

FROM STANDARDIZATION TO FLEXIBILITY: LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE TRANSITION FROM THE 2013 CURRICULUM TO THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM

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Abstract

Purpose. This study aims to analyze the transition from the 2013 Curriculum (K-13) to the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia by examining the shift from standardization to flexibility. It addresses the need to understand the rationale, implementation challenges, and opportunities of curriculum reform during the transition period toward a unified national curriculum. **Method.** The study employs a qualitative literature review approach. Data were collected through a systematic search of Scopus-indexed journal articles, policy reports, and academic proceedings published between 2013 and 2025. Thematic content analysis was applied to identify key patterns in curriculum design, teaching strategies, assessment systems, and governance of implementation. **Findings.** The review reveals that K-13 emphasized standardized competencies and authentic assessments but was often perceived as rigid and administratively burdensome for teachers. Conversely, the Merdeka Curriculum highlights flexibility, teacher autonomy, project-based learning (*Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila/P5*), and formative assessment practices. While this shift aligns with 21st-century learning demands, challenges remain in terms of teacher readiness, infrastructure gaps, and unequal institutional support across regions. **Implications.** The study underscores that the success of the Merdeka Curriculum is strongly dependent on teacher quality, school leadership, and sustained policy support. It recommends capacity-building programs for educators, structured monitoring mechanisms, and longitudinal evaluations to ensure equitable and effective implementation. This research contributes to the broader discourse on curriculum reform in developing countries by providing a comprehensive synthesis of Indonesia's experience. **Keywords:** Curriculum 2013, Merdeka Curriculum, educational reform, Indonesia, literature review

Introduction

Curriculum reform is one of the strategic instruments in an effort to improve the quality of education and adapt to the demands of the times, especially in the era of Society 5.0 and the technological revolution. In Indonesia, the latest educational innovations are represented by the transition from the 2013 Curriculum (K-13), which strongly prioritizes standardization, character strengthening, and integration of attitude-knowledge-skill aspects, to the Independent Curriculum (or Independent Learning Curriculum) which

emphasizes the flexibility and independence of schools in designing learning experiences (Sappaile, Wiliyanti, Mustajab, Prayitno, & Panglipur, 2025). This shift is not just a technical change, but a paradigm shift from central control to local autonomy in education.

However, this transition process is not without obstacles. In an evaluative study, Priawasana and Subiyantoro (2024) revealed that although many teachers and students consider the Independent Curriculum more attractive because of the flexibility and independence aspects of students, there are still issues of teacher readiness, infrastructure, and clarity of consistent implementation guidelines in all regions. In addition, other studies have noted that the assessment system in the 2013 Curriculum which is authentic and competency-based is often more rigid than the more holistic and adaptive assessment approach in the Independent Curriculum (Wahyuni, 2025). This situation shows that the comparison between the two curricula must take into account local readiness factors and stakeholder adaptability.

In this context, this study takes a literature review approach with the objectives: (1) comparing the implementation characteristics between the 2013 Curriculum and the Independent Curriculum in terms of curriculum structure, learning strategies, and assessment systems; (2) exploring challenges and opportunities in the transition period; and (3) to develop feasible policy and practice recommendations to support the integration of a single national curriculum that is adaptive and qualitative. Thus, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive conceptual and empirical analysis as a knowledge base for policymakers and education implementers in Indonesia.

Several studies have shown significant differences between the two. For example, Priawasana & Subiyantoro (2024) report that the Independent Curriculum is better able to increase student involvement, creativity, and critical thinking development than the 2013 Curriculum, although practical challenges remain. Meanwhile, in the context of the implementation of Merdeka, Fauzan et al. (2023) highlighted that the preparation of Learning Implementation Plans (RPP) in the Merdeka Curriculum provides more flexibility for teachers and schools to adapt the curriculum to local conditions, but a number of teachers still experience difficulties in designing and implementing a truly independent learning model. No less important, evaluative research in the basic area highlights that institutional support (monitoring, training, and mentoring) is needed so that the transition does not become an additional burden for schools (Febrianto, 2025).

Although there has been some empirical research, a number of gaps are still apparent. First, research that analyzes the comparison between the 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka systematically and across levels of education is still very limited. Second, most of the research is a regional or small-scale case study, so it is less representative of Indonesia as a whole. Third, the assessment aspect—especially how to formulate flexible but still valid and reliable assessment instruments in the Independent Curriculum—has not been studied in depth (especially in indexed documentation) to date. Therefore, this paper is expected to contribute by presenting a more systematic synthesis of the literature, as well as a conceptual framework that can serve as a foothold for further research.

