



Curriculum Innovation in the Implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* at Islamic elementary school

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Abstract

The dynamics of science and technology demand systematic updates in the field of education, one of which is the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum. This study aims to comprehensively analyze the basic concepts of the Merdeka Curriculum and identify the forms of transformative innovation it contains. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with a content analysis method, data were collected from various reputable scientific literature, books, and relevant policy documents, which were then analyzed using content analysis. The results of the study indicate that the Merdeka Curriculum promotes the concept of student-centered learning, which provides students with the autonomy to innovate and develop their adaptive potential without institutional pressure. Structurally, this curricular innovation is realized through four key policies: the transition from the National Standardized Test to school-based assessments; the restructuring of the National Exam into the Minimum Competency Assessment and the Character Survey; the streamlining of the Lesson Plan for greater efficiency; and the flexibility of the student admission zoning system. This restructuring not only changes instructional methods but also reorients the paradigm of basic education toward pedagogical flexibility relevant to the needs of the times.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a learning process that takes place between teachers and students. Furthermore, education is inseparable from the curriculum, which plays a vital role and serves essential functions in education, ensuring that education is carried out in accordance with its intended objective (Fatmawati, 2021; Yulianti et al., 2022). However, as science and technology advance, innovations in the curriculum often occur, such as what happened a few months ago when the K13 curriculum was replaced by the freedom to learn curriculum (Rahmadhani et al., 2022; Setiawan & Ahla, 2022). With the current curriculum changes, the learning system is also being implemented using different methods that align with the current curriculum. A curriculum is a set of plans, programs, and guidelines used to determine the content, teaching materials, and objectives of educational institutions (Aprillia et al., 2022; Nurholis, 2022; Yulianti et al., 2022). In technical terms, it can be defined as the curriculum framework used by teachers in guiding students to achieve their desired

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goals through the accumulation of knowledge, skills, and mental attitudes (Rahmania & 'Alaniah, 2024). It can be concluded that a curriculum is a set of programs, plans, objectives, content, and learning assessments used as guidelines for delivering education so that it proceeds as intended.

Innovation is often defined as renewal or improvement. Curriculum innovation in the learning process between teachers and students aims to solve problems in learning (Fatimah, 2021). Curriculum innovation encompasses several aspects, including curriculum structure, curriculum content, and innovation within the curriculum (Kurniati et al., 2022). Furthermore, curriculum innovation involves many changes to the curriculum, ranging from educational programs and objectives to content and evaluation stages. Gerald Hills defines innovation as an idea, practice, or object that is considered new by an individual or another unit in its application (Hapidin et al., 2024). On the other hand, innovation also refers to the ability to apply creativity in education to solve problems in education (Fatimah, 2021).

The concept of the freedom to learn has not yet been aligned with the educational goals of Indonesia (Ainia, 2020). However, this concept of the freedom to learn can provide a direction to contribute to improving the quality of education by fostering free thinking without pressure from either teachers or the curriculum itself (Putri et al., 2024; Rahmansyah, 2021). Thus, it can be understood that the concept of the freedom to learn as freedom of thought is related to the understanding that exists within the individual. The Minister of Education and Culture states that learning will proceed effectively when an educator is able to interpret the curriculum well (Astuti et al., 2023).

The the freedom to learn paradigm is an effort to respect the changes currently taking place in education (Cahyani et al., 2022). The the freedom to learn curriculum embodies the freedom to learn, providing students with the opportunity to learn as freely and comfortably as possible in a calm, relaxed, and joyful manner without pressure or stress. It focuses on students' natural talents without forcing them to study specific subjects, enabling them to build a portfolio aligned with their interests (Hattarina et al., 2022).

In the the freedom to learn curriculum, supervision plays a crucial role in restructuring the learning process to create a better learning experience than before. (Wullur et al., 2025). The focus of the the freedom to learn curriculum is to prepare individuals to think critically and creatively. To address this, teachers must undertake various preparations, starting with planning including determining methods, strategies, and instructional materials so that the established learning objectives can be achieved (Anridzo et al., 2022). Based on the background described above, this article will explore innovations in the the freedom to learn curriculum in greater depth. This article examines two research questions: first, what is the concept of the the freedom to learn curriculum; and second, what forms do innovations in the the freedom to learn curriculum take.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative method using a content analysis approach. This approach was chosen because a study of innovation in the merdeka curriculum at Islamic elementary school requires an in-depth examination of various regulatory texts, policies, and the underlying pedagogical theories (Engkizar et al., 2019, 2025, 2026; Kleinheksel et al., 2020; ÖZDEN, 2024; Rusli et al., 2025). Qualitative research, by its very nature, aims to comprehensively understand phenomena through the exploration of meaning, concepts, and critical interpretation of the textual data obtained (Muis, 2025). In the context of this study, a qualitative approach was applied to analyze the characteristics of curriculum innovation, such as the integration of Islamic values, differentiated instruction, and the strengthening of

literacy and numeracy at the elementary level of Islamic education (Rohbiah & Cahyadi, 2024). This analysis aims to examine the extent to which the curriculum is capable of addressing contemporary issues including the readiness of teaching staff and the digitization of madrasahs so that an instructional framework can be formulated that is adaptable to the changing times (Hadi & Ramdhani, 2025).

