



Principal Elementary School Teachers' Perception of the Independent Curriculum: Readiness and Administrative Burden

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Abstract

This study explores the perceptions of teachers at State Elementary School 13/1 Muara Bulian regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, focusing on two main aspects: its appealing features and the administrative challenges encountered. The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to offer more flexible learning, emphasize differentiated instruction, and strengthen student character through contextual projects based on the Profile of Pancasila Students. However, in practice, teachers face considerable administrative burdens, such as preparing teaching modules, reporting formative assessments, and managing the Pancasila Student Profile Reinforcement Projects (P5). Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through interviews and observations involving directly engaged teachers. The findings show that while teachers appreciate the pedagogical freedom provided by the curriculum, they also express concerns over the increasing administrative demands, which are often unsupported by adequate training and resources. Therefore, practical measures are needed to offer professional assistance and streamline administrative tasks so that the Merdeka Curriculum can be implemented more effectively without overburdening educators.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum, teacher perceptions, administrative burden, SD Negeri 13/1 Muara Bulian.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a crucial foundation for national development. Through education, individuals are not only equipped with knowledge and skills but also instilled with character values that will shape their personality and civilized social behavior. Within the framework of national development, education is the primary instrument for producing superior, adaptive, and globally competitive human resources. Therefore, the education system must be able to adapt to the times and respond to the ever-changing dynamics of social, cultural, economic, and technological change. One form of this adjustment is manifested in the curriculum reform policy, which serves as a guideline for the direction and strategy of learning in Indonesia.

Over the past few decades, the Indonesian government has implemented several curriculum updates as part of its efforts to improve the quality of national education. From the 2004 Curriculum (KBK), the 2006 Curriculum (KTSP), to the 2013 Curriculum, each change brought a new spirit to the learning approach. Most recently, the Merdeka Curriculum (Independent Curriculum) emerged as a major innovation expected to address the needs of 21st-century education. This curriculum began its gradual implementation in 2022 and was introduced as part of the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) program championed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology

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(Kemendikbudristek). The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes more flexible, contextual, and student-centered learning, with the aim of providing teachers and schools with the freedom to develop the learning process.

The Independent Curriculum promotes several new principles in its learning approach, including differentiated learning, character building through the Pancasila Student Profile, and streamlining curriculum content and structure. The goal is for the learning process to focus not only on cognitive achievement but also on developing students with integrity, creativity, critical thinking, and the ability to collaborate and respect diversity. According to Anindito Aditomo, Head of the Education Standards, Curriculum, and Assessment Agency (BSKAP), the Independent Curriculum provides teachers with the opportunity to become adaptive learning designers who understand student characteristics and the learning environment more deeply. With this approach, teachers are no longer merely implementers of standard curriculum instructions, but become active and reflective facilitators in creating relevant and meaningful learning experiences.

One of the key elements of the Independent Curriculum is the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), which serves as a vehicle for project-based, cross-disciplinary learning. P5 is designed to foster noble values such as mutual cooperation, independence, global diversity, creativity, and critical reasoning skills. With project-based learning methods, students are expected to be actively involved in activities that awaken their social and contextual awareness of issues in their surroundings. A study conducted by Sulistiawati et al. (2023) showed that the implementation of P5 integrated with local wisdom values can increase student participation, build togetherness, and strengthen cultural identity in the learning process in elementary schools. This shows that these projects are not only instructional, but also transformational in developing students' character.

However, the spirit of change brought by the Independent Curriculum is not without its challenges, particularly in its implementation at the educational unit level. One crucial issue that has been widely highlighted is the increasing administrative burden faced by teachers. In many cases, teachers are not only required to develop independent teaching modules and conduct continuous formative assessments, but also to systematically and accurately document the entire P5 implementation process. This burden is exacerbated by time constraints and a lack of in-depth technical training, leaving teachers feeling overwhelmed in balancing administrative tasks with teaching responsibilities.

This issue was clarified in research conducted by Novi Handayani (2025). She found that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in several elementary schools faced serious obstacles in terms of teacher preparedness, particularly related to the drastically increased volume of administrative work. Teachers often feel they don't have enough time to delve into the content of their lessons because they are too focused on completing the documents and reports required by the system. In fact, in some cases, teachers feel like they are "writing more than teaching," a situation that clearly contradicts the spirit of independent learning that underpins this curriculum. This imbalance between

policy ideals and on-the-ground realities is a serious issue that requires immediate attention from education stakeholders.

