

Enhancing Education Quality at SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu Amidst the Merdeka Curriculum

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Abstract: *This study aims to investigate and evaluate the strategies adopted by SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu in response to the Merdeka Curriculum, focusing on identifying initiative, assessing their effectiveness, and understanding potential challenges. Qualitative research methods, including semi structured interviews and observations were employed to gather data. The study analyzed the headmaster's perspective, initiative used, and challenge faced by the school in implementing Merdeka Curriculum. SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu employs strategies such as curriculum customization, educational technology integration, teacher training, and student involvement to effectively adapt to the Merdeka Curriculum. These strategies align with the curriculum's objectives and improve educational quality. Enhancing curriculum customization, fostering student empowerment, and implementing metrics for the Merdeka Curriculum are recommended for further improving education quality in SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu.*

Keywords: *merdeka curriculum; strategies; education quality.*

INTRODUCTION

Transformation is an inevitable phenomenon and will always exist, which means that all aspects of life, including in the field of education, will inevitably undergo transformation over time (Nugraha, 2022). In the ever-changing development of education, the implementation of the "Merdeka Curriculum" in Indonesia has introduced a new chapter in educational transformation. The "Merdeka Curriculum" aims to empower schools with greater autonomy to design their own curriculum, in line with national values while catering to the unique needs and aspirations of their students. This curriculum reform, characterized by its flexibility and

adaptability, is an important development for Indonesian education. In the context of this significant change, the improvement of the education system in Indonesia continues to improve quality, address emerging educational issues, and keep up with evolving technology, knowledge, society, and culture (Kurnia, 2023). In line with that, we need to understand that the curriculum is always dynamic and always influenced by changes in the underlying factors (Insani, 2019).

During major educational changes in Indonesia, the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum has influenced not only the improvement of the education system as a whole but also the strategies implemented by schools such as SMP Islam Insan Kamil

Wonoayu in facing the challenges of adapting this curriculum. This is in line with the statement (Putri & Arsanti, 2022), the purpose of the Merdeka Curriculum is to create an education system in Indonesia that is parallel to developed countries, where students have the flexibility to choose learning materials according to their personal interests and aspirations. The “Merdeka Curriculum” was implemented in Indonesia, leading to in a new era of education. This study, however, is focused on the strategies used by SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu to overcome the difficulties associated with implementing this curriculum. In light of this significant change, SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu, like many other academic institutions, must successfully adapt to and maximize the “Merdeka Curriculum”. The dynamics of this adaptation process are crucial to the larger discussion about promoting Indonesia’s educational standards.

The “Merdeka Belajar” curriculum also emphasizes the development of students’ interests and learning preferences as well as character development through the ‘strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile’ programme. Due to the “Merdeka Belajar” curriculum’s attention to students’ interests and learning styles through the use of customized modules and the ‘strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile’ programme, a curriculum innovation that focuses on developing competencies in the Pancasila student profile, students’ achievement improves (Sulkipli et al., 2023). In addition, the “Merdeka Belajar” curriculum provides space for teachers to go deeper in understanding individual students’ interests and learning styles, which in turn helps them design more suitable learning modules. The Strengthening the Profile of Pancasila Students program also provides a strong foundation for building students’ characters with Pancasila values. This creates a more holistic learning environment.

According to a study by Sari (2019), the Merdeka Belajar policy has proven effective when implemented in practice. It has significantly contributed to enhancing the quality of education through multiple facets, including the way students learn, teacher dedication, principal support, and curriculum development. One of its key achievements has been the empowerment of schools to design curricula that are better aligned with current educational trends and the evolving needs of students. Furthermore, the “Merdeka Belajar” policy has brought about notable changes in Indonesia’s educational landscape. It has made the education system more adaptable and responsive to contemporary trends and challenges. This transformation has been realized through the implementation of improved teaching and learning processes, characterized by greater interactivity and a shift towards student-centered methods. Additionally, policy has fostered a stronger commitment among teachers and principals, further contributing to its success in positively shaping the country’s education system.

Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate and assess the strategies used by SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu to advance standards of learning within the framework of “Merdeka Curriculum”. The goals include identifying the initiatives and strategies the school has adopted in response to this curriculum, evaluating the principal’s perspectives and experiences with these initiatives and strategies, and assessing their efficacy and any challenges they experienced during the implementation.

