



Implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum in Improving Student Learning Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe and analyze the implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum with a focus on the development of the school operational curriculum, the use of teaching tools, the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) project, and learning practices based on students' learning stages to improve the quality of education. The research employed a qualitative descriptive method. Informants consisted of the school principal, vice principal, curriculum representatives, teachers, and driving teachers. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, and analyzed descriptively. The results show that the Independent Learning Curriculum is reflected in the integration of P5 across various fields, including religious devotion, mutual cooperation, and independent and creative learning. Differentiated learning is implemented by first mapping students' needs through diagnostic assessments, designing learning modules, applying process differentiation strategies, and conducting continuous evaluation through formative and summative assessments. The implementation has contributed to improving the quality of education by enhancing the principal's performance in aligning the School Operational Curriculum with national guidelines, strengthening teachers' creativity in using media, technology, and teaching materials, and increasing students' learning achievements. In conclusion, the Independent Learning Curriculum fosters innovation and collaboration that positively impact school performance and student competence.

Keywords: *implementation, independent kulirkulum, quality of school*

INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka Curriculum was developed as a more flexible framework focused on essential content and the development of students' character and competencies [1], [2]. Its core features include project-based learning to cultivate soft skills and character aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile, as well as an emphasis on essential material that enables deeper learning of foundational competencies such as literacy and numeracy [3].

The primary goal of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in introducing the Merdeka Curriculum is to reform education by transforming school culture. According to Sumarsih et al., a school culture overly focused on administrative tasks is not ideal. Instead, a culture emphasizing innovation and student-centered learning is needed to nurture graduates with strong Pancasila values [4]. Similarly, Daga highlighted that excessive bureaucracy hinders teachers' effectiveness in the classroom [5]. In response to the challenges of the Society 5.0 era, a more adaptable curriculum is necessary [6], [7]. The Merdeka Curriculum is therefore expected to improve the competence of all education stakeholders and elevate the quality of education [8], [9], [10], [11]

SDN 2 Tijue, a model primary school favored by the community in Pidie Regency, had previously implemented the 2013 Curriculum. Following national policy changes, the school transitioned to the Merdeka Curriculum. This shift has been reflected through the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) and differentiated learning—both of which have significantly contributed to improving student and teacher performance.

Preliminary observations reveal that SDN 2 Tijue demonstrates strong teaching practices, sufficient human resources, and student achievements aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum standards. This is supported by the school's Educational Report Card, which indicates high performance across several dimensions.

In literacy—defined as the ability to understand, use, reflect on, and evaluate various types of texts—SDN 2 Tijue ranks in the upper-middle tier (21–40%). For numeracy, which involves applying mathematical concepts to real-world problems, the school ranks in the middle tier (41–60%) (Rapor SDN 2 Tijue, 2024).

Regarding character education, including morality toward others, the environment, the nation, teamwork, creativity, critical thinking, global diversity, and independence, the school again ranks in the upper-

middle category (21–40%). In terms of classroom management, psychological support, and teaching methods, similar rankings were recorded. Notably, the school ranks in the top tier (1–20%) for curriculum management oriented toward improving learning outcomes. Despite these achievements, field observations revealed several implementation challenges. Some teachers expressed difficulties in understanding aspects of the Independent Learning Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka), particularly in translating learning outcomes into instructional objectives and executing the P5 project effectively.

This raises the question of whether the educational quality observed at SDN 2 Tijue is truly the impact of the Independent Learning Curriculum or whether it reflects pre-existing strengths. If the former is true, it becomes essential to assess the extent to which the curriculum has contributed to measurable improvements in educational quality. This study positions itself within this gap: while previous research has focused on general barriers to implementation, such as teachers' struggles with module development, digital platforms, and shifting from lecture-based methods Rahayu et al., [12]; Sari et al., [13]; Mansur et al., [14], few have examined how implementation translates directly into improved learning outcomes at the school level.

Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in linking the practical implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum with concrete improvements in student learning outcomes and school quality indicators. The objective of this study is to describe and analyze the implementation process at SDN 2 Tijue, focusing on its effects on curriculum development, teaching practices, and student achievement.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. Qualitative research, as defined by Moleong, is a tradition within the social sciences that relies fundamentally on human observation and interpretation in natural settings [15]. The descriptive nature of this research aims to depict phenomena as they occur in their natural setting.

The descriptive nature of this study aims to portray the implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum as it occurs in practice, without manipulation of the research context. According to Mariana, descriptive research investigates the current status of a group of people, objects, conditions, systems of thought, or events [16].

The research was conducted at SDN 2 Tijue, a primary school that has adopted the Independent Learning Curriculum. This location was selected purposively because the school has shown both notable achievements in curriculum management and specific challenges in classroom practice, making it a representative case for study.

Data sources consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from informants including the principal, vice principal, curriculum

coordinator, teachers, and guru penggerak (teacher facilitators). Secondary data were gathered from school documents such as curriculum plans, teaching modules, assessment reports, and school profiles [17], [18].

Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted semi-structurally to capture detailed perspectives from each informant. Observations focused on classroom learning processes, P5 project implementation, and curriculum development activities. Documentation was used to validate information obtained from interviews and observations [19], [20].

Data analysis employed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman. In this process, data were first reduced by organizing and simplifying raw information according to the research focus. The reduced data were then displayed in narrative form, supported by descriptive matrices or tables where necessary [21], [22]. Finally, conclusions were drawn and continuously verified by comparing patterns, identifying relationships, and interpreting meanings throughout the research process. This cyclical and iterative approach ensured the credibility and validity of the findings.

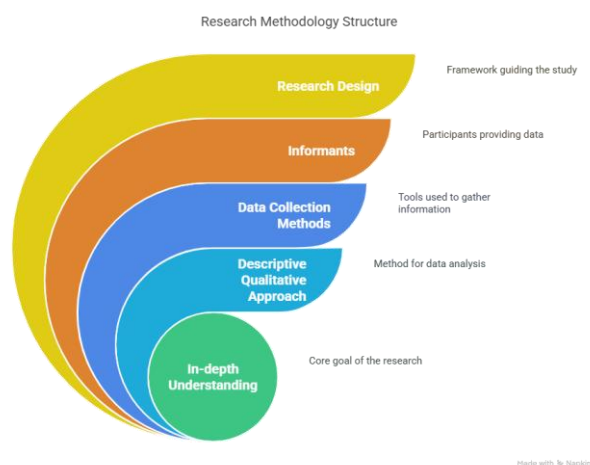


Figure 1. Research Methodology Structure

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Transformation of Learning Structure at SDN 2 Tijue through the Merdeka Curriculum

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SDN 2 Tijue shows a significant shift in learning, particularly with the allocation of 20% of study hours to the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) project. Through Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) and differentiated instruction, students are grouped by ability, which helps reduce learning gaps and creates a more inclusive learning environment.

The findings indicate that this approach not only strengthens literacy and numeracy but also supports character education across the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile. These outcomes are supported by adaptive teaching modules, varied assessments, and strong collaboration between teachers and parents.

Teachers' roles as facilitators further encourage independence and creativity.

This study aligns with Sari et al. [13], who found that contextualized project-based learning enhances motivation and achievement. However, the case at SDN 2 Tijue adds new evidence that integrating local culture into P5 themes increases relevance and impact. This suggests that localized adaptation is crucial for the success of curriculum innovation.

A strength of this research is its demonstration of how local wisdom and global

perspectives can be combined to shape student character. Nevertheless, a key weakness lies in the uneven mastery of differentiated instruction among teachers, which can affect the consistency of curriculum implementation.

The implication is that sustained professional development and strong community partnerships are essential for scaling the Merdeka Curriculum. With adequate support, it can serve as a practical model for improving both academic outcomes and student character in Indonesian primary schools.

