

Formulation and Implementation of the Independent Curriculum Policy at the Primary and Secondary Education Levels: A Case Study at SDN 1 and SMPN 2 Jerowaru

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Abstract

This study addresses the limited research on the formulation and implementation of the Independent Curriculum in rural primary and secondary schools, despite its critical influence on teaching quality and student learning outcomes. The research aims to (1) analyze the curriculum policy formulation process at SDN 1 Jerowaru and SMPN 2 Jerowaru, (2) describe its implementation in both schools, and (3) evaluate its impact on the quality of teaching and learning. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected from 34 purposively selected participants—including principals, curriculum coordinators, teachers, students, parents, and education supervisors—through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Thematic analysis, supported by NVivo software, revealed that the formulation process was collaborative and contextually responsive, with school leaders and teachers demonstrating strong conceptual understanding but expressing a need for greater operational clarity. Implementation strategies varied by context: SDN 1 adopted project-based, student-centered learning integrating local environmental and cultural themes, while SMPN 2 emphasized subject-based instruction aligned with national standards. The Independent Curriculum was found to enhance teaching quality by fostering teacher autonomy, creativity, and reflective practice, while students exhibited improved critical thinking, collaboration, and communication skills. The study concludes that successful curriculum reform in rural contexts

depends on the alignment of policy design, leadership, teacher competence, and local adaptability. It contributes theoretical insights into decentralized curriculum implementation and offers practical recommendations for professional development, mentoring, and resource distribution. Future research is recommended to explore the sustainability of such reforms, digital integration, and implementation in resource-constrained environments.

Keywords: Curriculum Formulation; Policy Implementation; Independent Curriculum; Rural Education; Teaching and Learning Quality

INTRODUCTION

Education systems worldwide continually reform their curricula to meet the demands of an increasingly complex, technology-driven, and globalized society. The success of these reforms often depends on how effectively national education policies are localized and implemented within schools. Internationally, curriculum reform has become a crucial mechanism for promoting flexible learning, creativity, and lifelong skills. Research on curriculum decentralization reveals that granting greater autonomy to schools can improve contextual relevance and student engagement; however, without adequate local capacity, such autonomy can also widen disparities between schools and regions (OECD, 2024). Studies in multiple countries emphasize that successful curriculum transformation depends not only on the policy design but also on the instructional leadership of school principals and supervisors, who act as key agents in translating national reforms into classroom practice (Ralebese et al., 2025).

Tep, Oeurn, and Sreng (2024) assert that teacher educators play a vital role in developing curriculum components such as syllabi, lesson planning, and assessment. However, these educators face challenges related to time, knowledge, and professional development. They found that autonomy, flexibility, and peer collaboration enhance teachers' professional capacity to interpret curriculum frameworks effectively. Similarly, Whitehead (2023) contends that when teachers are granted autonomy to design syllabi and adapt instructional strategies, they can better respond to local learning needs. In contrast, rigid adherence to standardized content often limits creative teaching approaches. Moreover, in contexts where technology and blended learning are increasingly integrated,

educators must allocate time and resources strategically to sustain independent curriculum practices (Fudge & Ferebee, 2021). Collectively, these international findings underscore that curriculum reform requires structural autonomy, leadership support, and continuous professional development to achieve meaningful implementation.

In Indonesia, curriculum reform has historically accompanied changes in ministerial leadership. Each new education minister typically introduces a modified curriculum framework, reflecting the state's evolving educational philosophy and priorities (Alwan, 2023). While such reform initiatives aim to improve educational quality, their success depends on consistent policy continuity, infrastructure readiness, and teacher adaptability. The Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka), introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek), represents Indonesia's most recent and ambitious educational transformation designed to address post-pandemic learning recovery and prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century (Syifausakia, 2023).

Kurikulum Merdeka emphasizes flexibility, project-based learning, and the development of the "Profil Pelajar Pancasila" as a core competency framework. This approach allows schools and teachers to design learning experiences aligned with their students' contexts, promoting autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking (Fujiawati, 2016; Fitriana et al., 2022). Fitriana et al., (2022) further highlight that the curriculum aims to balance attitudes, knowledge, and skills as essential dimensions of student development. Despite these goals, national evaluations indicate that disparities persist in teacher readiness and resource availability, leading to uneven implementation across regions (Wahyudin et al., 2024). Schools in urban areas often have better access to training, teaching materials, and digital infrastructure, while rural schools continue to struggle with limited capacity.

Research by Udin et al., (2025), shows that successful implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka requires strong principal leadership, clear assessment systems, and active teacher collaboration. Without these, teachers tend to revert to traditional teaching methods, undermining the policy's goal of fostering student independence and creativity. Similarly, Rahmadanty et al., (2022) highlight the persistent gap between central policy formulation and classroom practice, especially in underdeveloped regions where local support and monitoring are minimal. These studies collectively demonstrate that while

Kurikulum Merdeka provides structural flexibility, its success hinges on contextual adaptation, continuous mentoring, and professional support mechanisms.

As a response to these challenges, several scholars propose combined top-down and bottom-up approaches. Rifai et al. (2024) argue that effective implementation requires integration between central policy direction and school-level innovation. Mulyasa (2023) suggests that contextualizing the Kurikulum Operasional Satuan Pendidikan (KOSP)—the operational document through which schools translate national policy into local action—can bridge gaps between policy design and classroom reality. Likewise, Pulungan (2024) recommends strengthening teachers' professional capacity through structured workshops, certification programs, and peer-learning communities, while Khoirurrijal et al. (2022) emphasize simplifying instructional modules and creating realistic academic calendars to reduce administrative burdens.

Historically, curriculum development in Indonesia reflects the nation's continuous attempt to balance educational equity and quality (Gandasari et al., 2022). The Independent Curriculum, as one of the latest innovations, aligns with constructivist learning theory, which views learners as active agents who construct knowledge through experience and reflection. This theoretical perspective reinforces the curriculum's emphasis on inquiry-based, student-centered learning.

Previous studies provide valuable insights into both the strengths and limitations of Kurikulum Merdeka. Firdaus & Permana, (2024) identified several advantages, including improved teacher empowerment, student-centered learning, and the promotion of Pancasila values. Nonetheless, they also noted challenges such as insufficient teacher understanding of the curriculum framework and inadequate infrastructure in elementary schools. Similarly, Mayanti, (2023) found that while the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in model schools (Sekolah Penggerak) encouraged flexibility and innovation, its sustainability depended on consistent support and monitoring. Damayanti et al., (2024), reported comparable findings at the secondary level, emphasizing the need for policy coherence and administrative simplification.