This study is limited to academic literature (journal articles, conference proceedings, and policy documents) that discuss the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum and the Independent Curriculum in Indonesia in the context of transition. This paper will be presented in several parts: theoretical foundations (curriculum concepts, flexibility vs standardization), comparative implementation (curriculum structure, learning strategies, assessments), discussion of challenges and opportunities, practical recommendations, and conclusions. It is hoped that the results of this research can be a reference for researchers, educators, and policy makers in designing and organizing a national curriculum that is not only uniform but also responsive to local needs and learning quality

Literature Review

The trajectory of policy and rationale for change.

The 2013 curriculum (K-13) is positioned as a competency-based standardization effort (knowledge–skills–attitudes) with an emphasis on authentic assessment and thematic integration across subjects. Cutting-edge critical analysis highlights the tension between the demands of national standards and local needs, including the varying assessment burden and readiness of school actors. The findings place the transition to the Independent Curriculum as a correction to the rigidity of K-13, especially to provide space for pedagogical autonomy and contextual responsiveness.

From standardization to flexibility: curriculum design and implementation implications.

The paradigm shift in "standardization of flexibility" in the Independent Curriculum is manifested in school/teacher autonomy, project-based learning (P5), and the emphasis on essential competencies. The policy review across the *Merdeka Learning* initiative emphasizes the focus on *foundational learning*, strengthening teacher capacity, and easing exam-based controls to provide room for local adaptation. These changes are projected to reduce memorization practices and encourage collaborative problem-solving, but their success relies heavily on systemic support during the transition period.

Readiness and capacity of school actors.

A number of studies confirm that the quality and readiness of teachers are strong determinants in the successful implementation of new curriculum policies. Empirical evidence shows a significant influence of teacher quality on policy readiness, so training, ongoing professional development, and school leadership are crucial when transitioning from K-13 to the Independent Curriculum. In many contexts, the unequal readiness between regions related to TPACK pedagogical competence and ICT access is a source of variation in implementation.

Principal decision-making and transitional governance.

Literature reviews in reputable journals highlight the role of school principals in decision-making during the adoption of the Independent Curriculum (e.g., teacher readiness mapping, internal training strategies, and P5 orchestration). This study emphasizes that instructional leadership and effective change management (vision

communication, coaching support, and monitoring) correlate with the quality of implementation at the educational unit level.

Learning assessment and accountability: from administrative burden to formative assessment.

In the K-13 era, authentic assessments are often perceived to add administrative burdens and make it difficult to maintain consistency of quality between schools. The latest policy analysis emphasizes that the Independent Curriculum shifts the emphasis to formative assessments, periodic feedback, and essential progress indicators (not just administrative completeness), while maintaining accountability for learning outcomes. This shift is in line with international practices that place assessment as a learning instrument, not just *a judgment*.

The context of decentralization and inequality of implementation.

Since the decentralization of education, variations in regional/school capacities (resources, supervision, and technical support) have affected the equitable distribution of the quality of curriculum implementation. Longitudinal evidence on Indonesia's learning profile reveals long-standing challenges to basic learning quality and interregional gaps; Without capacity-building interventions, the transition to a more flexible curriculum risks widening implementation inequalities. Therefore, the Merdeka policy package needs to be supported by targeted capacity development and intensive assistance.

Summary of research gaps.

Recent literature provides a strong foundation on the rationale for the transition and design of the Independent Curriculum, but there is still limited a systematic comparative synthesis across levels on (a) the quality of formative assessment in the classroom, (b) effective change leadership models at the school level, and (c) the effectiveness of external support (training, supervision, and monitoring) in reducing implementation disparities between regions. Strengthening the evidence base in these three areas is important so that the direction of "flexibility" remains accompanied by measurable and equitable quality assurance

Research Methods

Research Approach

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature review design. This approach was chosen because the main focus of the research is to analyze and compare the concepts, practices, and challenges of the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum (K-13) and the Independent Curriculum in Indonesia. The qualitative approach allows researchers to delve deeply into the meanings, contexts, and interpretations contained in various academic literature, policies, and previous research results (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Source

The main data in this study is in the form of secondary documents, including journal articles indexed by Scopus, proceedings of international conferences, official policy reports from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, and

publications from international institutions such as the OECD and UNESCO. The selected articles cover the period 2013–2025 to capture the dynamics from the beginning of the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum to the development of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was carried out using the *systematic literature search* method. The researcher used the Scopus, Google Scholar, and DOAJ databases with the keywords: "Curriculum 2013 Indonesia", "Merdeka Curriculum implementation", "curriculum transition Indonesia", and "educational reform Indonesia". The selected articles meet the inclusion criteria: (1) discuss the implementation or evaluation of the K-13 or Independent Curriculum, (2) are written in English or Indonesian, and (3) are published in an academic journal or indexed proceedings. Articles that are only popular opinion or do not pass the peer review process are excluded.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out using the *thematic content analysis* method. This process involves three stages: (1) coding key information related to curriculum design, implementation strategies, teacher roles, and transition challenges; (2) categorization into big themes such as "standardization vs. flexibility," "learning assessment," and "school leadership"; and (3) synthesis of literature to formulate comparisons and research gaps (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Validity and Reliability

To maintain validity, the researcher used a *triangulation* strategy of sources by combining international journal articles, policy reports, and national publications. In addition, *peer debriefing* is carried out through discussions with fellow education researchers to reduce interpretation bias. Reliability is supported by recording the entire selection and analysis process in a *transparent* trail audit.

