

The Independent Curriculum Approach in Supporting Independent Learning for Inclusive Students in Elementary Schools

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how the Merdeka Curriculum supports independent learning for inclusive students in elementary schools. The method used is qualitative research with a case study approach in several elementary schools that have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and document analysis. The results of the study show that the Merdeka Curriculum has a positive impact on the independent learning of inclusive students through an adaptive and responsive approach to student needs. The discussion indicates that the freedom to choose learning materials and methods, as well as the role of adaptive teachers, significantly influences the increase in student independence. The conclusion of this study is that the Merdeka Curriculum is effective in supporting the independent learning of inclusive students in elementary schools, which in turn can enhance their academic achievement and social skills.

Keywords – Merdeka Curriculum; Inclusive education; Independent learning; Elementary school.



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1. Introduction

Inclusive education aims to provide equal learning opportunities for all students, including those with special needs, within the same educational environment (Wafiqni et al., 2023). Inclusive education emphasizes principles of justice, equality, and accessibility, ensuring that every student, regardless of background or ability, can receive a quality education (Sundahry et al., 2022). Through inclusive education, it is hoped that every student can develop according to their potential, have equal opportunities to participate in various activities, and experience a non-discriminatory learning environment.

The implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia still faces various challenges (E. N. Endu et al., 2023). The main obstacles include limited resources, such as trained teachers in inclusive education, adequate facilities, and appropriate learning materials. Additionally, the lack of understanding about the concept and importance of inclusive education among teachers, parents, and the broader community also poses a challenge. The inflexibility of the national curriculum often makes the learning process less responsive to the individual needs of students, especially those requiring special attention (Lestari et al., 2022).

To address these challenges, collaborative efforts from various stakeholders, including the government, schools, and the community, are needed. The government needs to provide policies and budgets that support the development of inclusive education, such as continuous teacher training, provision of adequate facilities, and the development of a flexible curriculum. Schools need to adopt a more inclusive approach in planning and implementing learning, as well as creating an environment that supports diversity. Additionally, increasing public awareness and understanding of the importance of inclusive education is essential to create a supportive and non-discriminatory environment for all students (Romadhon et al., 2021). Through joint efforts, inclusive education can be more effective in providing equal learning opportunities for every student in Indonesia.

The Merdeka Curriculum, introduced by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture, represents one of the efforts to address these challenges. This curriculum is designed with principles of flexibility and freedom, allowing both teachers and students to tailor the learning process to individual needs. By providing a more adaptable framework, the Merdeka Curriculum aims to create a more responsive and inclusive educational environment where each student can engage in learning activities that best suit their personal learning style and abilities (Aeny et al., 2022).

This flexible approach is particularly beneficial for inclusive education, where students with special needs require tailored support and instruction. The Merdeka Curriculum encourages teachers to develop individualized learning plans that can accommodate various learning difficulties and strengths, ensuring that no student is left behind (E. Endu et al., 2023). By empowering teachers with the autonomy to innovate and adapt their teaching methods, the curriculum fosters an environment where students can learn at their own pace and according to their unique needs, promoting a more effective and meaningful learning experience.

The emphasis on student-centered learning in the Merdeka Curriculum is designed to foster self-directed learning and independence among students. This approach encourages students to take greater responsibility for their own learning, developing critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and a sense of agency (Widjaningrum & Hamdan, 2022). For inclusive students, this not only enhances their academic achievement but also boosts their confidence and social skills, preparing them for lifelong learning and active participation in society. By addressing the individual needs of all students, the Merdeka Curriculum supports the holistic development of learners and paves the way for a more equitable and inclusive education system in Indonesia (Maruti et al., 2023; Wijaya et al., 2023).

Self-directed learning is the ability of students to manage their own learning processes, including planning, monitoring, and evaluating their

progress(Aeny et al., 2022; Widjaningrum & Hamdan, 2022). This skill is crucial for inclusive students as it enables them to build confidence and empower themselves to overcome the learning challenges they face. By taking control of their educational journey, inclusive students can tailor their learning experiences to meet their unique needs and preferences, fostering a sense of independence and self-efficacy(Wijaya et al., 2023).

Given the significance of self-directed learning for inclusive students, it is essential to examine how the Merdeka Curriculum can support the development of this ability in elementary schools. The Merdeka Curriculum, with its principles of flexibility and autonomy, provides a framework that encourages students to take an active role in their learning(Maruti et al., 2023). Through personalized learning plans and adaptive teaching methods, the curriculum aims to create an environment where students can engage in self-directed learning practices effectively.

