

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CURRICULUM 2013 AND THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION IN INDONESIAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: INSIGHTS FROM DESCRIPTIVE-ANALYTICAL RESEARCH

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Abstract

This study compares the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum (K13) and the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian elementary schools, focusing on structure, pedagogy, assessment, and teacher roles. Using a descriptive-qualitative approach, data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving two teachers. Findings reveal that K13 is rigid and content-based with a mechanistic 5M scientific method, whereas the Merdeka Curriculum is flexible, competency-based, and emphasizes project learning and formative assessment. Teacher roles in Merdeka shift toward active facilitation. The Merdeka Curriculum proves more effective in fostering student independence and critical thinking. The novelty lies in its contextual classroom-based analysis, offering strategic insights for policy and teacher development.

Keywords: *Merdeka Curriculum, 2013 Curriculum, Elementary Education, Teacher Role, 21st Century Learning*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini membandingkan implementasi Kurikulum 2013 (K13) dan Kurikulum Merdeka di sekolah dasar Indonesia, dengan fokus pada struktur, pendekatan pembelajaran, sistem penilaian, dan peran guru. Menggunakan metode deskriptif-kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi kelas, dan analisis dokumen terhadap dua guru dari sekolah yang menerapkan masing-masing kurikulum. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa K13 bersifat kaku dan berorientasi konten dengan pendekatan saintifik 5M yang mekanis, sementara Kurikulum Merdeka lebih fleksibel, berbasis kompetensi, dan mendorong pembelajaran proyek serta penilaian formatif. Peran guru dalam Kurikulum Merdeka lebih sebagai fasilitator aktif. Temuan menunjukkan Kurikulum Merdeka lebih efektif dalam membangun kemandirian dan berpikir kritis siswa. Kebaruan studi ini terletak pada analisis kontekstual praktik kurikulum di kelas nyata, memberikan masukan strategis bagi pengembangan kebijakan dan pelatihan guru.

Kata Kunci: Kurikulum Merdeka, Kurikulum 2013, Pendidikan Dasar, Peran Guru, Pembelajaran Abad 21

Introduction

Primary education serves as a cornerstone in shaping students' foundational knowledge, essential skills, and moral character. In Indonesia, curriculum reform has been a central strategy in efforts to improve education quality and align learning outcomes with societal demands and global competencies in the 21st century. Over the past decade, the transition from the 2013 Curriculum (Kurikulum 2013 or K13) to the Merdeka Curriculum has not only involved technical changes in policy documents but has also signified a broader pedagogical and philosophical transformation in Indonesian education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017).

The 2013 Curriculum was introduced as an enhancement of the previous KTSP curriculum and began phased implementation in 2013. It adopts a scientific (5M) approach—observing, questioning, experimenting, reasoning, and communicating—and promotes integrated thematic instruction, character education, and a holistic assessment model covering attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Citriadin, 2020). Despite these intentions, many teachers have reported significant challenges in managing administrative complexity and applying the comprehensive assessment system in practice.

In response to these issues and the growing need for flexible, student-centered learning, the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology launched the Merdeka Curriculum in 2022, under the broader “Merdeka Belajar” reform initiated in 2019. The Merdeka Curriculum encourages pedagogical

autonomy, project-based learning, and differentiated instruction, aiming to nurture students' creativity, critical thinking, independence, and collaborative skills—attributes crucial for navigating contemporary challenges (Rahmafritri et al., 2024; Rahmawati, 2025).

Internationally, curriculum reforms are increasingly driven by the need to promote learner agency, competency-based education, and contextual adaptability. Biesta (2015) emphasizes the importance of moving beyond content delivery toward creating meaningful educational experiences that support the student's subjectivity and democratic participation. Priestley and Philippou (2019) further argue that curriculum change requires a deep rethinking of the roles of teachers—not merely as policy implementers but as active agents of pedagogical innovation shaped by local contexts and professional judgment.

While the Merdeka Curriculum aligns with these global trends, empirical research comparing its real-world implementation with the previous K13 model remains limited. Most existing studies are conceptual or focus on individual components such as assessment or teaching strategy. A comprehensive comparison of the two curricula in terms of structure, pedagogical approach, assessment systems, teacher roles, and student impact—particularly at the elementary level—is still underexplored in Indonesian contexts.

This study addresses this gap by providing an in-depth comparative analysis of K13 and the Merdeka Curriculum in actual classroom settings. By incorporating teacher perspectives, classroom observations, and curriculum document analysis, this research offers evidence-based insights into the strengths and limitations of both curricula. The findings aim to inform curriculum policymakers, support teacher professional development, and enrich scholarly discourse on curriculum innovation in developing education systems.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach to examine and compare the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum through real classroom practices. A comparative case study design was employed to explore the phenomena within their natural settings and to understand educational actors' perspectives in depth (Yin, 2018).