Significances of Study

This study offers several noteworthy advantages. Firstly, its conclusion can provide SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu with valuable insights into the effectiveness of their strategies, serving as a basis for improved decision-making and ongoing

educational enhancement within the school. Secondly, the study's findings hold significant implications for educational policy, furnishing education police makers with valuable insights into the impacts and challenges associated with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the Islamic school. Lastly, by contributing the broader academic discourse on curriculum reform and its influence on Islamic educational institutions, this research contributes to our understanding of the dynamics within the Indonesian education system. In summary, this study not only benefits the school directly by informing its strategies but also offers insights of broader significance to education policymakers and academic community. It underscores the importance of continuous improvement in educational practices and contributes to the ongoing conversation about curriculum reform in Indonesia.

Previous Study

The study titled "Learning Analysis: Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Improving Numeracy Literacy in Elementary Schools" written by (Hindriyanti et al., 2023) and this research, "Strategies for Enhancing Education Quality at SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu Amidst the Merdeka Curriculum: A Headmaster's Perspective," share a common emphasis on improving education through curriculum changes. Both studies applied qualitative methods and were conducted during the 2022/2023 academic year. However, they differ in terms of the educational settings, with "learning analysis" focusing on elementary school and this research centering on Islamic junior high school. In addition, while "learning analysis" explores the impact on numeracy literacy, this research highlights the headmaster's perspective and the strategies within the context of Merdeka Curriculum. These differences provide valuable insights into the diverse educational

landscape, offering a more comprehensive understanding of curriculum-driven educational enhancements.

The study titled "Strategies to Implement Independent Learning Programs: A Reflective Study on Ministerial Programs" written by (Harmanto et al., 2022) and this research "Strategies for Enhancing Education Quality at SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu Amidst the Merdeka Curriculum: A Headmaster's Perspective," both share a concern on educational strategies. They differ, however, in their contexts and primary objectives. The former study explores the implementation of independent learning (MB-KM) programs in higher education, emphasizing activities such as teaching at schools, research, and internships, among others. On the other hand, this research centers on an Islamic junior high school and primarily investigate the strategies employed to enhance education quality within Merdeka Curriculum Framework. While these studies contribute to educational insights, they do so within distinct educational settings and with different emphases-higher education policy implementation in the former and school-level strategies in latter. Combining findings from both studies can offer a broader perspective on educational strategies across different levels of the education system.

Based on the preceding studies, a noticeable research gap emerges in the exploration of how curriculum changes and educational strategies impact different educational levels. While the first previous study highlights the effects of the Merdeka Curriculum on numeracy literacy elementary schools, the second previous study delves into the implementation of independent learning program in higher education. However, there is a lack of research that bridges the gap between two levels, particularly investigating how curriculum changes and strategies may be implemented and their potential synergies in secondary

education settings, such as junior high school. Therefore, further research is needed to comprehensively understand the nuances and effectiveness of curriculum-driven educational enhancements and strategies across various educational tiers.

METHOD

It can be defined that qualitative research as a type of study that advances conceptual understanding based on knowledge already in existence (Ary et al., 2010). This study focuses a strong emphasis on flexibility and validity, two concepts that are directly related to the researcher's capacity for data collection, analysis, and reflection. Because a qualitative approach enables researchers to acquire an in-depth understanding of the strategies used by SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu to deal with the "Merdeka Curriculum" and the principal's perspectives on these strategies, this study has chosen this methodology. Researchers can more thoroughly investigate the detailed and ethereal features of this educational phenomena by using a qualitative approach.

Setting for this study was SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu. Additionally, a number of the other schools that use the "Merdeka Curriculum" will be considered as the benchmark. Semi-structured interviews with the school principal of SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu was used as the gathered data. The purpose of the interview questions is to discover more about the strategies used and the participants opinions regarding the application of the Merdeka Curriculum. In addition, observations were made at SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu to watch how the strategies are used in practices.