Understanding the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on self-directed learning involves exploring various aspects of its implementation(Hastuti et al., 2022). This includes assessing how teachers facilitate self-directed learning, the resources and tools available to support students, and the overall learning environment. By evaluating these factors, educators and policymakers can gain insights into how the curriculum can be optimized to better support inclusive students in developing their self-directed learning skills, ultimately leading to more successful and empowering educational experiences.

This research seeks to investigate the practical application of the Merdeka Curriculum within the framework of inclusive education at elementary schools, focusing particularly on how this curriculum can enhance the self-directed learning capabilities of inclusive students(Ahmadi et al., 2022). The study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing a case study methodology across multiple elementary schools that have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum. Data collection methods include detailed observations, in-depth interviews with teachers, school administrators, and students, as well as thorough analysis of

pertinent documents such as lesson plans and student progress reports (Romadhon et al., 2021).

By delving into these diverse sources of information, the study aims to uncover nuanced insights into how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented in inclusive educational settings (Hanifah et al., 2022). Specifically, it examines how teachers facilitate self-directed learning among students with diverse learning needs, the adaptability of the curriculum to cater to individual learning styles, and the overall impact on student engagement and academic performance.

The anticipated outcomes of this research are expected to contribute significantly to the enhancement of inclusive education practices. By shedding light on effective strategies and identifying areas for improvement, the findings aim to inform the development of more targeted policies and practices that foster a supportive and empowering educational environment for all students, regardless of their learning abilities or backgrounds.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative method with a case study approach to examine how the Merdeka Curriculum supports the self-directed learning of inclusive students in elementary schools. The research is conducted across four districts in Madura Island, namely Bangkalan, Sampang, Pamekasan, and Sumenep. These locations were selected based on the diverse educational conditions and the varying implementations of the Merdeka Curriculum in those areas.

The choice of these districts allows for a comprehensive exploration of how the Merdeka Curriculum is applied in different educational settings and the impact it has on fostering independent learning among inclusive students. By focusing on these diverse contexts, the study aims to provide insights into the effectiveness of the curriculum in promoting inclusive education practices across different socio-cultural and educational landscapes.

Through detailed observations, interviews with educators and stakeholders, and analysis of relevant documents, the research seeks to capture a holistic understanding of the challenges, successes, and opportunities associated with implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in supporting inclusive education. The findings are expected to contribute to the refinement of educational policies and practices, ultimately aiming to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students in Indonesia.

The subjects of this study consist of several elementary schools located in each district of Madura Island: Bangkalan, Sampang, Pamekasan, and Sumenep. Specifically, the study includes a total of eight elementary schools across Madura Island: two elementary schools in Bangkalan District, two elementary schools in Sampang District, two elementary schools in Pamekasan District, and two elementary schools in Sumenep District.. These schools were selected based on their implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and their participation in inclusive education programs. The study aims to investigate how the Merdeka Curriculum supports the self-directed learning of inclusive students across these diverse educational contexts. By focusing on these schools, the research seeks to provide valuable insights into the practical application and impact of the curriculum in fostering inclusive education practices in Madura Island.

Data for this study was collected using three main techniques:

- a. Observation: Observations were conducted to observe the learning processes in inclusive classrooms, focusing on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and students' self-directed learning. This observational phase spanned three months at each school, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of daily classroom dynamics and curriculum adaptation.
- b. Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, school principals, inclusive students, and parents of students. These interviews aimed to gather insights into their experiences, challenges faced, and strategies employed in implementing the Merdeka

Curriculum. By engaging with multiple stakeholders, the study sought to capture diverse perspectives on the effectiveness and challenges of inclusive education practices.

- c. Document Analysis: Document analysis encompassed examination of lesson plans (RPP), student progress reports, and other relevant documents. This analysis aimed to discern how the Merdeka Curriculum was incorporated into lesson planning and learning evaluation processes. By reviewing these documents, the study aimed to assess the alignment of curriculum implementation with intended educational outcomes and identify areas for improvement.