The content analysis approach was used to examine scientific texts, official regulations from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, journal articles, previous research findings, and various academic documents related to the concept of the freedom to learn curriculum and its application in Islamic elementary school (Akbar, 2024). Content analysis enables researchers to systematically identify patterns of meaning, themes, and specific trends within a document. Through this approach, the study seeks to critically interpret the various ideas of education experts, national curriculum policies, and the distinctive features of the madrasah curriculum (such as the integration of Islamic values and religious moderation) to formulate curriculum innovations relevant to the current context (Aprillia et al., 2022).

The data sources for this study consist of primary and secondary data: Primary Data: Obtained from official policy documents that form the pillars of the freedom curriculum in madrasah, such as the Minister of Religious Affairs Decree No. 450 of 2024 concerning Guidelines for the Implementation of the independent curriculum in Madrasah, the Madrasah Operational Curriculum Development Guide, and technical regulations related to the curriculum structure of elementary madrasah. Secondary Data: Obtained from national and international journal articles, seminar proceedings, theses, dissertations, pedagogical textbooks, and other scientific publications relevant to the themes of curriculum innovation and the freedom to learn curriculum.

Sources were selected using purposive sampling, which involves establishing specific criteria such as the relevance of the latest policy content, the academic credibility of the texts, and the contribution of the ideas to the development of educational transformation in Madrasah (Rusli et al., 2025). The primary instrument in this study was the researcher himself (human instrument), who played a role in the processes of data collection, selection, interpretation, and analysis. To support the research process, documentation sheets and a data classification matrix were used as tools to group information based on specific themes. The use of these instruments aimed to ensure a systematic analysis and facilitate the data categorization process.

Data collection was conducted through a documentary study by systematically reviewing various relevant references (Rusli et al., 2025). The collected data were then analyzed using thematic analysis, as developed. The analysis stages began with data reduction (sorting documents relevant to elementary madrasah, theme categorization (organizing data into a cluster matrix), interpretation of meaning (linking regulations to educational innovation theory), and finally, drawing critical conclusions. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, this study employs a source triangulation technique by comparing various perspectives from different sources in the literature, cross-referencing ministry of religious affairs policy documents with theories of curriculum adaptation, and verifying the consistency of arguments across sources (Hariawan et al., 2025). Through this methodology, the study is expected to produce an in-depth and objective analysis of educational transformation through independent learning, while also offering a conceptual framework for curriculum innovation that is contextual, adaptive, and responsive to the challenges of Islamic basic education both now and in the future..

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Basic Concepts of the independent learning Curriculum

The independent learning curriculum is a learning process that encourages free thinking, in which teachers serve as the driving force behind national education. Through this independent learning curriculum program, students can think freely without pressure from their teachers, making it easier for them to develop skills in line with their individual abilities (Rahmansyah, 2021). Syviana Murni, in the National Seminar independent learning: *Toward a Prosperous Indonesia in 2045* held at Jakarta State University on March 10, 2022 (Pertiwi et al., 2023).

The concept of the independent learning curriculum as project-based learning aims to develop skills and competencies in line with students' character and the Pancasila learner profile, focusing on essential content so that there is time to deepen learning in accordance with core competencies related to literacy and numeracy. In this context, teachers have the flexibility to implement differentiated instruction based on students' individual abilities (Kurniati et al., 2022). According to Nadiem, curriculum policies related to independent learning must first be introduced to teachers before they are communicated to and implemented for students. In addition, Nadiem also stated that regardless of a teacher's competency level, without a process of translating core competencies and linking them to the curriculum, learning will not take place (Nasution et al., 2023; Rohmatika, 2023).

Independent learning is an innovation from a flagship program launched by the minister of education and culture in 2019. Mila Amalia, an innovator in independent learning curriculum-based learning, notes that the independent learning curriculum conceived by the government and the ministry of education, culture, research, and technology has now become a prevailing belief among teachers and the public that every change in the minister of education will alter the previous curriculum into the current independent learning curriculum. The independent learning curriculum was introduced to improve upon the implementation of the 2013 curriculum (Gunawan, 2017; Sari et al., 2022; Zahra, 2019). This is supported by the findings of Wahyuni's research, which indicated that teachers faced difficulties in implementing the 2013 Curriculum such as in developing lesson plans, applying the scientific approach, and conducting learning assessments. Additionally, Maladerita noted that in the 2013 Curriculum, the main challenges for teachers lay in the implementation process (Angga et al., 2022).

The independent learning curriculum is very different from the curriculum implemented previously; the current curriculum places greater emphasis on individual capabilities. This independent learning approach allows both teachers and students to think freely, without pressure from either teachers or educational institutions. In addition, Nadiem has asked teachers to design project-based learning to foster students' creativity. Independent learning education can be understood in several ways, including the following. First, independent education can be understood as an educational model designed to instill sound values and transform individuals. Second, this form of education prioritizes human dignity and worth; consequently, every individual is entitled to equal treatment in the learning process. Third, it is an education that restores human life (Hattarina et al., 2022).

