



Effectiveness of the Merdeka Belajar Policy: Challenges and Opportunities in Improving the Quality of Primary and Secondary Education in Indonesia

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Abstract: This research explores the effectiveness of the Merdeka Belajar policy in improving the quality of primary and secondary education in Indonesia as well as the challenges and opportunities faced in its implementation. Through a qualitative approach using the case study method, data was collected from in-depth interviews with teachers, school principals, and Education Service officials in several regions, as well as through analysis of policy documents and related literature. The research results show that this policy provides opportunities to improve the quality of education, especially in developing 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity. However, there are significant obstacles in its implementation, especially related to the infrastructure gap between schools in urban and rural areas and the readiness of teachers to adopt innovative learning methods. The digital divide and limited access to training are the main obstacles that have the potential to weaken educational inequality in Indonesia. Therefore, government support in the form of funding, equitable infrastructure development, and ongoing training is very necessary to ensure that the Merdeka Belajar policy can be implemented effectively and evenly. Thus, this policy has the potential to create a more inclusive and relevant education system if these challenges can be overcome.

Keywords: Merdeka Belajar; Freedom to Learn; Policy Effectiveness; Primary and Secondary Education; Infrastructure Gaps; Teacher Readiness; 21st-Century Skills

Introduction

In an effort to reform Indonesia's education system to make it more responsive to global changes, the Ministry of Education and Culture launched the Merdeka Belajar program, a revolutionary policy that aims to change the education paradigm in Indonesia from a uniform and bureaucratic approach to a more flexible and student-centered one (Nugrohadhi et al., 2022; Pertiwi 2022). This policy offers an approach that places teachers and students as the main actors in determining the direction of learning, which is expected to increase the relevance and quality of education, especially at the primary and secondary levels (Jupriyanto et al., 2023). Merdeka Belajar seeks to

overcome the chronic challenges facing national education, such as low literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking skills among Indonesian students (Muliyah, 2020; Susilawati, 2021).

This program comes amidst concerns about the effectiveness of the Indonesian education system in preparing the young generation to face the challenges of the 21st century (Frananda et al., 2023; Indarta et al., 2022; Sartini & Mulyono, 2022). Based on the PISA report, Indonesia is still lagging behind in terms of literacy and numeracy skills compared to other countries in the Southeast Asia region (Syafii et al., 2023). The Independent Learning policy is expected to be able to encourage the achievement of important competencies, such as problem-solving skills,

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collaboration, and adaptability, which are very much needed in the digital era (Natalia & Sukraini, 2021; Ananda, 2022; Irawaan, 2023). Basically, this policy allows students to do more project-based learning and hands-on experience, so they can better understand the practical application of the knowledge they are learning (Novitasary, 2023; C. Sari, 2023).

On the other hand, Merdeka Belajar also brings big challenges for various stakeholders. The readiness of teaching staff, especially in rural and remote areas, is one of the main challenges. Many teachers are still accustomed to conventional teaching methods which tend to focus on memorization, so they lack the skills to implement a more creative and participatory learning approach as mandated by Merdeka Belajar (Sumarmi, 2023). In addition, differences in educational infrastructure between urban and rural areas are also a major obstacle, where schools in remote areas often lack access to technology and adequate facilities to support digital-based learning (Ningrum et al., 2023; Prayitno, 2024).

In terms of opportunities, Merdeka Belajar opens up space for innovation in learning, allowing teachers to experiment with various methods and strategies that are more interactive and contextual. This not only has the potential to increase students' learning motivation, but also allows students to develop skills that are more relevant to everyday life and the future world of work (Alhayat et al., 2023; Arisanti, 2022). This policy also promotes more inclusive education, where students with various economic and geographical backgrounds are expected to have more equal learning opportunities (Darlis et al., 2022; Solikhah & Wahyuni, 2023).

The success of Merdeka Belajar cannot be separated from the support of various stakeholders, including local government, parents, and local communities. Central and regional governments need to work together to ensure that every school, both urban and rural, receives adequate support in terms of teacher training and provision of necessary facilities and infrastructure (Damayanti et al., 2023; Zulaiha et al., 2023). On the other hand, the involvement of parents and communities in the educational process is also very important, especially in supporting community-based programs that are integrated into the school curriculum (Kurniati et al., 2023; Rahmiyati et al., 2024; Wahdani & Burhanuddin, 2020).