These data collection methods were chosen to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how the Merdeka Curriculum supports inclusive education practices in elementary schools across Madura Island.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The analytical process involved several steps:

- a. Coding: Data gathered from observations, interviews, and document analysis was coded to identify key themes and patterns related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and its support for self-directed learning among inclusive students.
- b. Categorization: Identified themes were categorized based on similarities and differences, grouping related themes together to facilitate deeper analysis and interpretation.
- c. Interpretation: These categorized themes were then interpreted to understand how the Merdeka Curriculum facilitates self-directed learning among inclusive students. This step involved synthesizing the findings to draw meaningful insights and implications.
- d. Triangulation: Data validity was ensured through triangulation of data sources (observations, interviews, document analysis) and data collection techniques. This approach helped verify the accuracy and

consistency of the findings by comparing information from different perspectives and sources.

By employing thematic analysis and adhering to these rigorous analytical steps, the study aimed to provide a robust understanding of the implementation and impact of the Merdeka Curriculum in supporting inclusive education practices across elementary schools in Madura Island.

This research adhered strictly to ethical principles, ensuring compliance with guidelines such as obtaining permission from school authorities and participants, maintaining confidentiality of information, and providing clear information regarding the research's purpose and procedures to all participants.

By following these ethical standards, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in supporting self-directed learning among inclusive students in elementary schools across Bangkalan, Sampang, Pamekasan, and Sumenep districts. The ethical conduct of the research not only safeguarded the rights and privacy of all involved but also aimed to yield reliable and insightful findings that contribute to enhancing inclusive education practices.

3. Result and Discussion

Result

a. Observations result

Based on observations conducted in inclusive classrooms across four elementary schools in Bangkalan, Sampang, Pamekasan, and Sumenep districts, the following are the key findings:

- 1) **Learning Activities:** The Merdeka Curriculum is implemented with flexibility in learning activities. Teachers provide opportunities for inclusive students to choose learning methods that suit their needs, such as independent study, working in small groups, or using interactive learning media.

- 2) **Student Participation:** Inclusive students demonstrate active participation in learning activities. They engage in discussions, ask questions, and collaborate with classmates. Teachers provide appropriate support and guidance to help students understand lesson materials effectively.
- 3) **Use of Learning Media:** Various learning media are utilized, including textbooks, digital teaching materials, and visual aids. Teachers also leverage technology such as computers and projectors to facilitate interactive and engaging learning experiences.
- 4) **Learning Evaluation:** Teachers employ diverse assessment methods such as project tasks, presentations, and written tests to evaluate the learning progress of inclusive students. These assessments are conducted continuously and adapted according to the students' abilities.

These observations highlight the effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in supporting inclusive education practices across different districts in Madura Island. The findings underscore the importance of flexibility, student engagement, varied learning resources, and adaptive assessment strategies in promoting inclusive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of students.

b. Interviews result

Interviews were conducted with teachers, school principals, inclusive students, and parents of students at four elementary schools that were the subjects of the study. Here are the main findings from the interviews:

Teacher:

- Teachers feel that the Merdeka Curriculum provides freedom to design learning activities that meet the needs of inclusive students. They can adjust teaching materials and methods to support students' self-directed learning.

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- Challenges faced by teachers include resource limitations, such as specialized teaching materials for inclusive students and technical support in using technology.
 - Teachers believe that training and professional development related to the Merdeka Curriculum are crucial in enhancing their skills in teaching inclusive students.

Headmasters:

- School principals support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and strive to provide necessary resources to support inclusive education. They also organize training sessions for teachers to enhance their understanding and skills in teaching inclusive students.
- Principals recognize the importance of collaborating with parents and the community to support the success of inclusive education initiatives.

Inclusive students:

- Students feel more confident and motivated in their learning with the Merdeka Curriculum. They enjoy the freedom to choose their learning methods and feel more valued.
- Students also appreciate the good support from teachers, who help them understand lesson materials effectively..

Parents:

- Parents observe positive changes in their children, especially in terms of self-directed learning and confidence. They support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and believe that this approach helps their children develop according to their abilities and interests.

c. Document analysis result

Documents analyzed include Lesson Implementation Plans (RPP), student progress reports, and other relevant documents. The main findings from the document analysis are as follows:

- Lesson Implementation Plans (RPP): The RPP demonstrates flexibility in lesson planning. Teachers incorporate various methods and learning strategies suitable for inclusive student needs, such as project-based learning, group discussions, and the use of digital learning media.
- Student Progress Reports: Student progress reports document the individual learning progress of inclusive students. Teachers provide specific and constructive feedback to help students enhance their learning independence.
- Other Documents: Other analyzed documents, such as classroom observation notes and school activity reports, indicate that the school has endeavored to create an inclusive learning environment and support students' learning independence.