Furthermore, Putri et al., (2024) conducted a literature review showing that successful adaptation of Kurikulum Merdeka in primary schools requires comprehensive planning, stakeholder engagement, and continuous professional development. Meanwhile, Suharta et al., (2025) analyzed the Independent Curriculum as part of the government's

broader strategy to enhance education quality and equity. Their findings emphasize that effective implementation depends on consistent policy enforcement, cross-sector collaboration, and targeted teacher training.

Despite the growing body of research, empirical studies focusing on the policy formulation and implementation process of the Independent Curriculum at the micro (school) level—particularly in rural and resource-limited contexts—remain limited. Most previous studies concentrate on program evaluation or teacher readiness, leaving a gap in understanding how policies are interpreted, negotiated, and operationalized within schools. The formulation of local curriculum policy (KOSP) is a critical stage where national directives intersect with school autonomy, yet few studies explore this process in depth.

This study addresses that gap by analyzing how Kurikulum Merdeka policy is formulated and implemented at SDN 1 and SMPN 2 Jerowaru, two public schools representing primary and secondary education levels in rural Lombok, Indonesia. It further examines how these processes influence classroom practices and student learning experiences. By combining policy analysis with school-level case study data, this research contributes to understanding the interplay between policy design, leadership capacity, and contextual implementation.

Based on the preceding discussion, this study aims to: (1) analyze the formulation process of the Independent Curriculum policy at SDN 1 Jerowaru and SMPN 2 Jerowaru; (2) describe the implementation of the policy in both schools; and (3) evaluate the impact of policy formulation and implementation on the quality of teaching and learning. The findings are expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions to curriculum policy studies, offering insights into how educational autonomy and local adaptation can be harmonized within Indonesia's ongoing efforts to achieve equitable and high-quality education.

METHODS

Research Type

This study employed a qualitative research approach, focusing on understanding the meanings, processes, and experiences of participants involved in the formulation and implementation of the Independent Curriculum policy. Qualitative research is particularly

suiting for exploring how individuals or groups interpret a social or human phenomenon and for capturing the complexity of contextualized educational settings (Santos et al., 2021). This approach was selected because it allows an in-depth examination of the real-life dynamics of curriculum policy formulation and implementation in both primary and secondary education, emphasizing natural settings rather than statistical generalization.

Research Design

The study adopted a case study design, focusing on SDN 1 and SMPN 2 Jerowaru as specific sites of investigation. Yin (2018) explains that a case study design is appropriate when researchers aim to gain a comprehensive understanding of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. This design enabled the researcher to capture the dynamics, challenges, and strategies involved in the formulation and implementation of the Independent Curriculum at both educational levels. Compared to survey or experimental designs, the case study provides richer insights and contextual depth, consistent with previous studies on educational policy implementation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Time and Location

This research was conducted over a period of approximately six weeks, from September 15 to October 25, 2025. The study took place at SDN 1 Jerowaru and SMPN 2 Jerowaru, both located in Jerowaru District, East Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. These schools were selected as research sites because they represent educational institutions at both the primary and secondary levels that have begun to formulate and implement the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) in alignment with national education reforms. The choice of these sites also allowed for the exploration of similarities and differences in curriculum implementation strategies across the two educational levels within the same regional context.

Population and Sample

The population of this study comprised all stakeholders directly involved in the formulation and implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SDN 1 Jerowaru and SMPN 2 Jerowaru, including principals, curriculum coordinators, teachers, students, parents, and education supervisors. Each group contributed valuable perspectives to understanding the curriculum's implementation process. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants based on their relevance, experience, and direct involvement in curriculum implementation. According to Sugiyono (2019), purposive sampling is

appropriate for qualitative research because it enables researchers to select information-rich cases that best illuminate the studied phenomenon.

From each school, approximately 17 participants were selected: one principal, one curriculum coordinator or vice principal for curriculum affairs, four core teachers implementing the curriculum, six students from various grade levels, two parents or guardians, and one education supervisor (shared between both schools). In total, the study involved 34 participants from the two schools. This diverse composition provided comprehensive insights and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Data Collection Instruments and Techniques

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Interview guidelines were developed according to the research objectives and previous studies on curriculum implementation. Observations focused on classroom activities, teacher-student interactions, and the practical application of curriculum components. Documents such as curriculum frameworks, lesson plans, and school policy records were reviewed to support data triangulation. The use of multiple instruments strengthened the validity and credibility of findings, following the guidelines for qualitative research credibility (Moleong, 2017). All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and confirmed by participants to ensure data accuracy.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes three main components: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Asipi et al., 2022; Anwar Thalib, 2022). Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes related to the Independent Curriculum policy's formulation and implementation. Data coding was performed manually and supported by qualitative data-analysis software of NVivo. The analysis process was iterative, allowing continuous comparison between data sources until a comprehensive understanding was achieved. To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher employed triangulation, member checking, and a detailed audit trail documenting all analytical procedures.

RESULTS

1. The Formulation Process of the Independent Curriculum Policy

a. Understanding of Policy Objectives

Participants across both schools consistently described the *Independent Curriculum* (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) as a national educational reform emphasizing flexibility, competency-based learning, and character development. However, the level of conceptual understanding varied depending on professional roles and institutional contexts. School leaders demonstrated a broad grasp of the policy's vision but noted challenges in translating it into technical practice. As the principal of **SMPN 2 Jerowaru** explained:

“We see the curriculum as freedom to focus on students’ competencies and character, but translating national objectives to daily lesson design is not straightforward.” (P16, male, 48, Principal of SMPN 2 Jerowaru, personal communication, October 3, 2025).

Classroom teachers at both primary and secondary levels understood the curriculum's philosophy but requested clearer operational examples for daily practice:

“The idea is clear — more student-centered and project-based — yet we still need concrete examples on designing modules and assessments.” (P03, female, 34, Grade 1 Teacher of SDN 1 Jerowaru, personal communication, September 26, 2025).

Students and parents were generally aware of the reform's broader intent — “freedom to learn” and “learning through projects” — though they lacked familiarity with technical terminology such as *Capaian Pembelajaran* (CP) and *rubrik penilaian*. A junior-high student commented:

“It feels like we have more choices in learning now. Teachers say it’s ‘Merdeka Belajar,’ but I don’t know the detailed goals.” (P24, female, 13, Student of Grade VIII, SMPN 2 Jerowaru, focus group discussion, October 7, 2025).

Observation at **SDN 1 Jerowaru** confirmed variations in teachers' technical understanding. During a curriculum discussion, several teachers asked for concrete examples of *Assessment for Learning* and rubrics, while others focused on designing thematic

project ideas (Observation, September 27, 2025). A review of school operational curriculum documents (KOSP) showed that while national objectives were referenced, standardized exemplars were still lacking (Document review, September 30, 2025).