Interview data were transcribed, and observations were recorded and analysed. The analysis included categorization, coding, and identifying key patterns and findings. Data triangulation enhanced research

validity, following ethical principles like participant privacy and confidentiality, with necessary permission secured. The study spanned a specific duration, with recognized potential limitations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Interview

The interview with the principal of SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu revealed key thematic aspects regarding the schools' strategies for implementing Merdeka Curriculum. Central to these strategies was the school's adept customization of the curriculum to incorporate Islamic values and local wisdom, thus preserving their cultural and moral identity while fostering strong ethical foundations in students. Furthermore, the school's embrace of educational technology, such as online platforms and digital resources, aimed to create dynamic and flexible learning environments, in harmony with the Merdeka Curriculum's ethos of freedom in resource selection. Lastly, the interview emphasized the critical role of ongoing teacher training, which not only enhanced teacher competence but also enabled the application of innovative teaching methods in alignment with the curriculum's principles. These findings collectively underscore the school's comprehensive approach to curriculum implementation, promoting holistic education that blends academic proficiency with moral character and technological adeptness in students.

1. Adapting the Curriculum:

The interview results show that SMP Islam Insan Kamil has customized the "Merdeka Curriculum" to include elements of Islamic values and local wisdom in their curriculum. This is done to ensure that the education provided remains consistent with Islamic values and strengthens the school's identity. As has been implemented at SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu, there is a

significant effort in integrating Islamic values and local wisdom in the curriculum. This integration covers the moral or attitudinal aspects, which include values such as tolerance, cooperation, perseverance/discipline, honesty, and sensitivity to the environment. Thus, this school is committed to shape the character of students who are not only academically intelligent but also have a strong moral and ethical foundation in accordance with the underlying values of their religion and culture.

2. Use of Educational Technology

SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu has adopted educational technology as part of their strategy. It includes using online learning platforms to facilitate learning outside the classroom and utilizing digital resources in learning. Online learning benefits greatly from the use of programs like Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and Zoom Meeting. In the context of Merdeka Curriculum, we can use more digital learning environments like Moodle, Google Classroom, or well-designed e-learning, which includes animations and materials catered to learning requirements. For instance, teachers can use Google Classroom to upload lesson plans and homework, and students can access these resources from home to complete online learning.

3. Teacher Training

SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu provides ongoing training to their teachers in order to improve their understanding of the “Merdeka Curriculum” and how to implement it in learning. For instance, teachers at SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu can arrange classes and practical instruction in their subject areas each month. Additionally, they may have on-the-job training in responding to the workshop's results more effectively. Teachers will use Merdeka Curriculum concepts while students

are learning in this training, and they will be graded by the subject group.

Observation

In addition to interviews, observation is also an important part of this research. This activity was carried out on February 14, 2023 – February 25, 2023. Through observation, researchers can directly monitor the practices of the strategies implemented by the school in a real context. This observation provides a more in-depth picture of how the strategy is implemented in daily activities at SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu. With the combination of data from interviews and observations, this study can provide a comprehensive understanding of the school's efforts in dealing with curriculum changes. The following are the strategies used by the school:

1. Student Participation

Students of SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu are actively involved in the process of determining learning objectives and designing parts of their own curriculum, in accordance with the spirit of "Independent Curriculum." When students are said to be actively involved, it means they play a significant role in carrying out the independent curriculum, as seen in their response to the values they have adopted and the learning skills they have acquired. Students believe that there is diversity in how the independent curriculum is applied, allowing for more effective and efficient learning.

The primary findings of this study are evaluated by the researchers in this discussion section. The Merdeka Curriculum and its implications for improving educational standards at SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu are the main theme in this section. Researchers also discuss the obstacles that the school might experience when implementing this curriculum and how to get around them. Finally, in this section,

we'll discuss the research's more general ramifications in relation to curriculum reform and education in Indonesia.

1. Adapting the Curriculum

The curriculum customization by SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu is very appropriate response to the “Merdeka Curriculum”. By incorporating Islamic values and local wisdom, the school ensures that the education provided is in line with their values and allows students to better understand their identity and culture. The adjustment to the curriculum refers to the results of analysing the needs of students at SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu. To support this statement, the Merdeka Curriculum is designed according to the needs of learners to be able to solve the real-world problems (Darto & Arbi, 2022). The adaptation of the curriculum by SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu as a highly relevant contribution to the “Merdeka Curriculum”. It is the part of effort that is in line with the objectives of Merdeka Curriculum development in general. Merdeka Curriculum development aims to compile, design, change, improve, implement, and control the education curriculum. This development includes monitoring, evaluation, and improvement based on input from the results of monitoring and evaluation in schools and educational institution outside the school (Kamila & Agus RM, 2023) .