The research findings indicate that the 'Kurikulum Merdeka' (Independent Curriculum) has a positive impact on the learning independence of inclusive students in elementary schools. Its adaptive and flexible approach allows students to learn according to their needs and abilities. Support from teachers, school principals, and parents also plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of the 'Kurikulum Merdeka'. However, challenges such as resource limitations and the need for further teacher training still need to be addressed to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of the 'Kurikulum Merdeka' in supporting inclusive education.

d. Coding result

Coding of data was conducted to identify main themes from observations, interviews, and document analysis. Some codes that emerged from the data include:

Table 1. Coding of data result

Student Learning Independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiative in learning • Active participation • Self-confidence
Approach of the 'Kurikulum Merdeka' (Independent Curriculum)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility in learning • Freedom to choose learning methods • Adaptation of learning materials
Roles of Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual support • Use of technology • Professional development
Challenges of Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource limitations • Teacher training • Technical support
School and Parental Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration with parents • Provision of resources • Inclusive learning environment

The identified codes were then grouped into several main categories to facilitate further analysis:

From the categorization of findings, it is evident that the 'Kurikulum Merdeka' plays a pivotal role in nurturing the learning independence of inclusive students in elementary schools. The curriculum's emphasis on flexibility empowers both students and teachers in the learning process. Students are granted the freedom to select learning methods that best align with their individual needs, while learning materials are adaptable to cater to the diverse abilities and requirements of inclusive learners. Teachers assume a critical role by providing personalized support to inclusive students, leveraging technology to facilitate interactive and engaging learning environments, and benefiting significantly from ongoing professional development within the framework of the 'Kurikulum Merdeka'.

The implementation of the curriculum is not without its challenges. Resource constraints, including the availability of specialized teaching materials and technical support, emerge as primary obstacles. Furthermore, the need for more intensive teacher training is evident to enhance educators' understanding and capabilities in effectively teaching inclusive students. Overcoming these

challenges is essential to ensure the sustained effectiveness of the 'Kurikulum Merdeka' in promoting inclusive education.

The collaboration between schools and parents proves indispensable in supporting the success of inclusive education initiatives. Schools actively engage parents to foster a supportive learning environment, ensuring the provision of necessary resources and cultivating an inclusive atmosphere that promotes student learning independence. By addressing these aspects comprehensively, the 'Kurikulum Merdeka' not only facilitates inclusive education but also strives to empower inclusive students with the skills and confidence needed to thrive academically and socially in their educational journey.

Improving Learning Independence: The 'Kurikulum Merdeka' initiative significantly boosts the autonomy of inclusive students in their educational journeys. By promoting initiative-taking among students, the curriculum empowers them to proactively engage in their learning processes. The flexibility offered in selecting learning methods and the adaptation of learning materials cater to diverse student needs and abilities. This tailored approach not only enhances their academic growth but also fosters greater self-reliance and confidence in their learning abilities.

Critical Role of Teachers: Teachers play a pivotal role in the successful implementation of the 'Kurikulum Merdeka'. Through providing personalized support, leveraging technology for interactive learning experiences, and continuous professional development, educators create an inclusive classroom environment that supports the independence of all students, including those with diverse learning needs. Their dedication ensures that each student receives the necessary guidance and encouragement to excel academically and develop crucial life skills.

Challenges to Overcome: While the 'Kurikulum Merdeka' brings substantial benefits, it also faces challenges that must be addressed for sustained effectiveness. Resource limitations, such as access to specialized teaching

materials and adequate technical support, pose significant hurdles. Additionally, enhancing the quality and frequency of teacher training programs is essential to equip educators with the skills and knowledge needed to effectively implement inclusive practices. Overcoming these challenges requires collaborative efforts from educational stakeholders to ensure that every student receives equitable access to quality education.

Effective Collaboration: Effective collaboration between schools and parents is indispensable in fostering the success of inclusive education under the 'Kurikulum Merdeka'. By working together, educators, schools, and parents create a supportive environment that nurtures student learning independence. This collaborative approach not only enhances educational outcomes but also strengthens the sense of community and inclusivity within the school environment, ensuring that every student can thrive and reach their full potential.

e. Triangulation data result

Triangulation of data was conducted to ensure the validity and accuracy of the research findings. Several triangulation steps were employed:

- **Data Sources:** Data were collected from diverse sources, including observations, interviews with teachers, school principals, students, and parents, as well as document analysis. Gathering data from multiple sources facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the 'Kurikulum Merdeka'.
- **Data Collection Techniques:** Various data collection techniques were utilized, such as direct observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Employing a variety of data collection methods helped validate findings and ensure data accuracy.
- **Thematic Analysis:** Thematic analysis was performed to identify the main themes emerging from the collected data. These themes were then categorized and interpreted to provide a deeper understanding of the implementation of the 'Kurikulum Merdeka'.

