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Independent Curriculum Policy in Elementary Schools: Teachers' Understanding and Implementation Challenges in Bekasi Indonesia

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka di sekolah dasar di Bekasi dengan menyoroti pemahaman guru, kesiapan, serta tantangan dalam pelaksanaan program Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5). Menggunakan desain deskriptif kuantitatif, data diperoleh melalui survei terhadap 50 guru dari lima sekolah dasar negeri. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sebagian besar guru memiliki pemahaman konseptual yang baik (72%) dan kesiapan moderat (65%), namun realisasi komponen kurikulum, khususnya proyek P5, masih berjalan tidak konsisten. Tantangan utama meliputi keterbatasan sumber daya, dukungan institusional yang minim, serta ukuran kelas yang besar, sehingga melemahkan potensi transformatif kurikulum. Selain itu, kurangnya referensi proyek kontekstual dan terbatasnya waktu kolaborasi antar-guru menghambat pelaksanaan lintas disiplin. Temuan ini menegaskan adanya kesenjangan antara kebijakan dan praktik kurikulum, serta perlunya penguatan modul P5 kontekstual, kepemimpinan sekolah yang lebih aktif, dan dukungan sistemik untuk mewujudkan pembelajaran yang berpusat pada peserta didik.

Kata kunci: Kurikulum Merdeka; sekolah dasar; kesiapan guru; implementasi kurikulum; P5; reformasi pendidikan; kesenjangan kebijakan-praktik.

Abstract

This study examines the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools in Bekasi, focusing on teachers' understanding, readiness, and challenges in executing the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) program. Using a quantitative descriptive design, survey data were collected from 50 teachers across five public schools. The findings indicate that while most teachers demonstrated good conceptual understanding (72%) and moderate readiness (65%), the realization of curriculum components, particularly P5 projects, remained inconsistent. Key challenges include limited resources, inadequate institutional support, and large class sizes, which weaken the curriculum's transformative potential. Moreover, lack of contextual project references and insufficient collaborative planning time hindered interdisciplinary implementation. These findings highlight the policy-practice gap in curriculum reform, emphasizing the need for contextualized P5 modules, stronger school leadership, and systemic support to sustain student-centered learning in Indonesian schools.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum; elementary schools; teacher readiness; curriculum implementation; P5; educational policy; education reform; policy-practice gap.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Ki Hajar Dewantara, education is an effort to guide and nurture the natural strengths and potentials of children as individuals and members of society, aiming to cultivate character, competence, and a dignified civilization (Ramadhan, 2024). In Indonesia, the curriculum plays a central role in realizing these ideals. However, curriculum reforms have been frequent, leading to difficulties for teachers and students in adapting to the continuous changes (Mulyasa, 2022). The most recent reform, the Merdeka Curriculum, was launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology under Minister Nadiem Anwar Makarim to provide greater flexibility, focus on essential learning outcomes, and strengthen character education through the Pancasila Student Profile program (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

The urgency of analyzing the Merdeka Curriculum arises from persistent challenges in its implementation. Recent data indicate that a significant proportion of teachers remain resistant or unprepared to adopt the new curriculum. For example, a study in West Java revealed that 40% of teachers failed to apply differentiated assessments, which are a core principle of the curriculum (Fitria et al., 2024). Similarly, national surveys highlight that despite government training programs, around 28% of teachers still struggle to translate curriculum principles into classroom practice (Inayati, 2022; Nurhadi, 2023). These difficulties are compounded by systemic disparities, such as rural schools' limited infrastructure and lack of access to resources (Mulyasa, 2022; Solehudin et al., 2024). Moreover, post-pandemic learning loss has intensified the urgency for curriculum policies that not only innovate but also adapt to local contexts (Salma et al., 2024).

Empirical studies provide further evidence of these challenges. In West Sumatra, Suci et al. (2025) found significant differences in teacher readiness between schools, with some demonstrating strong conceptual understanding while others struggled due to inadequate resources. In West Java, Salma et al. (2024) reported that "driving schools" piloting the Merdeka Curriculum encountered obstacles related to teacher readiness, limited resources, and student adaptation. In Hulu Sungai Tengah, science teachers expressed confusion in implementing P5 projects and reported increased workloads (Nikmah et al., 2023). Similarly, in Batam, English teachers acknowledged the positive intent of the curriculum but highlighted constraints in facilities that hampered student-centered learning (Purba et al., 2024). Collectively, these findings show that while the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to transform learning, its implementation remains uneven across regions.