Level of Understanding of the Independent Curriculum Policy among Stakeholders

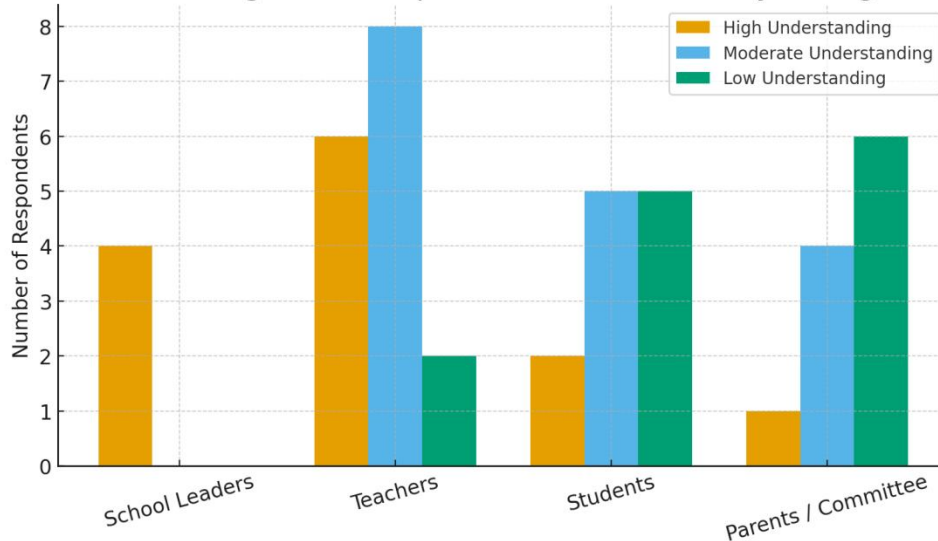
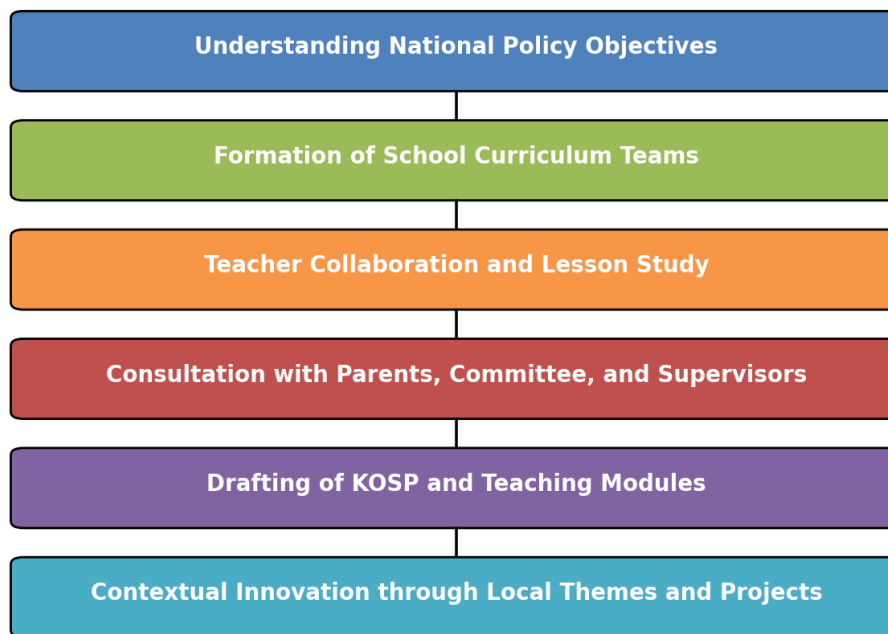


Figure 1: Level of Understanding of the Independent Curriculum Policy among Stakeholders

Figure 1 shows varying levels of understanding of the Independent Curriculum among stakeholders. School leaders displayed the highest comprehension due to their active role in planning, while teachers had moderate understanding but needed more technical guidance. Students understood the general idea of Merdeka Belajar but lacked detail, and parents or committee members showed the lowest awareness, limited to general program information. The chart indicates a hierarchical pattern—leaders understood the policy best, while community stakeholders remained at the basic level.

b. Stakeholder Involvement

The policy formulation process in both schools involved multiple stakeholders, though the scope and intensity of participation differed.



**Figure 2: Flowchart of the Curriculum Formulation Process
in SDN 1 and SMPN 2 Jerowaru**

Figure 2 illustrates the sequential process of formulating the Independent Curriculum in SDN 1 and SMPN 2 Jerowaru. The process began with understanding national policy goals, followed by the formation of internal curriculum teams. Teachers then collaborated through lesson studies and joint module design. Community consultations and supervisory input supported the validation phase, leading to the drafting of school operational documents (KOSP) and teaching modules. Finally, both schools adapted the curriculum to local contexts through environmental and cultural projects, reflecting contextual innovation and bottom-up implementation.

1) Leadership and curriculum teams.

At SDN 1 Jerowaru, the principal and curriculum coordinator played key roles in leading the formulation. The principal described forming an internal team to adapt national guidelines into school-level documents:

“We formed a team of core teachers and OPS staff to map national CP into our learning sequences and to draft modul ajar for teachers.” (P01, male, 45, Principal of SDN 1 Jerowaru, personal communication, September 25, 2025).

Similarly, the curriculum coordinator explained the collaborative structure:

“Our team regularly discussed each subject’s learning flow to make sure all competencies were connected.” (P02, female, 39, Curriculum Coordinator of SDN 1 Jerowaru, personal communication, September 26, 2025).

2) **Teacher collaboration.**

Teachers in both institutions emphasized peer-learning sessions, such as *lesson study* and joint module design, as essential for co-formulating the Independent Curriculum:

“We met weekly to present draft learning plans and get feedback — that’s how our KOSP started to take shape.” (P17, female, 40, Vice Principal for Curriculum of SMPN 2 Jerowaru, personal communication, October 3, 2025).

Observation during a teacher workshop confirmed this active exchange of feedback, as teachers reviewed and refined learning outcomes together (Observation, September 29, 2025).

3) **Community actors.**

Parents, *komite sekolah*, and local stakeholders participated mainly in consultative meetings or during school exhibitions. The school committee representative of SMPN 2 Jerowaru stated:

“We are invited to program presentations and give input about local relevance, though technical curriculum drafting remains with teachers and leaders.” (P30, male, 46, Member of SMPN 2 Jerowaru School Committee, personal communication, October 9, 2025).

