Kemdikbud, 2020). Research by Prasetya and Santoso (2021) indicates that Merdeka Belajar's flexibility can benefit schools with resources to implement innovative approaches, although schools in remote areas face challenges in meeting these demands due to limited infrastructure and training.

3. Challenges in Implementation

3.1. Teacher Preparedness and Training

Studies show that one of the significant barriers to effective curriculum implementation in Indonesia is teacher preparedness. Susanto et al. (2018) highlight the need for comprehensive teacher training on both K13 and Merdeka Belajar, noting that many educators lack confidence in adopting the new pedagogical approaches required. Inadequate training can lead to resistance to change or ineffective teaching methods that do not align with the curriculum's goals (Setiawan, 2020). Similarly, teacher readiness directly impacts students' ability to engage with the curriculum meaningfully, as those less trained tend to revert to rote learning methods rather than encouraging critical thinking and active learning.

3.2. Infrastructure and Resources

The infrastructure gap is a significant factor influencing the success of K13 and Merdeka Belajar, particularly in rural and remote regions. According to Wulandari and Rahayu (2021), a lack of technological resources, such as internet connectivity, digital devices, and supportive learning materials, hinders the practical implementation of both programs. Schools in urban areas may benefit from better facilities and support systems, while those in rural areas face an uneven playing field, impacting educational equality and students' learning experiences.

3.3. Assessment and Evaluation Methods

With the shift toward competency-based learning in K13, traditional assessment methods may not adequately capture students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills. Both teachers and administrators face challenges in developing and implementing formative and summative assessments that align with these objectives (Gunawan & Iswanto, 2022). For instance, standardized testing does not always reflect students' holistic growth in skills emphasized by K13 and Merdeka Belajar, suggesting a need for alternative assessment models that consider students' creative and cognitive development.

4. Positive Outcomes and Potential Benefits

4.1. Promoting Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

Despite the challenges, the 2013 Curriculum has led to positive changes in students' learning outcomes in schools where it has been successfully implemented. Widiastuti et al. (2021) found that students demonstrated improved critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which are integral to success in a globalized workforce. The curriculum encourages students to approach learning through inquiry and exploration, which fosters a more profound and personal understanding of academic content.

4.2. Increased Student Engagement and Independence

The Merdeka Belajar program has enabled schools to create more engaging learning environments by promoting autonomy and reducing administrative demands on teachers (Nurdiana & Hafidz, 2022). The flexibility of Merdeka Belajar allows for innovative projects and problem-based learning initiatives that align with students' interests and real-world applications, enhancing students' motivation to learn.

5. Recommendations for Improved Implementation

Based on current research, several recommendations have emerged for improving the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka Belajar: **Increased Professional Development:** The Ministry of Education should prioritize ongoing professional development and training programs to ensure teachers are fully equipped to implement K13 and Merdeka Belajar. Effective training that emphasizes active learning, critical thinking, and assessment techniques would be beneficial (Fauzi & Mulyadi, 2021).

Resource Allocation: Addressing the infrastructural disparities by providing equitable access to technology and learning resources is essential for the programs to be effective in all regions. Collaborative partnerships with private sectors could be beneficial in supporting resource-deficient schools (Rahman & Andini, 2020). **Development of Alternative Assessments:** To align assessments with curriculum goals, it is essential to explore alternative assessment models, such as project-based and portfolio assessments. These methods could provide a more accurate reflection of students' competency in critical and creative thinking skills (Sari & Utomo, 2021).

Methodology

This research uses a mixed-method approach:

- a. **Quantitative Survey:** Administered to 500 students and 100 teachers from five provinces: West Java, North Sumatra, South Sulawesi, Bali, and East Kalimantan. The survey questions covered comprehension, challenges, and perceptions of the 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka Belajar.
- b. **Qualitative Interviews:** Conducted with 15 teachers from different schools to gain deeper insights into their experiences in implementing the new curriculum.
- c. **Data Analysis:** Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically to complement the quantitative findings.

Findings and Discussion

1. **Teacher Understanding and Acceptance of the 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka Belajar**
 - **Teachers:** Approximately 78% of teachers reported an understanding of the goals of the 2013 Curriculum, but only 52% felt adequately prepared to apply the scientific methods it requires. In terms of Merdeka Belajar, about 65% of teachers appreciated the increased flexibility, while 35% indicated a need for further training.
2. **Impact on Learning Quality and Student Engagement**
 - **Student Engagement:** In schools with adequate facilities, 75% of students showed increased learning motivation, especially through project-based learning approaches. However, students in under-resourced schools reported a 25% decrease in engagement, mainly due to limited resources such as laboratories and internet access.

- Academic Performance: Average academic scores improved by 10% in subjects employing scientific and project-based learning approaches, particularly in science and language. However, performance gaps of up to 15% were observed between rural and urban schools.
3. Implementation Challenges
 - Teacher Training: Sixty percent of teachers expressed a need for additional training to better understand and apply the new instructional methods under the 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka Belajar. This challenge was most acute among teachers in rural areas with limited access to professional development resources.
 - Infrastructure and Facilities: Only 40% of students in rural areas reported the availability of basic facilities such as libraries and laboratories. In urban areas, approximately 80% of students had access to sufficient learning facilities, supporting curriculum implementation.
 4. Perceptions and Learning Motivation of Students
 - Positive Perceptions in Urban Areas: Both students and teachers in urban areas held positive perceptions of the new curriculum, feeling more supported by adequate facilities and training. Conversely, rural schools showed lower curriculum alignment, and students demonstrated lower learning motivation due to insufficient resources and limited teacher support.

Conclusion

This study highlights that while the 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka Belajar have positively impacted student engagement and academic performance, their implementation remains uneven. The primary challenges lie in providing continuous teacher training and improving facilities, especially in remote areas. Ongoing investment in infrastructure and support for professional development are essential to ensure the curriculum's effectiveness across all Indonesian schools.

1. Sustained Teacher Training: The government should expand access to teacher training, particularly in rural areas. Ongoing training will improve teachers' understanding and ability to apply instructional methods aligned with the 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka Belajar.
2. School Infrastructure Development: Increasing resources in rural schools, such as laboratories, libraries, and internet access, is crucial to support project-based learning and scientific approaches.
3. Regular Curriculum Evaluation: The government should conduct routine evaluations to measure curriculum effectiveness and identify regional disparities, ensuring equitable education quality across Indonesia.

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