



Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum After the Termination of the Sekolah Penggerak Program: Challenges and Learning Transformation in a Semi-Urban Junior High School

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Abstract

This article examines the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum following the termination of the Sekolah Penggerak Program at SMP Negeri 2 Baranti, Sidenreng Rappang Regency, Indonesia. The study adopts a qualitative case study approach involving school leaders, teachers, supervisors, and students. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The analysis was guided by Edward III's policy implementation framework, Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, and the CIPP evaluation model. The findings indicate that the Merdeka Curriculum continues to be implemented despite the discontinuation of intensive government assistance. Communication has been sustained through teacher learning communities, school meetings, and the Merdeka Mengajar Platform. However, challenges remain, including technological limitations, unequal digital competence among teachers, and restricted access to professional development opportunities. Nevertheless, teachers demonstrate positive attitudes toward the curriculum and increasingly employ project-based, student-centered, and contextual learning approaches. The curriculum has also stimulated learning transformation among both teachers and students through reflective practices, instructional innovation, and greater student engagement. The study concludes that sustainable curriculum reform depends on school leadership, collaborative professional cultures, and continuous policy support.

Original Research Article

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1. Introduction

Educational reform has become a central strategy for improving national competitiveness and preparing learners for increasingly complex social and economic environments. According to Fullan (2020), sustainable educational reform requires systemic change involving curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional culture. The rapid advancement of technology, globalization, and changing labor market demands require educational systems to cultivate critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, and lifelong learning skills. Consequently, governments around the world continue to redesign curricula to ensure that education remains relevant to contemporary challenges.

In Indonesia, educational transformation gained momentum following the COVID-19 pandemic. Learning disruptions generated significant concerns regarding learning loss,

particularly in literacy and numeracy achievement. In response, the Ministry of Education introduced the Merdeka Curriculum as part of a broader educational transformation agenda. The curriculum emphasizes flexibility, differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and the development of the Pancasila Student Profile. Tomlinson (2017) argues that differentiated instruction enables teachers to accommodate diverse learner needs and improve learning outcomes. Rather than focusing solely on content coverage, the curriculum encourages meaningful learning experiences and competency development.

To accelerate implementation, the government launched the Sekolah Penggerak Program. This initiative provided mentoring, professional development, leadership training, and institutional support for participating schools. Through

the program, schools received assistance in curriculum implementation, instructional innovation, and school transformation. However, the program was terminated in 2025 as part of a broader policy shift emphasizing institutional independence and mainstream implementation.

The termination of the program raises important questions regarding policy sustainability. Schools that previously benefited from intensive support must now continue implementation independently. This situation is particularly relevant in semi-urban schools where infrastructure, technology access, and professional development opportunities may be limited. Understanding how such schools sustain reform initiatives is therefore essential for evaluating the long-term effectiveness of educational transformation policies.

This study investigates the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum after the termination of the Sekolah Penggerak Program at SMP Negeri 2 Baranti. Specifically, the study aims to analyze implementation processes, identify local challenges, and examine learning transformation among teachers and students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Policy Implementation Theory

Policy implementation refers to the process through which governmental decisions are translated into practical actions. Edwards III (1980) emphasized that successful implementation depends on clear communication, adequate resources, supportive dispositions, and effective bureaucratic structures. Edward III identifies four critical variables influencing implementation success: communication, resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure. Communication ensures that policy objectives are clearly understood. Resources include human competence, facilities, and financial support. Disposition concerns implementers' attitudes and commitment, while bureaucratic structure involves coordination and institutional arrangements.

The framework has been widely applied in educational policy research because schools function as implementation units where policies are translated into instructional practices. Effective implementation requires not only policy clarity but also adequate support systems and positive stakeholder attitudes.

2.2 The Merdeka Curriculum

The Merdeka Curriculum represents Indonesia's effort to modernize educational practices. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) state that student-centered curricula are essential for developing twenty-first-century competencies and deeper learning. Its primary characteristics include student-centered learning, competency-based instruction, project-based learning, differentiated teaching, formative assessment, and character development through the Pancasila Student Profile.

The curriculum provides schools with greater autonomy in organizing learning activities according to local needs and student characteristics. Teachers are encouraged to act as facilitators who guide students in constructing knowledge through authentic learning experiences.

2.3 Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory explains how individuals revise assumptions and perspectives through critical reflection. Mezirow (2000) maintains that critical reflection is the foundation of transformative learning and personal growth. Transformative learning occurs when learners encounter experiences that challenge existing beliefs and encourage the development of new understandings.

In educational settings, transformative learning can influence both teachers and students. Teachers may adopt innovative pedagogical approaches, while students may become more active, reflective, and independent learners. The Merdeka Curriculum creates opportunities for transformative learning through project-based activities, collaborative learning, and reflective assessment practices.

2.4 CIPP Evaluation Model

The CIPP model developed by Stufflebeam evaluates programs through four dimensions: Context, Input, Process, and Product. Stufflebeam and Coryn (2014) argue that evaluation should support decision-making and continuous program improvement rather than merely measure outcomes. Context evaluation assesses needs and environmental conditions. Input evaluation examines resources and strategies. Process evaluation focuses on implementation quality. Product evaluation assesses outcomes and impacts.