Furthermore, this administrative burden not only impacts the technical aspects of teaching but also psychologically impacts teachers' enthusiasm and motivation. In this context, an important question arises: does a policy intended to free teachers from the shackles of conventional learning actually create a new, more complex burden? This question serves as a critical reflection on the implementation process of the Independent Curriculum and underlies the importance of understanding teachers' perceptions directly from the field. Teacher perceptions are crucial because they are the primary implementers of every curriculum policy. Understanding how teachers respond to the curriculum will provide a more objective picture of the successes and challenges faced during the implementation process.

Based on this background, this study aims to explore in depth how teachers at SD Negeri 13/1 Muara Bulian interpret the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. The main focus is directed at two dimensions: first, how teachers view the positive aspects of this curriculum, particularly in terms of flexibility and relevance of learning; and second, how teachers respond to administrative challenges that arise in daily practice. This school was chosen because it has actively implemented the Independent Curriculum and can represent challenges common in elementary education units. It is hoped that the results of this study will not only contribute to the development of more effective curriculum policies but also provide input for strengthening the role of teachers within a truly liberating educational framework.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive study type. This approach was chosen because it can provide an in-depth description of teachers' views and experiences in implementing the Independent Curriculum in elementary schools, particularly in the context of the pedagogical benefits and administrative challenges they face. The research was conducted at SD Negeri 13/1 Muara Bulian, Batanghari Regency, Jambi Province. This school was selected purposively on the basis that the institution has actively and consistently implemented the Independent Curriculum, thus providing a relevant empirical picture of the curriculum's implementation at the elementary education level.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with several teachers directly involved in the planning and implementation of the Independent Curriculum-based learning. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for an open exploration of teachers' perceptions without losing focus on the main research theme. During this process, teachers were given the opportunity to share their experiences related to the development of teaching modules, the implementation of formative assessments, and their involvement in the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). All interviews were recorded and carefully transcribed for further analysis. Furthermore, to

strengthen the field findings, the researchers also conducted a documentation study and literature review. The literature used came from scientific journals, research articles, and official policy documents obtained through the Google Scholar platform. Sources were selected selectively, considering their recency, topic relevance, and publisher credibility.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, identifying patterns of meaning emerging from interviews and comparing them with secondary data obtained from a literature review. This analysis began with data reduction, categorization by theme, and then drawing conclusions based on contextual interpretations of teachers' experiences. The researchers also conducted data triangulation to ensure the validity of the findings, comparing and matching the interview results with relevant literature. Therefore, the results of this study are expected to provide a comprehensive and in-depth picture of the dynamics of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum and contribute an empirical perspective useful for improving education policy in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents research findings based on interviews with teachers at SD Negeri 13/1 Muara Bulian and a literature review of relevant journals and scientific articles. The results are presented in a qualitative descriptive manner, referring to the main themes identified through data analysis. The discussion focuses on two main aspects: teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum and the challenges they face, particularly related to the administrative burden in teaching and learning.

The findings of this study are presented in narrative form, summarizing teachers' direct experiences and opinions and linking them to theoretical findings from the supporting literature. A critical discussion is conducted to demonstrate the appropriateness, differences, and contribution of the field findings to academic discourse and curriculum policy implementation. This approach is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the reality of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the elementary education level, while also offering new perspectives for developing more effective learning policies and practices.

According to Mr. Febri, the independent curriculum is a student-centered learning approach. In this curriculum, teachers are no longer the sole source of knowledge, but rather act as facilitators. Teachers adapt teaching methods to students' needs and characteristics. "We are not the teachers who determine the teaching method, but rather adapt it to the character and needs of the child. Children are truly free to learn," he said. For example, at the beginning of the semester, teachers conduct a diagnostic assessment to determine students' initial abilities. Based on the results of this assessment, appropriate learning approaches and models are determined.

Based on interviews with the principal, who also serves as a teacher at SDN 13/1 Muara Bulian, it was discovered that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum was being carried out in stages, prioritizing the upper grades (grades 4–6). This was due to limited teacher training and the school's available facilities and infrastructure.

Meanwhile, the lower grades (grades 1 and 2) have not yet implemented the Independent Curriculum directly because teachers at this level were deemed not yet fully prepared to implement the more flexible and differentiation-based approach required by the new curriculum.

In general, teachers expressed enthusiasm and a positive view of the Independent Curriculum. They appreciated the greater room for creativity in developing learning based on students' needs and interests. However, in its implementation, particularly in the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), teacher involvement still relies heavily on individual initiative. There is no standard format shared by all teachers, resulting in highly variable project implementation. Some enthusiastic teachers have independently developed and implemented projects, such as visits to local libraries, fire stations, and other educational spaces.

The principal explained that the implementation of P5 at their school essentially covers all grade levels, from grades 1 to 6. Activities are carried out in rotation due to the limited capacity of the visit location and the number of students, which reaches around 120. Furthermore, the school also faces administrative challenges, such as a circular prohibiting out-of-town activities, which temporarily hampered the implementation of certain projects. As a form of adaptation, the school shifted activities to local open spaces such as Bujang Park and continued the program because it had received support from parents and was included in the budget plan.