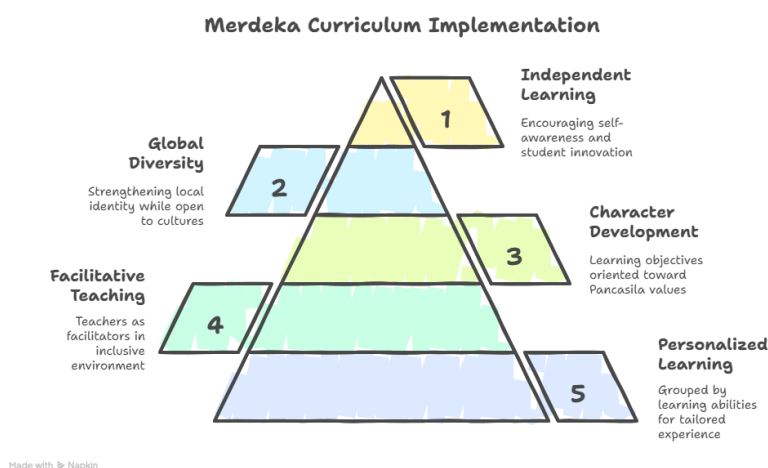


Figure 2. Merdeka Curriculum Implementation

2. Implementation of Differentiated Learning

Based on classroom observations and assessment records, SDN 2 Tijue has actively implemented differentiated learning by using diagnostic assessments to map students' learning needs and by designing instructional modules that differentiate content, process, product, and learning environment. Grouping students by readiness and applying targeted strategies—such as Teaching at the Right Level and adaptive materials—has enabled teachers to match tasks to each learner's level, which in turn appears to increase student engagement and produce observable gains in cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains as reported by teachers and evidenced in classroom artifacts.

This cause-effect relationship is supported by several contributing factors: teacher initiative in developing responsive modules, regular reflective practice and formative evaluation, leadership support for instructional innovation, and active parent-teacher collaboration. At the same time,

implementation is constrained by uneven teacher mastery of differentiated design and limited time allocated for module development, which may reduce consistency across classrooms. A key strength of the evidence is triangulation across observations, teacher interviews, and students' work; a notable limitation is the single-school scope and the short duration of follow-up.

These findings are consistent with previous studies that emphasize diagnostic assessment and teacher capacity as central to successful Merdeka Curriculum implementation [12], [14]. The contribution of the SDN 2 Tijue case is its contextualization of differentiated modules with local themes, which appears to enhance relevance and student motivation. Practically, the results imply that scaling differentiated learning requires sustained professional development, peer coaching, and institutional time-allocation for teachers to design, implement, and reflect on adaptive modules.