Combining the CIPP model with implementation theory and transformative learning provides a comprehensive framework for understanding curriculum reform in practice.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design. The research site was SMP Negeri 2 Baranti, a semi-urban junior high school that implemented the Merdeka Curriculum and previously participated in the Sekolah Penggerak Program.

Participants included the principal, vice principal for curriculum affairs, school supervisor, six teachers, and five students. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants possessed direct experience with curriculum implementation.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Interview questions explored implementation experiences, challenges, support mechanisms, and perceived impacts. Observations focused on classroom interactions, project-based learning activities, formative assessment practices, and student engagement. Documents analyzed included curriculum plans, teaching modules, project reports, and evaluation records.

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Triangulation of sources and methods was applied to strengthen trustworthiness and credibility.

4. Results

4.1 Communication

Communication emerged as a significant factor supporting curriculum implementation. Despite the termination of the Sekolah Penggerak Program, school leaders maintained regular meetings and collaborative forums to discuss curriculum-related issues. Teachers continued accessing information through professional learning communities and the Merdeka Mengajar Platform.

Participants reported that communication channels helped reduce uncertainty and enabled collective problem-solving. Internal coordination also contributed to consistency in instructional planning and assessment practices.

4.2 Resources

Resource limitations represented the most substantial challenge. Internet connectivity remained unstable, affecting access to digital learning materials and online professional development. Some teachers experienced difficulties utilizing technology effectively due to differences in digital competence.

Infrastructure constraints were particularly evident in project-based learning activities requiring technological support. Nevertheless, teachers demonstrated creativity in adapting available resources to local contexts.

4.3 Disposition

Teacher attitudes toward the curriculum were generally positive. Participants appreciated the flexibility provided by the curriculum and believed that it encouraged more meaningful learning experiences. Many teachers viewed project-based learning as an effective strategy for increasing student participation and contextualizing instruction.

Commitment to implementation remained strong despite reduced external support. Teachers emphasized that collaborative learning communities helped maintain motivation and professional growth.

4.4 Bureaucratic Structure

School leadership played a critical role in coordinating implementation activities. Administrative procedures were aligned with curriculum objectives, and leadership support facilitated collaboration among teachers. However, participants noted the absence of structured external mentoring that had previously been available through the Sekolah Penggerak Program.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that communication and teacher commitment are essential factors sustaining curriculum implementation. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) note that professional capital and teacher collaboration significantly influence educational improvement and reform sustainability. Consistent with Edward III's framework, effective communication reduced ambiguity and facilitated collective understanding of policy goals.

The study also highlights the significance of professional learning communities. Following the termination of formal mentoring programs, teacher collaboration became an important mechanism for sustaining reform efforts. This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of collaborative professional cultures in educational improvement.

Resource constraints remain a major concern. Although teachers demonstrated adaptability, long-term sustainability requires improved infrastructure and access to professional development. Educational reforms often fail when implementation expectations exceed available resources. Therefore, policy makers must ensure equitable support for semi-urban schools.

From the perspective of transformative learning, evidence suggests that the curriculum has contributed to meaningful changes in teaching and learning practices. Teachers increasingly engage in reflective practice and instructional experimentation. Students participate more actively in learning activities, demonstrating enhanced confidence, collaboration, and problem-solving abilities.

The CIPP evaluation framework further illustrates the complexity of curriculum implementation. Context evaluation confirms the relevance of reform in addressing post-pandemic educational challenges. Input evaluation identifies infrastructure and competence gaps. Process evaluation reveals both successful practices and implementation barriers. Product evaluation demonstrates positive impacts on learning engagement and instructional quality.

6. Implications

The study offers several implications for educational policy and practice. First, teacher learning communities should be strengthened as sustainable professional development mechanisms. Second, investments in digital infrastructure are necessary to support equitable implementation. Third, educational authorities should provide periodic mentoring and monitoring to ensure implementation quality. Fourth, school leaders should foster collaborative cultures that encourage innovation and reflection.

The findings also suggest that policy sustainability depends on institutional capacity rather than temporary program interventions. Building internal leadership and professional

networks may be more effective than relying exclusively on external assistance.

7. Conclusion

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 2 Baranti has continued despite the termination of the Sekolah Penggerak Program. Effective communication, positive teacher disposition, and supportive leadership have enabled the school to sustain educational reform initiatives. However, challenges related to technological infrastructure, digital competence, and access to professional development remain significant.

The curriculum has contributed to learning transformation by encouraging reflective teaching practices, project-based learning, and increased student engagement. These findings demonstrate that sustainable educational transformation requires a combination of policy support, institutional capacity, collaborative professional cultures, and continuous investment in human and technological resources.

Future research should compare implementation experiences across different regions and educational levels to deepen

understanding of curriculum sustainability and policy effectiveness in Indonesia.

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