Innovation in the Independent Learning Curriculum at Islamic elementary school

Curriculum innovation can be defined as an update to the curriculum, or something considered new and not yet implemented in educational institutions. The challenges of curriculum innovation are closely related to the principles of curriculum development that are relevant both internally and externally namely, the principles of flexibility, continuity, practicality, and effectiveness. Internally, this means that the curriculum is aligned and consistent with its components, ranging from objectives

and content to evaluation methods. Externally, this means that the objectives, content, methods, and evaluation align with the needs of society (Fatimah, 2021). There are several policies regarding independent learning curriculum innovation in the context of national education (Rosyidi, 2020).

Table 1. Policies on the Independent Learning Curriculum Innovation in National Education

No.	Policy	Explanation
1.	The USBN becomes a school	based assessment. Assesses student competencies through written tests and other comprehensive forms of assessment. Teachers and schools have greater autonomy in evaluating student learning outcomes. The USBN budget is redirected toward teacher and school capacity building.
2.	The National Exam is transformed into a Minimum Competency Assessment and Character Survey	It no longer measures mastery of subject matter in the curriculum as the National Exam has traditionally done. Going forward, the National Exam will be used to map students' minimum literacy and numeracy competencies and to strengthen the application of learning as measured by PISA and TIMSS. It will be administered at the school level (grades 4, 8, and 11)
3.	Lesson Plans (RPP)	Teachers are free to choose, create, develop, and use lesson plan formats based on their own initiative and innovation. Lesson plans are streamlined to include learning objectives, activities, and assessments. Lesson plan writing is made efficient and effective so that teachers have time to prepare and evaluate the learning process in a focused manner.
4.	The PPDB Zoning System is implemented flexibly	to address disparities in access and quality across various regions. There are standard guidelines for PPDB across regions, namely: the zoning pathway for students is at least 50%, the affirmative action pathway is at least 15%, the transfer pathway is a maximum of 5%, and the merit-based pathway or remaining quota is 0.30%, depending on regional conditions. Local authorities have the authority to determine the final proportions and define the zoning areas.

The independent learning curriculum also includes other programs and policies for teaching and learning in schools. The Indonesian Minister of Education and Culture aims to restore the national education system to the essence of the law by granting schools, teachers, and students the freedom to innovate and to learn independently, creatively, and innovatively (Hasan et al., 2025; Htay et al., 2025; Tadol et al., 2025). This innovation must begin with teachers, who bear the responsibility of driving national education. The independent learning curriculum program was launched to improve the quality of human resources so that they can compete with education systems abroad and adapt to future changes in science and technology (Sherly et al., 2021).

One of the initiatives of minister of education and culture Nadiem Makarim regarding the independent learning curriculum is that it all stems from a desire to create a pleasant and joyful learning environment free from boredom. In addition, independent learning has its own specific goal: to ensure that teachers, students, and parents can enjoy a pleasant learning environment without undue pressure from either the school or educational institutions (Nasution, 2022).

The independent learning curriculum includes several assessment methods, including learning assessments (or diagnostic assessments), formative assessments,

and summative assessments. Currently, the focus is on formative assessments during the learning process. Additionally, the assessment format remains the same as in the 2013 curriculum, using a scale of 1 to 100 to fill out a rubric based on criteria A, B, C, d, with scores of 1, 2, 3, and 4, and different indicator scopes (Angga et al., 2022).

The independent learning curriculum innovation offers advantages in its implementation; in this context, teachers must take into account the nature of the times as they pertain to children. This has been a key consideration for the government, which has transitioned from the 2013 Curriculum to the independent learning curriculum. The government's curriculum transition has no other purpose than to keep pace with the times. Future developments will require skills and competencies to address the challenges of the changing times; therefore, the government has revised the curriculum so that students can develop their own skills and competencies without undue emphasis on specific skills or competencies (Sapitri, 2022).

On the other hand, one of the advantages of the independent learning curriculum is that teachers can be creative and innovative in the learning process; in addition, there are class projects that students must complete so they can develop skills and competencies in line with their interests and talents. Under this independent learning curriculum, the government also encourages teachers to foster creativity and innovation in learning so they can realize the concept of the independent learning curriculum and help students achieve the Pancasila learner profile. This curriculum provides educational institutions with the flexibility to develop the skills and competencies of both teachers and students, so there is no undue pressure from either the school or the government.

CONCLUSION

The merdeka curriculum embodies the essence of educational transformation through freedom of thought, positioning teachers as the primary drivers in facilitating the development of students' potential independently and without institutional pressure. Although implementing this concept demands a high level of commitment, autonomy, and adaptability from all stakeholders, this curriculum tangibly brings about structural innovations that have a significant impact on the national education system. These innovations are realized through four strategic policies: the transition from the national standardized test to school-based assessments; the restructuring of the National Exam into the minimum competency assessment and the character survey; the streamlining of the lesson plan for greater efficiency; and regulatory flexibility within the student admission zoning system. Through these structural strengths, the merdeka curriculum not only provides students with the autonomy to hone their 21st-century skills but also serves as a responsive and relevant policy instrument for addressing future global challenges and dynamics.

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