4) **Supervision and external support.**

Support from district supervisors was primarily advisory, provided through periodic visits and monitoring rather than ongoing technical mentoring:

“We provide orientation and monitoring visits; deeper technical workshops depend on district scheduling and budgets.” (P31, female, 52, Supervisor of Secondary Education, East Lombok, personal communication, October 10, 2025).

c. Challenges in Formulation

Despite collaborative efforts, several consistent barriers affected the speed and quality of curriculum formulation.

1) **Limited technical guidance and training.**

Teachers across schools expressed that socialization sessions were informative but insufficiently practical. A Grade 3 teacher shared:

“The orientation helped us understand the principles, but we still needed hands-on workshops for making rubrics and learning flow maps.” (P04, male, 36, Grade 3 Teacher of SDN 1 Jerowaru, personal communication, September 27, 2025).

2) **Unequal access to resources.**

Some schools, particularly at the primary level, struggled with limited access to ICT tools and printed learning materials. Observation revealed that teachers often reused old K13 resources or created low-cost alternatives (Observation, September 28, 2025).

3) **Coordination gaps with education authorities.**

Several participants described irregular communication from the district office, leading schools to interpret guidelines independently. The vice principal for curriculum at SMPN 2 Jerowaru noted:

“We often have to make our own interpretations because follow-up from the district office is not consistent.” (P17, female, 40, Vice Principal for Curriculum of SMPN 2 Jerowaru, personal communication, October 3, 2025).

4) **Time and workload.**

Teachers reported that preparing differentiated modules, project rubrics, and learning media required significant time beyond regular teaching duties. A teacher admitted:

“Developing modul ajar takes extra hours — many of us finish it after class or at home.” (P19, female, 32, Mathematics Teacher of SMPN 2 Jerowaru, personal communication, October 4, 2025).

Nevertheless, local innovation emerged as a compensatory strength. Teachers contextualized curriculum materials by integrating environmental and cultural themes into project-based learning (Observation, October 5, 2025). Document analysis revealed locally developed teaching modules focusing on community mapping, traditional crafts, and environmental awareness — indicating pragmatic adaptation aligned with student realities (Document review, October 6, 2025).

Table 1. Summary of Findings on the Formulation of the Independent Curriculum Policy at SDN 1 and SMPN 2 Jerowaru

Aspect	SDN 1 Jerowaru	SMPN 2 Jerowaru	Overall Summary
Understanding of Policy Objectives	Principals and teachers understood the main ideas of flexibility and character education but needed clearer technical guidance.	Teachers grasped the concept of competency-based learning yet requested concrete module and assessment examples.	Conceptual understanding was generally good, but technical interpretation remained limited.
Stakeholder Involvement	Principal and curriculum coordinator led internal collaboration through school-based teams.	Teachers and vice principals actively collaborated through peer-learning and joint planning.	Stakeholder involvement was collaborative, though community participation was mostly consultative.
Challenges in Formulation	Limited training and ICT resources hindered technical implementation.	Heavy workload and inconsistent district coordination slowed progress.	Major constraints were technical capacity, resource inequality, and irregular supervision.
Local Innovation	Teachers integrated environmental and cultural themes into projects.	Developed thematic learning modules related to community and local context.	Local adaptation became a key strength to bridge policy and classroom reality.

Table 1 summarizes the findings of the curriculum formulation process in both SDN 1 and SMPN 2 Jerowaru. Both schools demonstrated a solid conceptual understanding of the Independent Curriculum but faced practical limitations in translating policy into operational practice. Stakeholder collaboration—particularly among teachers and curriculum teams—was active, though community participation remained limited to consultation. Major challenges included insufficient technical training, uneven access to resources, and inconsistent supervision from district authorities. Despite these obstacles, teachers displayed notable creativity by contextualizing the curriculum through local culture and environmental projects, reflecting adaptive implementation within local realities.

Triangulation of data from 34 respondents, direct classroom observations, and document reviews reveals that the formulation of the Independent Curriculum in SDN 1 Jerowaru and SMPN 2 Jerowaru was collaborative, contextually adaptive, yet technically constrained. School leaders and curriculum teams spearheaded translation of national policy into local practice, teachers engaged in co-design and peer mentoring, and community stakeholders offered consultative input. However, technical limitations, uneven resource distribution, and sporadic supervisory engagement hindered consistent implementation speed. Despite these challenges, teacher creativity and contextualization emerged as key enabling factors that anchored the early operationalization of the Independent Curriculum in both Jerowaru schools.

2. Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Both Schools

a. Teaching and Learning Practices

The implementation phase of the *Independent Curriculum* reflected a gradual yet transformative shift in teaching practices at both SDN 1 Jerowaru and SMPN 2 Jerowaru. Teachers began integrating project-based learning (PjBL), formative assessment, and student-centered approaches, though at varying levels of consistency.

At SDN 1 Jerowaru, teachers experimented with thematic projects connecting classroom subjects with local environmental issues. A Grade 4 teacher described:

“We designed projects about waste sorting and local plants so that children could learn science and responsibility at once.” (P06, female, 35, Grade 4 Teacher of SDN 1 Jerowaru, personal communication, September 28, 2025).

Observation in the same class confirmed active student participation, with learners working in small groups to create posters on waste management (Observation, September 29, 2025).

At SMPN 2 Jerowaru, teachers applied project-based activities in alignment with subject-based competencies and national assessments. The mathematics teacher explained:

“We try to connect real-life situations to problem-solving tasks, but we also have to keep up with assessment indicators for national exams.” (P19, female, 32, Mathematics Teacher of SMPN 2 Jerowaru, personal communication, October 4, 2025).

Lesson observations showed that the integration of *Kurikulum Merdeka* elements remained partial, with teachers still combining aspects of the previous 2013 Curriculum (K13) and new competency-based approaches (Observation, October 5, 2025).

A review of *Modul Ajar* documents from both schools indicated increasing teacher familiarity with “learning outcomes” (*Capaian Pembelajaran*), though alignment between objectives, activities, and assessments was still evolving (Document review, October 6, 2025).

**Table 2. Comparison of Teaching and Learning Practices
in SDN 1 and SMPN 2 Jerowaru**

Aspect	SDN 1 Jerowaru	SMPN 2 Jerowaru
Teaching Approach	Thematic and project-based learning connected to local context.	Subject-based learning aligned with assessment indicators.
Example Activity	Projects on waste sorting and local plants integrating science and responsibility.	Real-life problem-solving tasks in Mathematics linked to exam preparation.
Curriculum Integration	Partial implementation combining K13 and Merdeka Curriculum elements.	Gradual integration focusing on competency-based outcomes.
Student Engagement	High participation through group and outdoor activities.	Moderate engagement within structured classroom settings.

