



The Evolution of Education in Indonesia: A Study of the 2013 Curriculum, the Independent Curriculum, and Inclusive Education in the Digital Era

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Abstract

Education plays a crucial role in shaping a competitive and competent generation. Indonesia has undergone several curriculum reforms to align with global and societal needs, with the 2013 Curriculum (K-13) and the Independent Curriculum (Merdeka Curriculum) being the most relevant in the past decade. This study explores the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMK Negeri 3 Aceh Barat through a qualitative approach, employing semi-structured interviews with a Bahasa Indonesia teacher to analyze its application, challenges, and effectiveness. Findings reveal that while the Merdeka Curriculum offers greater autonomy in learning design and differentiation in instruction, its implementation faces significant obstacles, particularly regarding technological infrastructure. The lack of access to digital tools and internet connectivity hinders the optimal use of technology-based learning, especially in rural areas. Additionally, teachers require continuous professional development to effectively integrate digital resources into inclusive education. Despite these challenges, differentiation in the Merdeka Curriculum enables a more personalized learning experience, allowing students to engage with content suited to their interests and career aspirations, particularly in vocational high schools.

Keywords: Curriculum reform, Merdeka Curriculum, K-13 Curriculum, vocational education, student-centered learning, educational technology

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a strategic role in shaping an excellent and competitive generation. In Indonesia, curriculum changes are often made to align with the development of the times and societal needs. Two curricula that reflect these transformations are the 2013 Curriculum (K-13) and the Independent Curriculum. Education in Indonesia has undergone various curriculum changes as a response to global dynamics and local challenges. The two most relevant curricula in the past decade are the 2013 Curriculum and the Independent Curriculum. Both represent the government's efforts to improve the quality of education with different yet complementary approaches (Widodo, 2020; Mulyani, 2022).

The 2013 Curriculum (K-13) was designed to instill 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. A thematic and integrative approach is applied in the learning process. On the other hand, the Independent Curriculum emerged as a response to the need for more flexible learning, especially post-COVID-19 pandemic. This curriculum grants educational institutions the freedom to determine learning approaches that suit students' conditions. The concept of "Merdeka Belajar" (Freedom to Learn) allows students to explore their interests and talents through project-based learning, emphasizing the relevance of materials to everyday life (Fajri, 2022; Nugroho C Putri, 2023).

The 2013 Curriculum has a more rigid structure, focusing on national graduate competency standards. In contrast, the Independent Curriculum offers flexibility in selecting learning modules and arranging class hours. Students not only learn from textbooks but also from direct experiences through projects designed to enhance creativity and critical thinking skills (Rahmawati, 2023; Permatasari, 2022). As part of research on curriculum implementation, we conducted interviews at a vocational high school in West Aceh, SMK Negeri 3 Aceh Barat. These interviews aimed to gather information regarding curriculum application at the school, including challenges, strategies, and their impact on the learning process. The questions addressed various curriculum aspects, such as structure and teaching methods. The responses provided deep insights into the effectiveness of the implemented curriculum. In our interviews, we had the opportunity to speak with Ms. Yuliana, S.Pd, a Bahasa Indonesia teacher at SMK Negeri 3 Aceh Barat. She offered valuable insights regarding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the school, including its challenges and her views on its strengths and weaknesses. Below are her responses to the questions posed, "What are the differences between the Independent Curriculum and the 2013 Curriculum?"

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SMK Negeri 3 Aceh Barat. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a teacher to gain insights into the curriculum's application, challenges, and effectiveness. The interview questions focused on key aspects of curriculum implementation, including instructional methods, teacher and student experiences, and institutional challenges. The collected data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and perspectives regarding the curriculum's impact. By utilizing an interview-based qualitative method, this research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how the Independent Curriculum functions in a vocational high school setting, highlighting both its strengths and areas that require improvement.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this digital era, technology should be an integral part of every learning process. However, many schools, including SMK Negeri 3 Aceh Barat, lack the infrastructure needed to fully support the use of technology. The absence of sufficient facilities such as computers, reliable internet access, and other digital learning tools hinders the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which requires technology-based and digital media-supported learning.

The Independent Curriculum aims to provide educators with the flexibility to design learning that is more centered on the needs and characteristics of students while accommodating the principles of inclusive education. This approach ensures that all students, without exception, have equal access to the learning process. However, without adequate facilities, these challenges become increasingly complex, particularly in schools located in regions with limited technological infrastructure. Despite efforts to integrate technology into learning, the reality is that many students are unable to access digital learning materials optimally. Consequently, this lack of facilities not only hampers the implementation of the Independent Curriculum but also affects the quality of education, especially in striving for inclusive and equitable education across all societal levels.

Inclusive education in the digital era holds significant potential to create equal opportunities for all students, particularly through the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. This curriculum emphasizes the importance of flexibility in the learning process and provides educators with the opportunity to tailor materials according to the individual

needs of students. According to UNESCO (2020), technology can serve as an effective tool to overcome barriers faced by students with special needs, such as those with disabilities or other limitations. By leveraging digital technology, education can become more accessible and inclusive, creating a more adaptive and equitable learning experience for all students.