The research subjects consisted of two elementary school teachers—each representing the implementation of either the 2013 Curriculum or the Merdeka Curriculum. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on criteria such as a minimum of three years teaching experience and current application of the respective curriculum.

Data were collected through three primary methods: (1) Semi-structured interviews to explore teachers' understanding of the curriculum, instructional strategies, implementation challenges, and assessment practices; (2) Classroom observations, conducted three times for each teacher, to document teaching practices and the application of curriculum elements; (3) Document analysis of relevant curriculum materials such as syllabi, lesson plans, teaching resources, and assessment tools.

Research instruments included: (1) an interview guide, (2) an observation sheet based on curriculum indicators, and (3) a rubric for analyzing instructional documents. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), involving data reduction, coding, theme development, and interpretation. Findings were presented narratively and supported with comparison tables across five key dimensions: planning, implementation, assessment system, implementation challenges, and learning outcomes. To ensure data credibility, source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking were conducted (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Validity was reinforced through prolonged field engagement and reflective memos during analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Differences and Definitions of Curriculum

The Merdeka Curriculum was introduced as an enhancement of the 2013 Curriculum (K13) by the Indonesian Ministry of Education. Its primary goal is to promote equity in national education through a more adaptive intradisciplinary learning system (Afif et al., 2023). In practice, it advocates for engaging, non-monotonous learning that encourages student autonomy, active participation, character integration, and contextualization. Teachers are granted broader autonomy in determining learning content and teaching strategies aligned with students' developmental stages and interests.

Fundamentally, the Merdeka Curriculum differs from K13 by focusing on the uniqueness and character of each learner. Learning objectives are tailored to developmental stages rather than grade levels. One significant innovation is the integration of the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) project, which runs concurrently with intradisciplinary learning (Aisyah et al., 2024).

According to Lestari et al. (2024), the Merdeka Curriculum includes three types of learning activities: (a) differentiated intradisciplinary learning, (b) core activities focusing on the Pancasila Student Profile through interdisciplinary approaches, and (c) extracurricular learning tailored to student interests and available school facilities.

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is guided by the Indonesian National Standards, Curriculum, and Assessment Agency (BSKAP), which emphasizes four priorities (Rohiyatun et al., 2024): (a) independent implementation for schools beginning in 2022/2023, (b) professional development through teacher learning communities, (c) support from local educational authorities, and (d) school readiness for adopting curriculum models.

Martatiyana et al. (2023) describe three implementation options: (1) "Mandiri Belajar"—schools continue simplified K13 with selected Merdeka elements; (2) "Mandiri Berubah"—full adoption using Ministry-provided resources; and (3) "Mandiri Berbagi"—full adoption with self-developed teaching materials.

Curriculum Structure

The 2013 Curriculum focuses on four key competencies: religious values, positive societal behavior, mastery of academic content, and practical life skills (Suradi et al., 2022). Learning is centralized and thematic with fixed time allocations. In contrast, the Merdeka Curriculum offers greater flexibility by emphasizing the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile, broader learning outcomes, and variable time allocations. Teachers are encouraged to innovate and adapt materials to local needs, integrating project-based and extracurricular learning for holistic development (Darmayanti et al., 2024).

Learning Approach

K13 promotes the 5M scientific method (observing, questioning, experimenting, reasoning, and communicating), but in practice, it is often teacher-dominated with limited student agency (Putri et al., 2024). Merdeka classrooms, however, foster a more dynamic environment where students engage in inquiry-based and project-

based learning. Teachers act as facilitators, allowing students greater independence in problem-solving and knowledge construction (Haura & Fitriani, 2024).

Assessment System

The 2013 Curriculum employs a comprehensive yet administratively burdensome assessment system covering attitudes, knowledge, and skills via various instruments (Setiadi, 2016). Teachers often report excessive paperwork. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes formative assessment focused on learning processes, continuous feedback, and simplified tools such as portfolios and projects, allowing more effective monitoring of student progress (Maylafisa & Wardhani, 2024).

Role of Teachers

Under K13, teachers function primarily as content deliverers with limited room for innovation due to strict adherence to predetermined syllabi and textbooks. Many teachers struggle with rigid coverage targets, leading to rushed and less personalized instruction. Conversely, the Merdeka Curriculum empowers teachers to design context-based learning that is responsive to student characteristics. Teachers take on the role of facilitators and mentors, enabling experiential and explorative learning (A. S. Handayani et al., 2023).

Impact on Students

K13 fosters strong academic content understanding but lacks in cultivating student independence and critical thinking. Students tend to be passive and dependent on teacher direction. In contrast, the Merdeka Curriculum fosters a more active, creative, and independent learner profile. Through contextual project-based learning, students develop problem-solving skills, collaboration, and critical questioning abilities (Haris et al., 2024).