Table 2 presents a comparative overview of how the Independent Curriculum was implemented in both schools. SDN 1 Jerowaru emphasized contextual, thematic learning linked to the local environment, while SMPN 2 Jerowaru focused on structured subject-based approaches aligned with national assessments. Both demonstrated partial curriculum integration but differed in creativity and student engagement levels.

b. Teacher Readiness and Support

Teacher readiness played a decisive role in implementation success. Both schools adopted mentoring and peer-learning models to strengthen pedagogical confidence. At SDN 1 Jerowaru, the **Curriculum Coordinator (P02)** facilitated weekly mentoring sessions where teachers shared their module drafts:

“We hold small mentoring meetings each Friday to discuss what worked in the class and what we should adjust next week.” (P02, female, 39, Curriculum Coordinator of SDN 1 Jerowaru, personal communication, September 26, 2025).

These peer sessions improved consistency and reduced teacher anxiety about the new format. Observation showed collaborative reflection on learning outcomes and evaluation rubrics (Observation, September 27, 2025).

At SMPN 2 Jerowaru, structured mentoring was complemented by informal collaboration through subject-based teacher groups (*MGMP internal*). The Vice Principal for Curriculum shared:

“We encourage teachers to observe each other’s classes and discuss practical improvements.” (P17, female, 40, Vice Principal for Curriculum, SMPN 2 Jerowaru, personal communication, October 3, 2025).

The curriculum coordinator (P18) emphasized the school’s use of online resources and sample lesson plans from the Ministry of Education’s platform (*Merdeka Mengajar*):

“Teachers now use the ministry’s platform to find examples and upload their lesson modules for feedback.” (P18, male, 37, Curriculum Coordinator of SMPN 2 Jerowaru, personal communication, October 3, 2025).

Despite growing confidence, some teachers still faced challenges in differentiating instruction according to students’ learning profiles, especially in large classes (Observation, October 4, 2025). A review of *Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran (RPP)* documents revealed varying levels of detail and creativity, reflecting differences in teacher adaptability (Document review, October 6, 2025).

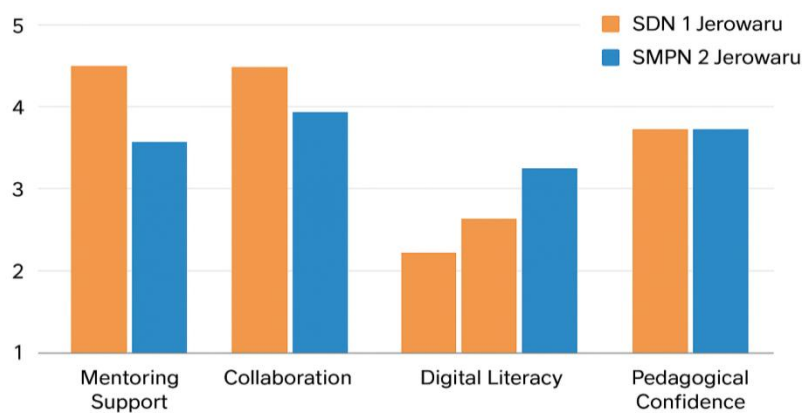


Figure 3: Teacher Readiness Bar Chart

Figure 3 presents a bar chart comparing teacher readiness levels between SDN 1 Jerowaru and SMPN 2 Jerowaru. Both schools showed strong mentoring and collaboration practices, with SDN 1 excelling in peer mentoring and SMPN 2 demonstrating slightly higher pedagogical confidence. However, both institutions reported relatively lower digital literacy, indicating the need for further ICT training to support technology-based learning.

c. Student and Community Engagement

The Independent Curriculum fostered active student participation and community involvement in learning. Teachers noted that students became more responsive and motivated under project-oriented lessons.

A Grade 2 teacher observed positive behavioral changes:

“When lessons involve games or outdoor observation, students become more curious and confident to ask questions.” (P05, female, 33, Grade 2 Teacher of SDN 1 Jerowaru, personal communication, September 27, 2025).

At SMPN 2 Jerowaru, teachers reported improved collaboration and communication among students during group tasks:

“Students are now more willing to present their group findings and explain their ideas. It builds confidence.” (P22, male, 29, Science Teacher of SMPN 2 Jerowaru, personal communication, October 6, 2025).

Parents and community members also showed increasing awareness of their role in supporting learning activities. A parent from SDN 1 Jerowaru shared:

“We now understand that learning is not just in class. The school invites us when students do projects involving the community.” (P13, female, 36, Parent of Grade 5 Student, SDN 1 Jerowaru, interview, September 30, 2025).

Field observation confirmed that both schools organized community-based projects—such as environmental clean-up and cultural exhibitions—that strengthened the social relevance of learning (Observation, October 2, 2025).

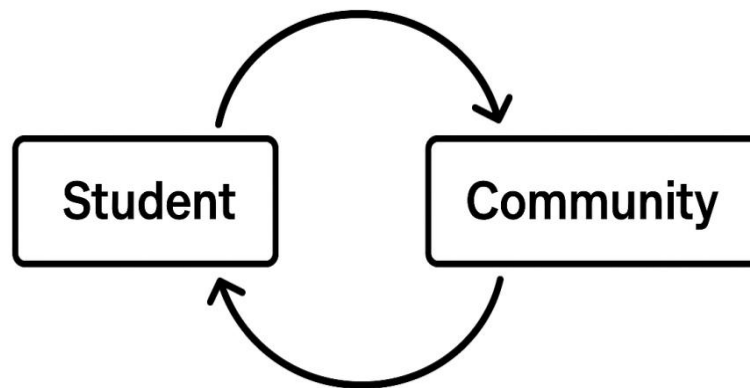


Figure 4: Model of Student and Community Engagement

Figure 4. Model of Student and Community Engagement illustrates the reciprocal relationship between students and the community in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. The circular arrows represent a continuous exchange: students engage in community-based projects that enhance their learning through real-life experiences, while the community provides support, context, and feedback that enrich educational outcomes. This two-way interaction fosters mutual growth—students develop social responsibility and practical skills, and the community benefits from active participation in educational development.

d. Differences Between Schools

Implementation patterns diverged due to differences in institutional context and resource availability. At SDN 1 Jerowaru, flexibility was more visible in classroom creativity. Teachers utilized local themes, folk stories, and nature exploration as contextual learning media. A principal explained:

“Our teachers creatively use local examples—like traditional markets or farming—to teach math and social studies.” (P01, male, 45, Principal of SDN 1 Jerowaru, personal communication, September 25, 2025).