In implementing this, schools must also consider logistical aspects such as transportation and security. Therefore, coordination with parents is crucial, especially so that students can be dropped off and picked up by their respective guardians.

This finding aligns with Irawan's (2023) opinion, which states that the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum is largely determined by the readiness and leadership of teachers in schools, not solely by the completeness of the policy documents provided by the government. In other words, educational transformation cannot be built solely through regulations, but also through work ethic, leadership, and teachers' commitment to responding to change contextually and creatively.

A total of 25,000 schools have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum since the 2021/2022 academic year. This curriculum is implemented starting from early childhood education, elementary school grades I and IV, junior high school grade VII, and senior high school/vocational school grade X. In implementing this Merdeka Curriculum, the government prepared a questionnaire to help schools and educational units assess their readiness to implement the Merdeka Curriculum. In implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, the government provides three options that schools and educational units can choose from. The first option requires schools not to replace the current curriculum, but must implement several principles and sections of the Merdeka Curriculum. The second option requires schools to implement the Merdeka Curriculum using pre-provided teaching materials. And the final option requires schools to implement the curriculum using pre-provided teaching materials but develop the teaching materials themselves in accordance with the Merdeka Curriculum. The independent curriculum is specifically geared towards secondary schools and above. It is for early childhood education and primary school levels. The foundation of the independent curriculum is more about

preparing students for the next level of schooling (Di et al., 2021). Therefore, the independent curriculum for elementary schools focuses primarily on preparing students with Pancasila insights, using a variety of teaching materials and methods. The independent curriculum for elementary schools gives educational institutions and schools in cities and districts the freedom to develop education in accordance with this curriculum. Therefore, each elementary school using the independent curriculum will have different learning implementations, but will remain focused on Pancasila values..

One example of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SDN 13/1 Muara Bulian was demonstrated during a fifth-grade lesson on "puberty." The teacher was no longer the sole source of information, but rather provided a general overview as a catalyst. Students were then given the freedom to independently search for, process, and draw conclusions from the information. After the exploration process, the teacher guided the students' thinking to formulate it into a collective understanding within the class.

This approach reflects the spirit of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes independent learning, differentiation, and collaboration. Furthermore, this method supports the development of the Pancasila Student Profile, particularly in critical thinking, reasoning, and collaborative work in information retrieval and synthesis.

Based on interviews, teachers and principals welcomed the pedagogical freedom offered by the Independent Curriculum. They stated that this approach allows teachers to be creative in designing learning based on students' needs and characteristics, while also encouraging students to be more active and responsible for their own learning. However, they also emphasized that teacher initiative is a key determinant of the success of such a strategy. Without strong teacher motivation and leadership, this learning practice, which demands student independence, risks suboptimal performance.

Thus, the example of teaching the topic "puberty" above not only illustrates the technical implementation of the Independent Curriculum but also reflects the curriculum's philosophical values, which are based on freedom of thought, independent learning, and constructive collaboration between teachers and students. This model also demonstrates that successful implementation is closely linked to teachers' readiness and enthusiasm to implement a real paradigm shift in teaching in the classroom.

In its implementation, there are significant differences between the previous curriculum and the independent curriculum. There are several fundamental differences in the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum (K13) and the Independent Curriculum (KM). These differences include learning approaches, assessment methods, flexibility in teaching, and the roles of teachers and students in the classroom. The 2013 Curriculum emphasizes a scientific approach that involves five main stages: observing, asking questions, gathering information, associating, and communicating (Pertiwi et al., 2023). Teachers in grade 4 adopted this learning method by focusing on delivering material systematically and using lecture methods for 80% of the total learning time and can . The remainder is used for group discussions to strengthen student understanding. In contrast, the Independent Curriculum provides greater flexibility in learning methods. A sixth-grade teacher at the UPT SD Negeri 060816 utilizes project-based learning (PjBL) as a core part of the learning process (Kuswanto et al., 2024). Interviews indicate that students in this class are more active in exploring various concepts through projects related to

everyday life. Examples of projects include creating an eco-friendly campaign and a simple experiment on the water cycle. The main difference in assessment lies in the method of evaluating learning outcomes. In the 2013 Curriculum, evaluation is conducted through written tests, daily tests, midterm tests, and final tests. A fourth-grade teacher revealed that assessment in the Curriculum 2013 focuses on the final result (output) and pays less attention to students' thinking processes. Assessments are primarily conducted using objective instruments such as multiple-choice and essay questions. In contrast, the Independent Curriculum emphasizes authentic assessment that assesses both the learning process and outcomes equally. This assessment includes formative and summative assessments, as well as student reflection on learning experiences. A sixth-grade teacher at the UPT SD Negeri 060816 stated that projects and presentations are a key part of the evaluation. Project-based assessments allow teachers to understand the extent to which students apply learned concepts in real-world situations.