Despite these growing studies, there are still notable gaps. First, most empirical research has focused on secondary schools or pilot "driving schools," leaving the implementation at the elementary level underexplored (Zendrato & Agatha, 2023). Second, studies have often emphasized teacher readiness but have not sufficiently examined the role of school leadership, particularly principals, in supporting the P5 program (Nurhafidhah et al., 2024). Third, research specifically in Bekasi, an urban district with both well-resourced and under-resourced schools, remains limited. Addressing these gaps is essential, as Bekasi provides a microcosm of Indonesia's broader educational disparities. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools in Bekasi, focusing on teacher

readiness, institutional support, and challenges in the P5 program, thereby contributing to the discourse on the policy–practice gap in Indonesian educational reform.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative design with exploratory considerations. The quantitative approach was chosen to capture measurable patterns of teachers' understanding and readiness regarding the Merdeka Curriculum, while acknowledging that some aspects, particularly the challenges in implementing the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) projects, might require further qualitative exploration in future research.

2.2. Research Instrument

Data were collected using a Google Form-based questionnaire consisting of closed-ended items measured on a 4-point Likert scale: (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Agree, and (4) Strongly Agree. The use of a 4-point scale, rather than a 5-point scale, was intended to avoid neutral responses and encourage participants to indicate a clear level of agreement or disagreement. The indicators included: (1) teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, (2) teachers' readiness for its implementation, (3) execution of the P5 projects, and (4) obstacles encountered in implementation.

2.3. Population and Sample

The population comprised elementary school teachers in Bekasi Regency. A purposive sampling technique was applied with the following inclusion criteria: teachers must (a) have at least two years of teaching experience, (b) be actively involved in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, and (c) be employed in public elementary schools. Based on these criteria, a total of 50 teachers were selected from five public elementary schools. This sampling strategy allowed for the inclusion of participants with direct and relevant experience, although it may have excluded teachers without adequate access to digital platforms, which constitutes a limitation of this study.

2.4. Data Collection

The questionnaire was distributed in June 2025. Prior to completing the survey, teachers were informed about the research purpose, voluntary nature of participation, and data confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained electronically from all participants.

2.5. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed descriptively by calculating percentages and mean scores for each item to provide an overview of teachers' understanding and experiences. Beyond descriptive statistics, correlational analysis was conducted to examine potential relationships between teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum and their teaching experience (in years). This allowed the study to explore whether more

experienced teachers demonstrated stronger curriculum comprehension.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards by ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity of responses, and secure storage of data. Participants were assured that their responses would only be used for academic purposes.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Research Result

Based on the analysis of responses from 50 teachers across five public elementary schools in Bekasi, the findings are presented in Figure 1 and elaborated in the subsections below. The survey measured four main indicators: teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, their readiness to implement it, the implementation of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) projects, and the challenges encountered during the process.

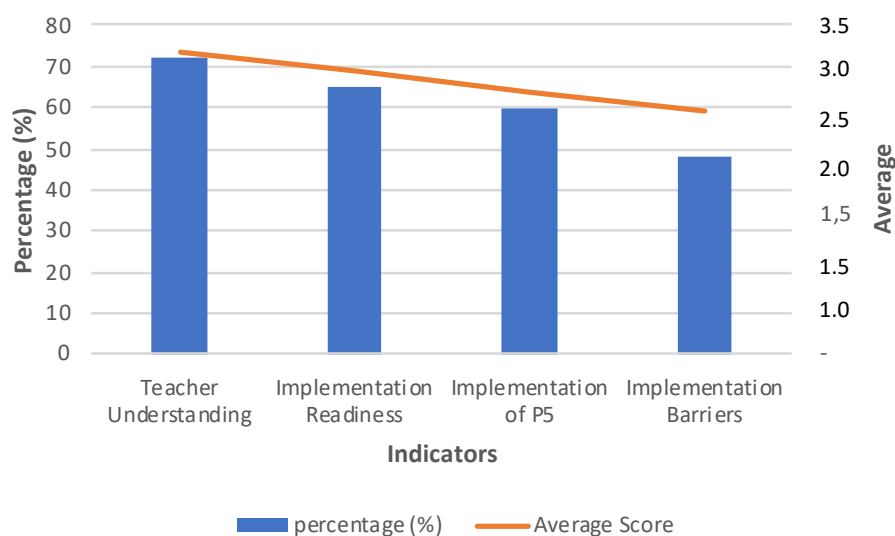


Figure 1. Teachers' responses across indicators of the merdeka curriculum

The data from figure 1 indicate that teachers generally demonstrated a good level of understanding and readiness in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. However, implementation remains uneven, with significant challenges related to resource availability, project-based learning (P5), and systemic support.