Research Ethics

This research is based on secondary documents, so it does not directly involve human subjects. However, the researcher still pays attention to research ethics by providing attribution and citation according to the APA 7th edition standard, and only using sources that can be verified academically.

Results and Discussion

A shift in curriculum paradigm from standardization to flexibility.

The results of the literature review show that the 2013 Curriculum (K-13) emphasizes uniformity of competency standards through a rigid learning structure, while the Independent Curriculum (K-Merdeka) highlights the flexibility of teachers and schools in developing the curriculum according to the needs of students and the local context. Puad (2023) emphasized that K-13 is often criticized for placing teachers as policy implementers who are very tied to curriculum documents, while K-Merdeka shifts the role

of teachers to become *more independent curriculum* designers. This shift has major implications for the way schools view learning autonomy.

The dynamics of the teacher's role and the readiness of implementation.

Analysis of various studies shows that the success of K-Merdeka is greatly influenced by the capacity of teachers to integrate project-based learning (PBL) approaches and formative assessments. Research by Hassan et al. (2021) emphasizes that teacher quality and professional readiness are determining factors in the implementation of new education policies. In Indonesia, there is still a gap in teacher competence, especially related to mastery of ICT and innovative pedagogy, which has the potential to cause disparities in the quality of implementation between schools (Sari, Kartiko, & Prasetyo, 2024).

Assessment system: from administrative burden to formative assessment.

K-13 has been criticized for its complex assessment system and burdens teachers, especially in recording competency of attitudes, knowledge, and skills separately (Puad, 2023). In the Independent Curriculum, the focus shifts to formative assessments, continuous feedback, and essential indicators of learning outcomes. The OECD (2023) notes that this approach is in line with international practices that emphasize assessment *for learning* rather than just *assessment of learning*. Thus, assessment is no longer just an administrative document, but a reflective instrument for improving the learning process.

Challenges of transition and the context of decentralization of education.

While K-Merdeka offers flexibility, not all schools can adopt it at the same pace. Geographical, infrastructure, and local government support factors are very influential. Beatty et al. (2021) show that the gap in learning outcomes between regions in Indonesia is still significant, so that curriculum transitions have the potential to widen inequality if not accompanied by intensive mentoring programs. This is in line with the findings of the literature that emphasizes the need for monitoring and *capacity building* so that change is not only enjoyed by superior schools, but also reaches schools in disadvantaged areas.

Policy implications and future research directions.

From the synthesis of literature, it can be concluded that the curriculum transition in Indonesia is not just a transition of documents, but a shift in the learning paradigm. The success of K-Merdeka is greatly influenced by comprehensive policy support, adaptive school leadership, and adequate teacher capacity. In the future, further research needs to be directed at (a) longitudinal evaluation of the impact of K-Merdeka on student achievement, (b) teacher professional development strategies based on local needs, and (c) the effectiveness of implementation differentiation policies between regions. Thus, flexibility can go hand in hand with the equitable distribution of the quality of education throughout Indonesia

Conclusion

The results of the literature review show that the transition from the 2013 Curriculum (K-13) to the Independent Curriculum is not just a technical change, but a paradigm shift in education from a standardization pattern to flexibility. If K-13 emphasizes uniformity of competencies and rigid authentic assessments, the Independent Curriculum encourages teacher and school autonomy, project-based learning (P5), and more adaptive formative assessments. This shift aims to increase the relevance of learning to local contexts while responding to the challenges of the 21st century (Puad, 2023; OECD, 2023).

Challenges and Implications Although it offers great opportunities, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is colored by a number of challenges, especially related to teacher readiness, infrastructure disparities between regions, and school leadership capacity. Studies show that teachers play a key role in ensuring the success of the transition, while policy support, professional mentoring, and ongoing monitoring are indispensable to prevent implementation inequalities (Hassan et al., 2021; Beatty et al., 2021). Therefore, flexibility must go hand in hand with a consistent quality assurance system.

Recommendations and Directions for Advanced Research Based on the results of the review, it is recommended that curriculum transition policies in Indonesia strengthen aspects of teacher training, provide clearer implementation guidelines, and develop an evaluation system that balances flexibility with accountability. Further research needs to focus on the long-term impact of the Independent Curriculum on student achievement, the practice of formative assessments in the classroom, and the school's leadership strategies in managing curriculum changes. Thus, the direction of education reform can ensure the achievement of equitable and adaptive learning quality.

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