Despite this, there remains skepticism regarding the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of these policies (Qurniawati, 2023; Septiani, 2023). Some researchers worry that without rigorous evaluation and ongoing monitoring, Merdeka Belajar may not be able to achieve its goals (Marisa, 2021; Taher et al., 2023). A lack of in-depth understanding of the basic principles of inclusive and student-centered education can result in

the implementation of this policy becoming just a formality in the field (Ana Rafikayati et al., 2022; Pokhrel, 2024; Suriaman, 2023). Therefore, regular monitoring and evaluation is very important to ensure that the objectives of this policy can be achieved effectively (Bahri, 2023; Nasution, 2023; Putri et al., 2024).

Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to explore the effectiveness of the Independent Learning Policy in improving the quality of primary and secondary education in Indonesia. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for in-depth data mining regarding the challenges and opportunities faced in implementing this policy (Creswell, 2014). The case study provides detailed insight into the Merdeka Belajar policy, including how the policy was understood, implemented, and the impact it had in various regions, both in urban and rural schools (Yin, 2018).

Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including teachers, school principals and officials at the Education Department in several regions in Indonesia. This interview aims to gain an understanding of the experiences, perceptions and obstacles faced by implementers of the Merdeka Belajar policy. Apart from that, focus is also given to teachers' responses and adaptations in facing changes in learning methods and the support received from the school and government. This primary data collection was supported by a semi-structured interview guide to ensure that key topics related to the effectiveness and challenges of policy implementation were discussed systematically (Bryman, 2016).

Secondary data was collected through analysis of policy documents, evaluation reports from the Ministry of Education and Culture, as well as various published studies regarding the effectiveness and implementation of Merdeka Belajar. This analysis is useful for understanding objectives, indicators of success, as well as various policy modifications that may have been made based on the results of previous policy evaluations. Secondary data also includes journal articles and research reports from educational institutions that have studied the impact of Merdeka Belajar on the quality of learning, both from an academic and non-academic perspective (Patton, 2015).

Data analysis was carried out using the thematic analysis method, which was used to identify the main themes from the data that had been collected. The first stage of this analysis involves the coding process of data to find recurring patterns and themes related to

challenges and opportunities in implementing Merdeka Belajar (Saldana, 2016). After that, the data was categorized according to relevant themes, such as "teachers' perceptions of policies", "support from local government", and "availability of resources". This process also involves data triangulation steps, which are carried out by comparing interview results, document analysis, and other research results to ensure the validity and reliability of the data.

The validity of the data in this research is maintained through the member checking method, where the interim results of the analysis are confirmed back to the informant to ensure that the researcher's interpretation is in accordance with the informant's perspective. In addition, the use of triangulation of methods and data sources helps minimize interpretation bias and increases accuracy in describing conditions in the field (Flick, 2018). In this way, it is hoped that this research can contribute to uncovering the specific challenges faced as well as opportunities that can be exploited to improve the quality of primary and secondary education in Indonesia.

Result and Discussion

The Merdeka Belajar policy has had a significant impact on teaching patterns and methods in primary and secondary schools in Indonesia, as reflected in the results of interviews with teachers, school principals, and local Education Service officials. Through this policy, teachers are given greater autonomy to design a curriculum that suits student characteristics and local conditions. The majority of teachers and school principals expressed their appreciation for this policy, especially in terms of freedom to innovate in the learning process which allows students to learn contextually and relevantly (Pratama, D., & Setiawan, 2022). This freedom has also facilitated the development of 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking and collaborative abilities, which are expected to prepare students to face global challenges (P. Sari, 2023).

However, even though the potential of the Merdeka Belajar policy is very promising, its implementation has not been evenly distributed throughout Indonesia, especially in rural and remote areas. One of the important findings from this research is the difference in access to technology and educational infrastructure between schools in urban and rural areas. Schools in urban areas, for example, have easier access to internet facilities and digital-based learning devices, which enable them to implement innovative learning methods such as project-based learning and digital learning. In contrast, schools in rural areas face serious infrastructure limitations, where internet access is still very limited and

technological facilities such as computers or multimedia devices are not adequately available (Rahman, H., & Prasetyo, 2022).