Observation confirmed integration of cultural values and local wisdom into learning materials (Observation, September 29, 2025). In contrast, SMPN 2 Jerowaru prioritized curriculum alignment with national assessments and subject-specific standards. Teachers focused on balancing innovation with exam readiness:

“We want to innovate, but we must ensure that students are still prepared for national exams.”
 (P19, female, 32, Mathematics Teacher, SMPN 2 Jerowaru, personal communication, October 4, 2025).

While SDN 1 Jerowaru emphasized thematic flexibility, SMPN 2 Jerowaru pursued structured discipline integration to ensure comparability with broader assessment metrics. Both schools, however, shared a common challenge: limited digital literacy and infrastructure slowed down the optimal use of technology-based learning tools.

Table 3. Comparative Strengths in Curriculum Implementation
Between SDN 1 and SMPN 2 Jerowaru

Indicator	SDN 1 Jerowaru	SMPN 2 Jerowaru	Description
Curriculum Integration	High (4.2)	Very High (4.4)	SMPN 2 aligns lessons closely with national standards and assessment frameworks.
Teacher Readiness	High (4.5)	Very High (4.6)	Both schools show strong readiness; SMPN 2 benefits from structured mentoring and MGMP collaboration.
Student Engagement	Very High (4.6)	High (4.1)	SDN 1 demonstrates stronger engagement through creative, thematic, and locally contextualized learning.
Community Involvement	Very High (4.4)	Moderate (4.0)	SDN 1 involves parents and the local community more actively in project-based learning.
Innovation	Very High (4.7)	High (4.3)	SDN 1 leads in innovation through use of cultural and environmental themes in lessons.

Table 3 compares the relative strengths of curriculum implementation between SDN 1 and SMPN 2 Jerowaru. The data show that SMPN 2 Jerowaru excels in curriculum integration and teacher readiness, supported by structured supervision and standardized assessment alignment. In contrast, SDN 1 Jerowaru demonstrates higher performance in student engagement, community involvement, and innovation, reflecting its creative adaptation of the Independent Curriculum to local contexts. Both schools display complementary strengths that collectively represent diverse approaches to successful policy implementation.

However, both schools encountered similar constraints: limited resources, uneven teacher readiness, and time-intensive curriculum documentation. Mentoring and peer

learning proved crucial in bridging these gaps, and the involvement of parents and communities further reinforced motivation and contextual learning relevance. These findings suggest that the success of Independent Curriculum implementation depends on localized adaptation supported by continuous capacity-building and community collaboration.

3. The Impact of Policy Formulation and Implementation on Teaching and Learning Quality

a. Improvement in Teaching Quality

The implementation of the *Independent Curriculum* brought a notable improvement in teaching quality at both SDN 1 Jerowaru and SMPN 2 Jerowaru. Teachers reported increased autonomy, creativity, and reflective practice in lesson planning and delivery.

At SDN 1 Jerowaru, teachers began designing learning modules that aligned with student needs and local contexts. The principal highlighted the transformative change in teacher mindset:

“Before, teachers waited for instruction from the district office. Now, they plan and create their own learning projects. It’s a big shift in independence.” (P01, male, 45, Principal of SDN 1 Jerowaru, personal communication, September 25, 2025).

Similarly, a curriculum coordinator from the same school emphasized reflective teaching as a new professional culture:

“Every week, teachers share their reflections on what worked and what didn’t. This helps them grow together.” (P02, female, 39, Curriculum Coordinator, SDN 1 Jerowaru, personal communication, September 26, 2025).

Observation data (September 28, 2025) confirmed the increasing use of student-centered learning, where teachers acted as facilitators rather than knowledge transmitters. At SMPN 2 Jerowaru, subject teachers also reported improved lesson coherence and interdisciplinary collaboration. The science teacher noted:

“The curriculum encourages us to connect science with social and environmental topics. It makes learning more meaningful.” (P20, female, 37, Science Teacher, SMPN 2 Jerowaru, personal communication, October 5, 2025).

These changes contributed to a stronger professional identity and a collaborative work atmosphere among teachers (Observation, October 6, 2025).

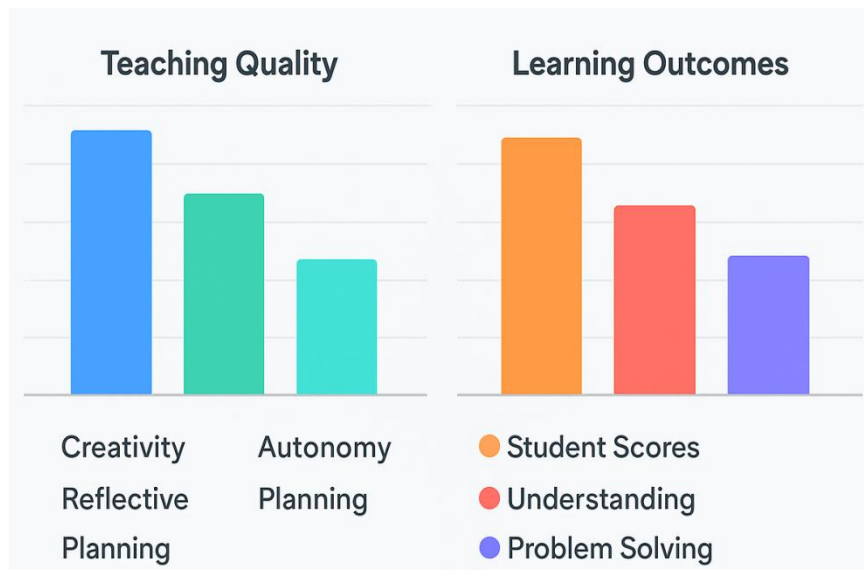


Figure 5: Improvements in Teaching and Learning Quality after Independent Curriculum Implementation

Figure 5 illustrates the positive effects of implementing the Independent Curriculum on both teaching and learning quality. Teachers demonstrated increased creativity, autonomy, and reflective lesson planning, while students showed improved understanding, higher engagement, and enhanced collaboration in the classroom. Overall, the curriculum fostered a more dynamic and effective educational environment.

b. Enhancement of Student Learning Outcomes

Student learning outcomes improved not only in cognitive areas but also in communication, curiosity, and collaboration skills. Observation at SDN 1 Jerowaru (September 29, 2025) revealed students actively engaging in group problem-solving and presentation activities—an uncommon practice before the curriculum reform.

A Grade 5 student expressed enthusiasm about new learning methods:

“Now we can learn by doing projects and telling stories. It’s fun, not just writing.” (P09, male, 11, Student of SDN 1 Jerowaru, focus group discussion, September 29, 2025).