2. Use of Educational Technology

The adoption of technology is a positive step to facilitate more efficient and relevant learning. The use of online learning platforms allows access to a wider ranges of learning resources, which is in line with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum to provide freedom in the selection of learning materials or resources. It also helps to promote more active interaction between students and learning materials, creating a more dynamic and immersive learning experience. The utilization of technology enables the

development of teachers’ skills in presenting learning that suits need of learners, and allows learners to learn flexibly and access variety of diverse resources (Rosmana et al., 2023).

3. Teacher Training

Teacher training is an important element in the successful implementation of Merdeka Curriculum. By improving teachers’ understanding of curriculum concepts and practices, SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu can ensure that they can implement the curriculum effectively and provide students with a better educational experience. Through the training, teachers become more prepared and confident in carrying out their roles in the learning process. In addition, they can also adapt more innovative learning strategies in accordance with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum. Because the role of teachers is very crucial in the curriculum development process in school. Therefore, in curriculum development, the quality of teachers must be improved (Sila, 2014). Thus, the existence and competence of professional teachers is recognized as the main foundation in the journey of education in Indonesia, essential for the success of the curriculum and the education system as a whole (Sila, 2014).

4. Students’ Involvement

Student participation in deciding learning objectives and designing parts of their own curriculum is one of strongest points of this approach. It allows students to have an active role in their education, explore their personal interest and potential, and build participation and leadership skills that are essential for their future. In addition, by involving students in this process, they can feel more motivated and committed to learning, creating a more dynamic and student-centered learning environment. The results of research conducted by (Indriyani & Jannah, 2023), explained that the preparation for the implementation of Merdeka

Curriculum must involve many parties starting from schools, teachers, students, parents, and the community. Based on this statement, it can be described that student participation is very important in the process of implementing Merdeka Curriculum.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

This study reveals the various strategies that SMP Islam Insan Kamil has used to deal with “Merdeka Curriculum” in the context of rapid educational change. The findings demonstrate that this school has made significant efforts to make sure they can effectively implement this curriculum and give their students an excellent education. Curriculum customization or adaptation, the use of educational technology, teacher training, and students’ involvement have all been significant pillars of “Merdeka Curriculum” implementation strategy. This enables educational institutions to use technology to improve student learning while adhering to Islamic principles and local knowledge. Student involvement in the educational process gives them the chance to actively engage in their learning and develop skills that will benefit them in the future.

Study Implication

The implication of this study is that SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu has adopted several successful strategies that can serve as useful examples for other schools in dealing with Merdeka Curriculum. Adjusting the curriculum to Islamic values and local wisdom, utilizing educational technology, teacher training, and student participation in the learning process are effective steps in dealing the dynamic curriculum transformation. It can have positive impacts on developing and improving education especially on students learning experiences.

Study limitation

Some weaknesses exist in this study as well. The results may not be immediately applicable to other school contexts because the study's primary focus was only one particular school. Second, despite giving an overview of the strategies employed, there is no in-depth analysis of the potential challenges that could arise when putting these strategies into practice. Future studies can therefore delve further into the difficulties schools have adopting the Merdeka Curriculum and how to solve them.

Suggestion

Several suggestions can be made to enhance the “Merdeka Curriculum” implementation at SMP Islam Insan Kamil Wonoayu based on the results of this study. First, it is essential to improve the curriculum by making sure that Islamic values and regional knowledge continue to be an essential part of education. Second, it is critical to improve teacher preparation, particularly in light of the “Merdeka Curriculum” and the use of technology in the classroom. Thirdly, student empowerment in the learning process needs to be improved, perhaps by creating student leadership initiative. Last but not least, educational institutions ought to think about utilizing particular metrics to assess the success of their Merdeka Curriculum application plans and the effects on education.

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