3.1.1. Teachers' Understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum

The survey showed that 72% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the fundamental concepts of the Merdeka Curriculum, with an average score of 3.2 (SD = 0.5) on a 4-point Likert scale. This suggests that most teachers had a sufficient grasp of the curriculum's key features, including differentiated learning, the development of teaching modules, and student-centered approaches. The relatively low standard deviation indicates that responses were fairly consistent across schools.

Notably, teachers who had attended government-organized training sessions or independent professional development workshops tended to report higher levels of understanding ($M = 3.4$) compared to those who had not ($M = 2.9$). Despite this generally positive trend, 12% of teachers admitted to having only limited understanding of the curriculum. Qualitative feedback revealed that these teachers felt overwhelmed by new terminologies and the shift in pedagogical approaches, underscoring the need for continuous mentoring and localized professional learning communities. This aligns with previous findings that curriculum reforms often fail without adequate and sustained teacher support (Fullan, 2007).

3.1.2. Teachers' Readiness in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

In terms of readiness, 65% of teachers reported feeling prepared to apply the Merdeka Curriculum in their classrooms, yielding an average score of 3.0 ($SD = 0.6$). Teachers expressed confidence in developing teaching modules, conducting formative assessments, and applying differentiated instruction. Senior teachers with more than 10 years of experience showed slightly higher readiness levels ($M = 3.1$) compared to novice teachers with less than five years of experience ($M = 2.8$).

However, despite this overall readiness, 28% of respondents admitted that they struggled with aligning lesson objectives to the broader framework of the curriculum, particularly when addressing heterogeneous student needs. Time constraints were frequently mentioned in the qualitative comments, with teachers highlighting difficulties in balancing administrative demands, module preparation, and classroom instruction. This echoes Darling-Hammond et al. (2020), who emphasized that teacher readiness is not merely about knowledge but also about systemic conditions that enable effective practice.

3.1.3. Implementation of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) Projects

The implementation of P5 projects, which are designed to foster students' character development and transversal competencies, remains limited. While 60% of teachers reported initiating at least one P5 project in the past semester, only 15% of schools successfully completed all required phases—planning, implementation, and evaluation. The overall average score for this indicator was 2.8 ($SD = 0.7$), reflecting moderate but inconsistent progress.

Teachers who attempted P5 projects commonly chose themes such as environmental awareness and local cultural heritage. However, many reported difficulties in accessing contextual project references, resulting in projects that were either overly generic or poorly aligned with students' real-life contexts. Moreover, the lack of collaborative planning time hindered interdisciplinary integration, which is a central requirement of P5. As one teacher noted, "We started the project, but without sufficient references and teamwork, it became just another classroom activity."

These findings indicate that while teachers are conceptually supportive of P5, structural limitations—such as time, resources, and cross-subject coordination—impede its full realization. This aligns with observations by OECD (2019), which found that project-based learning initiatives require strong institutional scaffolding to succeed.

3.1.4. Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

Challenges were evident across several dimensions, with 48% of teachers identifying resource limitations as the most pressing issue. These included the scarcity of relevant teaching materials, limited ICT infrastructure, and inadequate learning facilities. The average score for this indicator was 2.6 (SD = 0.8), indicating considerable variability in experiences across schools. Teachers in better-resourced urban schools reported fewer challenges, whereas those in more peripheral areas expressed significant concerns about lack of internet access and teaching aids.

Institutional support also emerged as a recurring theme. Several teachers reported that school leadership had not fully embraced the curriculum reform, resulting in minimal coordination, weak monitoring, and lack of encouragement for innovation. In addition, systemic pressures such as large class sizes (ranging from 35–40 students) and overlapping administrative tasks exacerbated the difficulties of implementing student-centered learning.

3.2. Discussion

The findings from this study highlight both opportunities and challenges in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the elementary school level in Bekasi. While the majority of teachers demonstrated an adequate understanding and moderate readiness, the actualization of curriculum components, particularly the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) projects, remained inconsistent. This suggests a gap between conceptual comprehension and practical enactment, which has been similarly identified in other large-scale curriculum reforms that emphasize competency-based approaches (Fullan, 2019; Priestley et al., 2021).