At SMPN 2 Jerowaru, similar outcomes were noted. The English teacher explained how students’ confidence in using English increased through contextual learning:

“Students are less afraid to speak now. They even present short dialogues in front of the class.” (P23, female, 33, English Teacher, SMPN 2 Jerowaru, personal communication, October 6, 2025).

A student from Grade VIII added:

“We work in groups more often. It helps us share ideas and learn from each other.” (P24, female, 13, Student of SMPN 2 Jerowaru, focus group discussion, October 7, 2025).

Field notes recorded students demonstrating independent inquiry and creative problem-solving during science experiments and thematic discussions (Observation, October 8, 2025). Document analysis from report cards also indicated gradual improvement in descriptive evaluations, reflecting teachers’ deeper understanding of formative assessment (Document review, October 9, 2025).

c. Institutional Benefits

At the institutional level, both schools experienced strengthened management systems and increased accountability through collaborative leadership. At SDN 1 Jerowaru, the principal implemented an internal evaluation mechanism through weekly coordination meetings. As noted by the school committee representative:

“We see the teachers and the principal working more closely now. Meetings are more productive and focused on results.” (P14, male, 47, Member of SDN 1 Jerowaru School Committee, personal communication, October 1, 2025).

This leadership approach cultivated a sense of shared responsibility. At SMPN 2 Jerowaru, curriculum documentation became more systematic and transparent. The vice principal explained:

“Now we record every module, reflection, and report. It’s not only for compliance but to track progress.” (P17, female, 40, Vice Principal for Curriculum, SMPN 2 Jerowaru, personal communication, October 3, 2025).

The implementation also encouraged peer supervision and the integration of digital tools for monitoring learning outcomes. However, infrastructure limitations—particularly the lack of stable internet and digital devices—remained obstacles, as noted by the secondary education supervisor:

“Schools have shown strong initiative, but access to digital tools is still a serious gap.” (P31, female, 52, Supervisor of Secondary Education, East Lombok, personal communication, October 10, 2025).

Observation confirmed that despite resource challenges, teachers continued using locally available materials and community partnerships to sustain innovation (Observation, October 10, 2025).

d. Broader Educational Implications

The field data indicate that the *Independent Curriculum* fostered not only pedagogical change but also a broader educational shift toward autonomy, collaboration, and contextual learning. However, effective implementation required the alignment of national policy design with local school readiness.

The primary education supervisor summarized this finding succinctly:

“Policies work best when adapted to local realities. Schools here succeed because they localize the curriculum without losing its national vision.” (P15, female, 50, Supervisor of Primary Education, East Lombok, personal communication, October 2, 2025).

Both schools exemplified how decentralized decision-making can empower teachers and communities to innovate within policy boundaries. Yet, sustainability depended on continuous support, capacity-building, and equitable access to resources. Triangulated evidence from interviews, observations, and document reviews consistently showed that the success of the *Independent Curriculum* was not merely structural but

transformational, promoting a culture of reflective learning and shared responsibility across school ecosystems.

Table 4. Summary of the Impact of the Independent Curriculum at Different Educational Levels

Educational Level	Observed Impact	Key Points
SDN 1 Jerowaru (Primary)	Improved teaching quality	Teachers reported increased creativity, autonomy, and reflective lesson planning
SMPN 2 Jerowaru (Secondary)	Enhanced learning outcomes	Students showed higher engagement and teachers applied more varied teaching strategies

The table 4 summarizes how the Independent Curriculum influenced teaching and learning at primary and secondary levels. At the primary level, teachers gained more autonomy and creativity in lesson planning, leading to improved teaching quality. At the secondary level, the curriculum promoted active student engagement and diversified teaching strategies, positively affecting learning outcomes.

The findings confirm that successful curriculum reform depends not only on policy formulation but also on the *human dimension*—teachers, students, parents, and communities—working collaboratively to actualize educational innovation in contextually meaningful ways.

DISCUSSION

1. Results Analysis

a. The Curriculum Formulation Process

The findings indicate that the formulation of the Independent Curriculum at SDN 1 and SMPN 2 Jerowaru was characterized by collaborative yet contextually adaptive processes. School leaders and curriculum teams demonstrated strong conceptual understanding of national policy objectives, focusing on flexibility, competency-based learning, and character education. However, teachers requested more concrete guidance on translating these objectives into operational practices such as assessment rubrics and lesson modules. These results align with the study's first objective, which aimed to analyze the formulation process, highlighting that effective policy translation requires both leadership support and capacity-building among educators. The observed challenges—including

limited technical training, uneven resource availability, and irregular supervisory engagement—underscore the importance of structured professional development and continuous mentoring to bridge policy intentions and classroom implementation.

These findings reflect that teacher educators play a central role in developing curriculum components but often face limitations in time, knowledge, and professional preparation (Tep, Oeurn, and Sreng (2024). Strong principal leadership and collaborative teacher engagement were also critical in ensuring that national curriculum reforms were meaningfully adapted to local school contexts (Udin et al., (2025).

b. Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Teaching and Learning

Implementation results reveal that both schools gradually integrated project-based learning, student-centered approaches, and contextualized thematic activities. SDN 1 Jerowaru emphasized local environmental and cultural themes, fostering high student engagement and community involvement, whereas SMPN 2 Jerowaru focused on structured subject-based lessons aligned with national assessment standards. Teacher readiness was enhanced through mentoring and peer collaboration, which improved pedagogical confidence and classroom management. These findings correspond to the study's second objective of describing the policy's implementation, demonstrating that localized adaptation, collaborative reflection, and contextual innovation are essential for operationalizing curriculum reforms effectively. Nevertheless, limitations in digital literacy and infrastructure indicate ongoing support needs for technology-based learning integration.

This aligns with research suggesting that teacher autonomy in designing syllabi and instructional strategies enables effective responses to local learning needs (Whitehead, 2023). Additionally, balancing knowledge, skills, and attitudes for holistic student development was evident in the schools' integration of local culture and student-centered activities (Fitriana et al., 2022).

c. Impact on Teaching Quality and Student Learning Outcomes

The Independent Curriculum positively influenced teaching quality and student learning outcomes in both primary and secondary schools. Teachers exhibited increased autonomy, creativity, and reflective practice, while students developed collaboration, critical thinking, and communication skills through project-based and inquiry-oriented activities. Institutional benefits included improved curriculum documentation, systematic monitoring,

and enhanced accountability. These outcomes fulfill the third objective of evaluating the impact on teaching and learning quality, illustrating that curriculum reform can drive professional growth, student engagement, and school-level innovation. The evidence suggests that successful policy implementation depends not only on structural guidance but also on the active participation of teachers, students, and the community, highlighting the interplay between policy, human capacity, and contextual realities.