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- By employing these triangulation steps, the research aimed to strengthen the robustness of its findings, ensuring that conclusions drawn about the impact and effectiveness of the 'Kurikulum Merdeka' on inclusive education were well-founded and reliable.

Through data triangulation, this research can provide valid and accurate findings regarding the implementation of the 'Kurikulum Merdeka' in supporting the learning independence of inclusive students in elementary schools. These findings serve as a foundation for the development of policies and practices in inclusive education that are more effective and responsive to the needs of students. By validating data through multiple sources and methods, the study ensures that its conclusions are robust and reliable, thereby contributing to advancements in inclusive education strategies aimed at fostering student independence and overall academic success.

Discussion

The research findings presented through observations, interviews, document analysis, coding, and data triangulation highlight the significant impact of the 'Kurikulum Merdeka' in supporting the learning independence of inclusive students in elementary schools across Bangkalan, Sampang, Pamekasan, and Sumenep districts. Observations revealed that the curriculum promotes flexible learning activities, allowing students to choose methods that suit their needs, such as independent study and interactive group work. This approach enhances student engagement and active participation in classroom discussions and activities, supported by a variety of learning media and continuous, adaptive assessment methods.

Interviews with teachers underscored their appreciation for the curriculum's flexibility, enabling them to tailor lessons to meet the diverse needs of inclusive students. However, challenges such as resource limitations for specialized teaching materials and technical support were acknowledged,

emphasizing the importance of ongoing professional development to enhance teaching skills and effectively implement the curriculum. School principals echoed support for the curriculum, emphasizing collaboration with parents and communities to bolster inclusive education initiatives and provide necessary resources.

Document analysis corroborated these findings, highlighting the adaptability and inclusivity embedded within Lesson Implementation Plans (RPP) and student progress reports. These documents underscored the role of teachers in providing individualized support and leveraging technology to foster inclusive learning environments.

The coding process identified key themes, including student learning independence, the adaptable nature of the 'Kurikulum Merdeka', the critical role of teachers, challenges in implementation, and the importance of school and parental support. These themes collectively demonstrate that while the curriculum enhances student autonomy and engagement, addressing resource constraints and enhancing teacher training are crucial for sustained effectiveness.

Through rigorous data triangulation, including diverse data sources and methodologies, the research ensures the validity and reliability of its conclusions. These findings provide a robust foundation for policy development and educational practices aimed at advancing inclusive education strategies. By addressing identified challenges and leveraging strengths, stakeholders can further enhance the implementation of the 'Kurikulum Merdeka', fostering an inclusive educational environment that supports the diverse learning needs and independence of all students.

4. Conclusion

This research aims to examine how the 'Kurikulum Merdeka' supports the learning independence of inclusive students in elementary schools. Based on observations, interviews, and document analysis, it was found that the 'Kurikulum

'Merdeka' significantly contributes to enhancing the learning independence of inclusive students. Key conclusions drawn from this study include:

Flexibility in Learning: The 'Kurikulum Merdeka' provides freedom for inclusive students to choose learning methods and materials that suit their needs. This flexibility encourages students to take initiative in their learning process, enhances active participation, and strengthens their confidence.

Role of Teachers: Teachers play a crucial role in implementing the 'Kurikulum Merdeka'. The individual support provided by teachers, the use of technology in teaching, and ongoing professional development significantly contribute to creating a learning environment that supports the independence of inclusive students.

Implementation Challenges: Despite the positive outcomes of the 'Kurikulum Merdeka', there are challenges that need to be addressed, such as resource limitations and the need for further teacher training. Providing specialized teaching materials and adequate technical support is crucial to ensure the success of the 'Kurikulum Merdeka' implementation.

School and Parental Support: Support from schools and parents is essential for the success of inclusive education. Effective collaboration among teachers, schools, and parents helps create an inclusive learning environment that supports the learning independence of students.

Overall, this research demonstrates that the 'Kurikulum Merdeka' is effective in supporting the learning independence of inclusive students in elementary schools. Its adaptive and flexible approach allows students to learn according to their needs and abilities, thereby potentially enhancing their academic achievements and social skills. These findings provide a solid foundation for the development of more effective policies and practices in inclusive education in the future.

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