Teachers face several challenges, including difficulty in developing lesson plans when analyzing Learning Outcomes, particularly because they must be organized by phase. They then formulate these into Learning Objectives (TP) and organize them into a Learning Objective Flow (ATP). Teachers' lack of technological expertise leads to difficulties in developing lesson plans. This was acknowledged by several teachers who encountered obstacles in designing Teaching Modules. Furthermore, another challenge they experienced was difficulty in selecting appropriate learning methods and strategies for students, making learning more engaging and engaging, and encouraging students to be more active in the teaching and learning process.

The main challenge faced by teachers at SD 13/1 Muara Bulian is the increasingly complex role of teachers. Teachers must not only teach but also analyze individual student needs, provide diverse learning activities, and provide freedom while still guiding the final learning outcomes.

There are several positive and negative impacts of the curriculum change, namely:

- 1) The new curriculum complements the shortcomings of the previous curriculum. The new curriculum that will be implemented has been designed by further examining what the obstacles in the previous curriculum are. From this, it can be said that one of the goals of the curriculum change is to complement the shortcomings of the previous curriculum. It is hoped that the positive impact of the new curriculum can further improve the quality of education in Indonesia, and
- 2) There is an adjustment to the demands of changing times. The times are developing rapidly, various aspects of life, including education, require changes to adapt to emerging needs. This function of the curriculum is to answer to face future challenges due to the demands of changing times and still be able to realize educational goals. The negative impacts of the curriculum change, specifically in elementary schools, are:

- 1) Failure to achieve educational targets at the beginning of implementation. This is usually caused by teachers as educators not being able to implement the new curriculum comprehensively. Teachers must truly understand the new curriculum and its components if they want to implement it with the expected results. No matter how well a new curriculum is developed, if the spearhead, the teachers, are unable to effectively implement it in the teaching and learning process, the curriculum will not run smoothly.
- 2) Inadequate facilities. In some areas, school facilities sometimes become

an obstacle to the successful implementation of the new curriculum. The facilities available to each school in Indonesia are still uneven.

For SD 13/1, Mr. Febri, the 5th-grade homeroom teacher, stated that the positive impacts felt were that the independent curriculum increased students' creativity and independence, encouraged critical thinking, and allowed them to learn at their own pace. Meanwhile, the negative impacts felt..."The lesson material tends to be incomplete because children learn independently and not all students can catch up equally." Said Mr. Febri.

SDN 13/1 Muara Bulian, Batang Hari Regency, demonstrated its readiness to implement the independence curriculum, including P5. A coordination meeting with parents (guardians) supported the implementation of the Pancasila student profile strengthening project (P5). Teachers agreed that students would bring project tools and materials, and the school provided basic infrastructure and IT support..

CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SDN 13/1 Muara Bulian was carried out in stages, taking into account various aspects, particularly resource availability, teacher readiness, and training support. Initial implementation focused on the upper grades (grades 4–6), given existing limitations. Both teachers and the principal responded positively to this curriculum because it provided greater opportunities for innovation, implemented a flexible approach, and placed students at the center of the learning process (student-centered learning). In this context, teachers acted as facilitators, assisting students in both independent and collaborative learning.

One concrete example of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is evident in the topic of "puberty" in grade 5, where students are given the freedom to actively explore the material. Furthermore, the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) has been implemented at all grade levels, although its implementation relies heavily on teacher initiative and parental support. Administrative and logistical barriers, such as limited facilities and restrictions on after-school activities, are overcome through the implementation of alternative activities in local environments that maintain educational value.

However, several challenges remain, particularly related to the high administrative burden, difficulties in designing phase-based learning plans, and limited technological proficiency among some teachers. Substantial differences between the 2013 Curriculum and the Independent Curriculum also pose a barrier to the adaptation process.

On the positive side, the Independent Curriculum is considered capable of enhancing student creativity, encouraging independent learning, and fostering critical thinking skills. However, challenges also arise in the form of the potential for incomplete material discussion due to an overly independent learning model, preventing all students from following along at the same pace. This emphasizes that the curriculum's success rests not solely on policy design but also on the preparedness, leadership, and dedication of teachers in the field.

Overall, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SDN 13/1 Muara Bulian reflects that effective implementation is heavily influenced by strong collaboration between teachers, students, parents, and the school. Sustaining this success requires ongoing adjustments, adequate training for educators, and the provision of supporting facilities and infrastructure at the elementary school level.

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