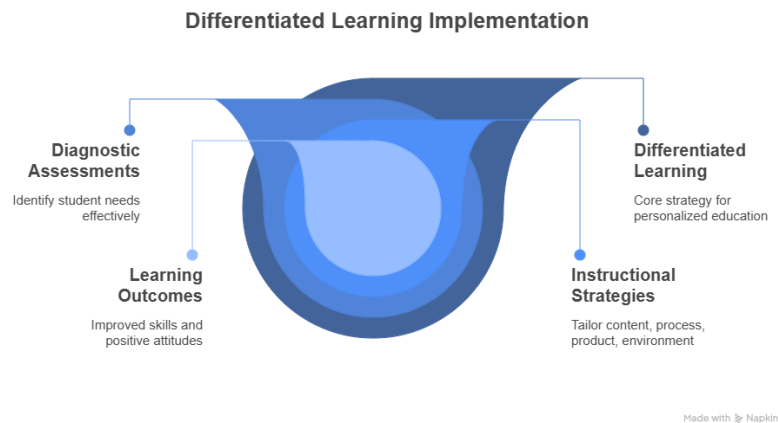


Figure 3. Differentiated Learning Implementation

Figure 3 illustrates the systematic implementation of differentiated learning at SDN 2 Tijue, where teachers begin with diagnostic assessments, design adaptive modules, and adjust content, process, and learning products to suit students' readiness levels. This cycle has led to higher engagement, improved academic and character outcomes, and greater teacher creativity, although challenges remain in terms of limited teacher expertise and time for module development. These findings align with Sari et al. [13] and Mansur et al. [14], who also reported difficulties in applying student-centered learning, yet the case at SDN 2 Tijue demonstrates that strong leadership and parental support can help overcome such barriers. The implication is that differentiated learning, when applied consistently, can serve as a scalable model for effective Merdeka Curriculum implementation.

3. Impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on School Quality

The application of the Merdeka Curriculum has had a positive impact on the overall quality of education at SDN 2 Tijue. The principal has demonstrated improvements in preparing planning documents such as the School Operational Curriculum (KOSP) in accordance with PMM guidelines. Teachers have begun to creatively

integrate technology and instructional media. Meanwhile, students have shown increased academic achievement based on formative and summative evaluations.

The positive impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on school quality at SDN 2 Tijue reflects the theoretical perspective of school effectiveness, which emphasizes the alignment of leadership, teaching practices, and student outcomes as key indicators of quality [23]. The principal's ability to prepare the KOSP in accordance with PMM guidelines illustrates the importance of strategic leadership in curriculum management, while teachers' creative integration of technology supports the principles of 21st-century learning that highlight digital literacy and adaptive pedagogy [24]. At the same time, the improvement in students' academic achievement through formative and summative evaluations aligns with constructivist theory, which stresses that meaningful learning occurs when instructional strategies are responsive to learners' needs and contexts [25]. However, the implementation still faces limitations such as uneven teacher readiness and varying access to technological resources, which may affect the consistency of curriculum outcomes across classrooms.

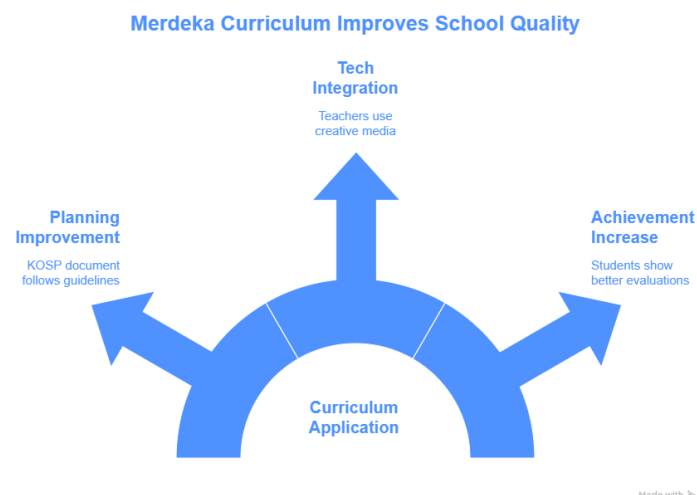


Figure 4. Merdeka Curriculum Improves School Quality

Figure 4 demonstrates that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SDN 2 Tijue has contributed to measurable improvements in school quality, as reflected in stronger leadership capacity, more creative teaching practices, and higher student achievement. The principal's ability to design the School Operational Curriculum (KOSP) in line with PMM guidelines shows an institutional strengthening, while teachers' creative use of media and technology indicates growing pedagogical innovation. Student progress, captured through formative and summative assessments, supports the claim that the curriculum fosters not only academic growth but also character development. These results are consistent with findings by Rahayu et al. [12], who observed that Merdeka Curriculum

implementation enhances school governance and instructional creativity, although challenges persist in teacher readiness. The implication is that, despite some limitations, the Merdeka Curriculum can be an effective driver of systemic quality improvement when supported by strong leadership and professional collaboration.