The key difference lies in learning outcomes: K13 produces academically proficient but passive students, while the Merdeka Curriculum promotes self-directed, critical, and adaptive learners.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal fundamental distinctions between the 2013 Curriculum (K13) and the Merdeka Curriculum, with implications that align with broader pedagogical shifts in 21st-century education. K13 follows a rigid, centralized, and content-oriented structure with standardized national benchmarks (Jannah et al., 2025), whereas the Merdeka Curriculum adopts a competency-based and modular framework that allows flexibility and local contextualization. This flexibility

corresponds with the notion of "teacher agency," in which educators are viewed not merely as curriculum implementers but as active developers (Priestley & Biesta, 2019 in Lubis et al., 2023). However, this autonomy can be disorienting for teachers accustomed to tightly structured curricula, highlighting the need for transitional support systems and ongoing professional development.

Pedagogically, the Merdeka Curriculum signifies a shift from procedural scientific approaches in K13—often mechanistic and teacher-centered—toward constructivist, project-based, and inquiry-driven learning (Zafirah et al., 2024). This shift aligns with Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, which emphasizes knowledge construction through authentic experiences and social interaction. Evidence supports that project-based learning enhances 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity more effectively than traditional methods. However, its success hinges on teachers' capacity to act as competent facilitators—a challenge that underscores the urgency for targeted teacher training.

The Merdeka Curriculum was developed as a response to the demand for adaptable learning systems that reflect regional diversity, in contrast to K13's focus on uniform national standards. It has been shown to foster learner autonomy and flexibility but requires greater resource allocation for effective implementation. As Agustiana and Asshidiqi (2021) note, curriculum plays a pivotal role in educational success, and inappropriate design can hinder the attainment of learning goals.

Assessment practices also illustrate this paradigm shift. K13 promotes a comprehensive but administratively burdensome form of authentic assessment. In contrast, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes meaningful formative assessment designed to support learning rather than merely document achievement (Budiono & Hatip, 2023). This approach resonates with Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, which values diverse learner abilities and progress over uniform outcomes (I. P. Handayani & Irawan, 2024). Despite this, transitioning from a results-oriented mindset to a process-oriented one remains a challenge for some educators.

The role of teachers has also undergone a significant transformation. 21st-century educators are expected to be adaptive professionals capable of navigating change and designing relevant learning experiences based on students' needs and socio-cultural context. Rather than simply delivering information, teachers must become facilitators, mentors, and co-creators of knowledge (Mardiana et al., 2021). Such transformation necessitates sustainable systemic support, professional

learning communities, and collaborative practices to help teachers evolve into “adaptive experts.”

Students in Merdeka Curriculum classrooms exhibit greater independence, creativity, and critical thinking skills. The framework of the Pancasila Student Profile offers a comprehensive model for balanced character and competence development. Nevertheless, sustained educational transformation requires system-wide coherence and consistent implementation over time.

The comparative analysis positions the Merdeka Curriculum as superior in flexibility, 21st-century relevance, and holistic competence development. However, its success is contingent upon adequate systemic conditions and resources. Teachers’ professional capital remains a decisive factor in education reform. One major barrier to equitable implementation is the digital divide across schools, as noted by Marizka et al. (2024). To address these challenges, this study recommends ongoing professional development, the strengthening of professional learning communities, coherent policy frameworks, and equitable distribution of resources and technological infrastructure.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the 2013 Curriculum (K13) and the Merdeka Curriculum represent two fundamentally different approaches to education reform in Indonesia. K13 is structured, centralized, and content-driven, employing a scientific 5M method that often reinforces teacher-centered practices and administrative rigidity. In contrast, the Merdeka Curriculum introduces a more flexible, competency-based model that emphasizes student-centered learning through inquiry and project-based methods.

The transition from complex and administratively heavy authentic assessment in K13 to the simpler, formative assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum signifies a meaningful shift toward supporting students’ learning processes and growth. Additionally, the teacher's role transforms from a knowledge transmitter to a facilitator and mentor, enabling more personalized and context-responsive instruction.

Findings indicate that the Merdeka Curriculum fosters student autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking—competencies essential for navigating the challenges of 21st-century learning. However, effective implementation depends on systemic readiness, including equitable access to resources, teacher preparedness, and

supportive educational policies. Addressing disparities in digital infrastructure and school capacity is crucial for ensuring consistent and equitable curriculum transformation across diverse educational contexts in Indonesia.

To ensure long-term success, stakeholders must prioritize continuous teacher professional development, foster inclusive learning environments, and establish sustainable support systems that align with the goals of modern, transformative education.

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