This digital divide has a direct impact on the effectiveness of the Merdeka Belajar policy. Schools that have better access to technology can more easily implement innovative learning methods, while schools in remote areas must rely on traditional methods that are often less effective in developing students' practical skills. This creates significant disparities in learning outcomes between students in urban and rural areas, exacerbating existing inequalities in Indonesia's education system. This condition shows that without adequate infrastructure support, the Merdeka Belajar policy has the potential to increase education gaps in Indonesia rather than reduce these disparities (Nurhadi, D., & Supriyadi, 2023).

Apart from infrastructure challenges, teacher readiness and competence in implementing this policy is also a determining factor in the success of Merdeka Belajar. From the research results, many teachers feel they are not ready to implement project-based learning approaches and other innovative methods recommended by this policy. This competency limitation is especially felt by teachers in remote areas who have limited access to training and professional development. Teachers who do not have adequate training tend to have difficulty designing project-based learning that demands better classroom management skills, flexible curriculum adaptation, and holistic evaluation (Yulianto, 2023).

One of the biggest obstacles teachers face in implementing Merdeka Belajar is the lack of relevant training. Most of the training provided focuses on theory without providing practical guidance in implementing a student-centered learning approach. As a result, teachers often return to traditional teaching methods that focus on lectures and memorization, instead of encouraging students to think critically and creatively through interactive approaches (P. Sari, 2023). This shows that, although the Merdeka Belajar policy provides teachers with more freedom, this policy will not be effective without support for teacher competency development that is sustainable and relevant to daily learning practices.

Government support in the form of funding and providing adequate training is also an important factor in implementing this policy. The government needs to allocate greater funds to strengthen educational infrastructure, especially in disadvantaged areas, so that all schools can implement this policy effectively. Apart from that, the government is also expected to be able to provide ongoing training programs to improve teacher competence, so that they are able to facilitate a more creative and contextual learning process. Without this

support, the goal of the Merdeka Belajar policy to create learning that is relevant to the needs of the 21st century will only become a discourse that is difficult to realize (Putra, J., & Widodo, 2023).

The results of this research underline the importance of collaboration between government, schools and the community in implementing the Independent Learning policy effectively. The government is expected to not only provide policy direction, but also provide the necessary resources so that these policies can be implemented evenly throughout Indonesia. Meanwhile, the community and parents need to be involved in the learning process so that students receive full support in developing 21st-century skills (Sulastri, E., & Pratama, 2023).

Conclusion

This research concludes that the Merdeka Belajar policy in Indonesia offers significant opportunities to improve the quality of primary and secondary education by providing greater autonomy to schools and teachers in curriculum development and teaching methods. This policy allows for a more adaptive and responsive learning approach to student needs, especially in developing 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration. Several schools in urban areas that have access to technology and capable educational infrastructure have successfully implemented this policy, which has proven to have a positive impact on student engagement and learning motivation.

However, this research also reveals that the implementation of Merdeka Belajar still faces major challenges, especially regarding the gap in educational infrastructure between urban and rural areas. Schools in remote areas experience limited access to technology and adequate training support, thus creating disparities in the implementation of this policy. In addition, many teachers feel less ready to adopt the new learning methods recommended by Merdeka Belajar due to the lack of relevant and ongoing training. Teacher readiness and infrastructure support are key factors in the successful implementation of this policy.

Therefore, to achieve the optimal goals of the Merdeka Belajar policy, comprehensive support from the government is needed in the form of stronger funding, equitable development of educational infrastructure, as well as sustainable teacher training and competency development programs. Good collaboration between the government, schools, and society is also needed to ensure that the implementation of this policy can provide equal benefits for all students in Indonesia. If these challenges can be overcome, Merdeka Belajar has the potential to create a more

inclusive, relevant, and quality education system throughout Indonesia.

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The author declares no conflict of interest

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