Overall, the evidence from Figure 4 confirms that the Merdeka Curriculum does not merely adjust instructional strategies but fundamentally strengthens the governance, pedagogy, and learning outcomes of SDN 2 Tijue. This reinforces the view that curriculum reform, when implemented systematically, can serve as a catalyst for sustainable school quality improvement.

Tabel 1. Summary of the Implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Dimension at SDN 2 Tijue

P5 Dimensions	Implementation Strategy	Achievement Indicators
Faith in God Almighty	Morning tadarus (Qur'an recitation), joint prayers, contextual religious lessons	Students can recite daily prayers, understand religious values, and demonstrate polite behavior
Global Diversity	Local culture projects, introduction to Indonesian archipelago culture through arts & stories	Students are able to name their regional culture and show appreciation for diversity in daily interactions
Mutual Cooperation (Gotong Royong)	Classroom and school yard community service activities	Students actively collaborate, share responsibilities, and help others voluntarily
Independence	Individual assignments based on interest and learning responsibility development	Students complete independent tasks on time and demonstrate self-confidence
Critical Thinking	Group discussions, simple problem-solving in real-life contexts	Students express logical opinions, compare ideas, and evaluate information
Creativity	Art creation, digital literacy activities, simple classroom experiments	Students produce original works and present creative ideas in various types of media

Table 1 shows that the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) at SDN 2 Tijue has been systematically integrated into daily learning activities, resulting in measurable character and competency outcomes. The dimension of faith in God Almighty is strengthened through tadarus, joint prayers, and contextual religious lessons, which foster students' polite behavior and religious awareness. Global diversity is developed through cultural projects and storytelling, enabling students to appreciate differences and respect diversity. Mutual cooperation is reflected in classroom and school-yard service activities, which successfully nurture responsibility and voluntary collaboration. The independence dimension is supported by individual assignments that encourage students to take responsibility for their learning, while critical thinking emerges through group discussions and real-life problem-solving tasks that train students to express and evaluate ideas logically. Finally, creativity is promoted through art creation, digital literacy, and classroom experiments, leading to the production of original works across various media. These findings align with Sari and Supriyadi [13], who argue that P5 strengthens holistic student development, but they also highlight challenges in

sustaining consistency across all dimensions, especially creativity and critical thinking, due to limited resources and teacher capacity.

These findings indicate that the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile at SDN 2 Tijue has contributed not only to strengthening students' character but also to enhancing their academic and social competencies in a balanced manner. However, the researchers note that sustaining all six dimensions consistently requires continuous teacher training and school support systems, particularly in fostering creativity and critical thinking, which remain more challenging compared to other dimensions.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SDN 2 Tijue has shown significant improvements in teaching and learning quality through differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and the integration of the Pancasila Student Profile. Teachers successfully applied diagnostic assessments to tailor instruction, which enhanced student engagement and learning outcomes, while principals improved curriculum planning and documentation in line with PMM guidelines. The findings also highlight the active role of parents and the local context in supporting inclusive and

contextualized learning, leading to better character formation, collaboration, and creativity among students. These results align with previous studies emphasizing the effectiveness of student-centered approaches and 21st-century skills development [26], [27], [28], [29]. However, a limitation of this study is its reliance on a single school context, which may reduce the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, the implications are substantial, showing that the Merdeka Curriculum contributes not only to academic achievement but also to holistic student development and school quality improvement.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SDN 2 Tijue has positively influenced both teaching practices and overall school quality. Differentiated learning, project-based activities aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile, and the integration of technology have enhanced student engagement, academic achievement, and character development. Principals' strategic curriculum planning and active teacher facilitation have been key factors in these improvements, while parental involvement and contextualized learning further support successful outcomes. Despite some limitations, such as variability in teacher readiness and resource availability, the curriculum demonstrates a clear potential to foster holistic student development and strengthen school performance. These findings provide valuable insights for other schools aiming to implement Merdeka Curriculum effectively and suggest that sustained professional development and collaborative support are essential for maintaining quality outcomes.

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