However, amidst this great potential, the digital divide remains a serious challenge in achieving inclusive education in the digital era. Selwyn (2016) explains that while technology can expand educational access, disparities in access to devices and internet connections may exacerbate inequalities in education.

Many schools, especially those in remote areas, face issues of inadequate technological facilities, preventing students from fully benefiting from the potential of digital learning. Therefore, efforts to reduce the digital divide through broader access to technological devices and the internet are crucial to ensuring that all students can experience the benefits of inclusive education. Inclusive education in the digital era also requires a shift in teaching approaches and improved teacher competencies. Angrist and Lavy (2019) emphasize that adequate training for teachers in utilizing technology is key to creating effective and inclusive learning. Teachers proficient in leveraging technology can design lessons that accommodate diverse learning styles and student needs. Hence, in addition to providing adequate infrastructure, there must be investments in teacher training and digital skill development. This will enable educators to fully utilize technology to support diversity in classrooms and enhance the overall quality of education.

The Role of Teachers in the New Curriculum

Teachers play a crucial role in the implementation of both curricula. In the 2013 Curriculum, teachers often face administrative pressure, while in the Merdeka Curriculum, they are given more freedom to design lessons. However, this also demands teachers to continually improve their competencies through training and professional development (Hasanah, 2023; Suryadi, 2021). With the evolution from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum, Indonesian education is moving toward a more inclusive and adaptive model. Although challenges remain, these policies show a positive direction in improving the quality of learning.

Government support, teacher training, and the use of technology are key to success (Widodo, 2020; Nugroho C Putri, 2023).

Differentiation in the 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka Curriculum

Curriculum in Indonesia has undergone significant evolution in responding to the diverse needs of students. One noticeable change is the application of differentiation in the Merdeka Curriculum, which is an improvement of the 2013 Curriculum.

1. 2013 Curriculum

The 2013 Curriculum introduced a competency-based and integrative thematic approach. However, there was limited room for differentiation because this approach tended to be uniform for all students. As a result, students with special needs or high abilities were not optimally accommodated (Hidayat C Sari, 2023).

2. Merdeka Curriculum

In the Merdeka Curriculum, differentiation becomes a primary approach to accommodate individual student differences. Teachers are given the freedom to adapt lessons according to student needs through three main aspects.

Differentiation of Content: Teachers provide learning materials adjusted to the students' level of understanding. For example, vocational high school students majoring in multimedia can choose modules focused on graphic design or game development, based on their interests.

Differentiation of Process: Teachers use various teaching methods, such as Project-Based Learning or direct practice in the workforce, to support students' learning styles.

Differentiation of Products: Students are given the freedom to demonstrate their learning outcomes in different forms, such as creating prototypes, videos, or written reports (Rahman C Lestari, 2023).

Application of Differentiation in Vocational High Schools (SMK)

The application of differentiation in the Merdeka Curriculum in Vocational High Schools (SMK) is crucial to ensure students are prepared to face the workforce. Examples of its application include:

Differentiation in vocational subjects: Students in the automotive engineering department can choose to specialize in electric vehicle technology, which aligns with industry trends.

Internship programs and industrial visits: Students can choose internship locations that match their interests and skills, such as companies based in manufacturing or technology. (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2022)

Benefits of Differentiation in Education

1. Increases student engagement through materials relevant to their interests and needs.
2. Facilitates skill-based learning to support graduates' readiness for work.
3. Encourages student independence in learning, in line with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum. (Prasetyo C Wahyuni, 2024)

CONCLUSION

The evolution of education in Indonesia shows significant progress with the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum, followed by the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum. This change aims not only to improve the quality of learning but also to create a more inclusive education system that can accommodate the diverse needs of students. The Merdeka Curriculum, with its focus on more flexible and student-centered learning, is the answer to the challenges faced in education today, especially in the ever-evolving digital era. However, there are major challenges in its implementation, particularly regarding inadequate facilities, such as those found at SMK Negeri 3 Aceh Barat, which limit the optimal use of technology in the learning process. On the other hand, inclusive education in the digital era offers great opportunities to create equal access to education for all students. Technology, if used properly, can open opportunities for students with special needs or those living in remote areas to access quality education. However, as stated by UNESCO (2020), the digital divide remains a major challenge in achieving inclusive education. Without adequate infrastructure and training for educators to effectively use technology, the potential for inclusive education will be difficult to achieve. Therefore, it is important to ensure that the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented effectively with adequate support in terms of technology facilities and the enhancement of teachers' digital competencies. Considering these factors, strategic steps need to be taken to ensure that this educational evolution progresses in line with technological advancements and creates inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education. Education that reaches all levels of society, regardless of existing limitations, will create the next generation that is ready to compete globally. The Merdeka Curriculum, with proper support in facilities and training, can provide a strong foundation to achieve this, especially in this challenging digital era.

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