A critical issue that emerged is related to the effectiveness of government-led training programs. Although such programs successfully increase teachers' conceptual awareness, they often fail to provide practical instruments such as project templates or model lesson plans for P5. The absence of these resources forces teachers to design activities independently, which results in inconsistent quality of implementation across schools. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that professional development must integrate practice-based components in order to effectively shift classroom practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Kennedy, 2019). In comparison, Singapore's education system allocates structured weekly planning time for teachers, which promotes collaborative project design and enhances the sustainability of reforms (Tan, 2023; Goh & Tan, 2022). The lack of similar systemic support in Indonesia restricts teachers' ability to implement the curriculum as intended.

Teacher readiness also appears to vary significantly across schools in Bekasi. Although urban teachers generally have better access to training, technology, and learning resources, disparities remain within the same region. Peripheral schools face more pronounced difficulties, such as limited internet access and insufficient teaching materials, which affect curriculum enactment. This finding echoes studies that highlight intra-urban inequalities in education, where access to resources and institutional support strongly influences teacher readiness and curriculum fidelity (Mulyasa, 2022; Ismail et al., 2021; Hardiyanti et al., 2023). Furthermore, similar studies in other developing contexts demonstrate that readiness is not solely determined by urban or rural classifications but also by school-level governance and support structures

(Huang et al., 2020; Pham & Renshaw, 2021).

Institutional support also plays a significant role in shaping the success of curriculum reforms. In many schools, leadership engagement was limited, administrative demands were excessive, and class sizes were large, all of which undermined student-centered pedagogy. OECD (2019) emphasizes that competency-based learning requires systemic scaffolding, such as smaller class sizes, reduced administrative burdens, and the presence of professional learning communities. These systemic conditions were not fully present in Bekasi schools, which aligns with teachers' qualitative reports of feeling overburdened and under-supported. Similar challenges have been observed in other countries where curriculum reforms failed to align with institutional realities (Schleicher, 2020; Voogt et al., 2022; Alsubaie, 2022).

Another important implication concerns teachers' digital readiness. The implementation of Merdeka Curriculum requires integration of digital platforms for assessment and collaboration. However, several teachers in Bekasi reported difficulties in using digital tools due to limited training and infrastructure. This reflects broader patterns in post-pandemic education, where gaps in digital competence hinder curriculum innovation (König et al., 2020; Mailizar et al., 2021; Trust & Whalen, 2020). Strengthening teachers' digital literacy should therefore be considered a prerequisite for sustaining P5 projects and other student-centered innovations.

Finally, this study acknowledges several limitations. The data were collected from only five public elementary schools in Bekasi, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions in Indonesia. Moreover, reliance on self-reported surveys introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, as teachers may have overstated their understanding and readiness. Future studies should therefore involve larger and more diverse samples, employ classroom observations, and conduct longitudinal studies to capture changes over time. Such approaches would provide deeper insights into how curriculum reforms translate into everyday teaching practices (Lauermann & Berger, 2021; van der Kleij & Adie, 2020).

4. CONCLUSION

The Independent Curriculum policy in elementary schools marks an important step toward promoting flexible, contextual, and student-centered education. Findings from this study show that while teachers in Bekasi generally have adequate conceptual understanding and moderate readiness to implement the curriculum, systemic challenges such as limited time, insufficient resources, and uneven institutional support significantly weaken its transformative potential. This indicates that teacher preparedness alone cannot guarantee successful curriculum enactment without corresponding systemic scaffolding.

To address these challenges, several policy-level recommendations are necessary. First, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology should provide practice-oriented supports such as contextualized P5 modules and accessible project templates aligned with local needs. Increasing the frequency and practicality of teacher training is also critical to ensure sustained professional growth. Second, a more radical reform should be considered, namely revising policy to mandate that at least 20% of school hours be allocated for structured teacher collaboration. This approach, inspired by practices in Finland,

would allow teachers to engage in joint planning, reflection, and interdisciplinary coordination, which are essential for meaningful implementation of student-centered reforms.

In conclusion, the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to foster deeper learning and stronger character development among elementary students. However, realizing this potential requires not only enhancing teachers' conceptual knowledge but also creating systemic conditions that enable practice. Strengthening resource provision, institutional leadership, and collaborative structures is imperative to ensure that the curriculum moves beyond policy rhetoric and becomes a sustainable practice in Indonesian classrooms.

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