These observations are supported by findings showing that the Independent Curriculum empowers teachers and fosters student-centered learning (Firdaus & Permana, 2024). Furthermore, flexibility and contextualized learning play a key role in preparing students for 21st-century challenges (Syifausakia, 2023).

2. Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings of this study show both consistencies and differences when compared to prior research on curriculum reform and the implementation of the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka). First, the collaborative and adaptive formulation process observed at SDN 1 and SMPN 2 Jerowaru aligns with Tep, Oeurn, and Sreng (2024), who emphasize that teacher educators and school leaders play a central role in developing curriculum components such as syllabi, lesson plans, and assessment instruments.

Both studies highlight that effective curriculum formulation requires not only understanding national policy objectives but also translating them into actionable and context-sensitive strategies at the school level. Similarly, Udin et al., (2025) underscore that strong leadership and active teacher collaboration are crucial for bridging the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. The present study confirms these assertions, demonstrating that without structured professional development and continuous mentoring, teachers may struggle to operationalize abstract curriculum goals, particularly in resource-limited rural schools.

In terms of implementation, the observed integration of project-based learning, student-centered approaches, and thematic activities mirrors the findings of Whitehead (2023), who argues that granting teachers autonomy in designing lessons enhances responsiveness to local learning needs and fosters creativity in pedagogy. The emphasis on contextualization at SDN 1, through local environmental and cultural themes, also corresponds with Fitriana et al., (2022), who stress the importance of balancing knowledge, skills, and attitudes in holistic student development. In contrast, SMPN 2 Jerowaru's focus

on structured subject-based lessons highlights a divergence from idealized student-centered models, reflecting the influence of national assessment standards. This difference underscores the ongoing tension between national curriculum requirements and local adaptation, a challenge also noted by Rahmadanty et al., (2022) in underdeveloped regions where monitoring and local support are minimal.

Regarding the impact on teaching quality and student outcomes, the positive effects observed—enhanced teacher autonomy, reflective practice, and student engagement—are consistent with the findings of Firdaus & Permana, (2024), who reported that Kurikulum Merdeka strengthens teacher empowerment and promotes student-centered learning. Similarly, Syifauzakia, (2023) highlights that flexible curriculum frameworks can better prepare students for the demands of the 21st century by fostering critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration skills. However, this study also identified persistent challenges, such as limited digital literacy and infrastructural constraints, which Fudge and Ferebee (2021) have noted as common obstacles in integrating technology-based learning. These differences indicate that while policy design provides a structural foundation, contextual realities—including school resources, teacher capacity, and community involvement—significantly shape the effectiveness of curriculum implementation.

Finally, this study's findings regarding the necessity of combining top-down guidance with bottom-up innovation are in line with Rifai et al. (2024) and Mulyasa (2023), who advocate for harmonizing national directives with school-level initiatives to ensure meaningful curriculum adoption. The present case study illustrates that such a combined approach can enhance professional growth, foster innovation, and improve learning outcomes, provided that adequate mentoring, monitoring, and stakeholder engagement are maintained. This comparative analysis demonstrates that the experiences of SDN 1 and SMPN 2 Jerowaru are both reflective of broader trends in curriculum reform and uniquely shaped by local contextual factors, offering insights into the complex dynamics of policy translation in rural educational settings.

3. Implications of Findings

The findings of this study offer several theoretical and practical implications for educational policy and practice. Theoretically, the research reinforces the constructivist perspective underlying Kurikulum Merdeka, which views learners as active participants in constructing knowledge through experience and reflection (Gandasari et al., 2022). The

observed improvements in teaching quality and student engagement suggest that curriculum autonomy, when coupled with structured professional development, enables teachers to adopt more reflective, inquiry-based, and student-centered pedagogical approaches. This supports previous studies by Firdaus and Permana, (2024) and Whitehead (2023), indicating that teacher autonomy and contextual adaptation are critical for translating policy into effective classroom practices.

Practically, the study underscores the importance of leadership support and collaborative mechanisms within schools. Principals and curriculum coordinators play pivotal roles in facilitating training, mentoring, and peer collaboration, which in turn improve teacher readiness and confidence. For instance, the successful integration of local environmental and cultural themes at SDN 1 demonstrates that context-sensitive adaptations can increase student motivation and foster community engagement, echoing the suggestions of Fitriana et al., (2022) regarding holistic student development. Moreover, the observed gaps in digital literacy and infrastructural support highlight areas where targeted interventions—such as ICT training, provision of teaching resources, and infrastructural investments—can enhance curriculum implementation, particularly in rural and resource-limited contexts.

Additionally, the findings have implications for policy design at the national level. While structural flexibility is a core strength of Kurikulum Merdeka, the study emphasizes that autonomy alone is insufficient without continuous monitoring, mentoring, and alignment with assessment standards. The combination of top-down policy guidance and bottom-up school innovation, as advocated by Rifai et al. (2024), proves essential for achieving meaningful and sustainable curriculum reform. These insights contribute to broader discussions on educational decentralization, highlighting the interplay between national policy frameworks, local adaptation, and the professional capacity of educators.

4. Research Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the research was conducted in only two schools, SDN 1 and SMPN 2 Jerowaru, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other schools or regions with different contextual characteristics. While the case study design allowed for in-depth analysis, broader quantitative studies could complement these insights by examining curriculum implementation across a wider sample of schools.

Second, the reliance on qualitative data, primarily through interviews, observations, and document analysis, introduces potential subjectivity in data interpretation. Although triangulation, member checking, and audit trails were employed to enhance credibility, the perspectives captured reflect those of selected participants and may not fully represent all stakeholders' experiences, particularly students and parents who had less extensive involvement in policy formulation. Third, the study's timeframe of six weeks constrained the ability to observe long-term effects of curriculum implementation on student learning outcomes and teaching practices. Longitudinal studies are recommended to assess the sustainability of the Independent Curriculum reforms and their impact over multiple academic cycles.

Finally, contextual factors such as limited digital infrastructure and varying teacher competencies influenced implementation outcomes, suggesting that findings may differ in schools with higher resource availability or urban settings. Recognizing these limitations allows for a more cautious interpretation of the results and identifies avenues for future research aimed at enhancing curriculum policy implementation in diverse educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study found that: (1) The formulation of the Independent Curriculum at SDN 1 and SMPN 2 Jerowaru was collaborative and contextually adaptive. School leaders and curriculum teams emphasized flexibility, competency-based learning, and character development, while teachers requested clearer operational guidance such as lesson modules and assessment rubrics. These findings highlight that effective curriculum formulation depends on leadership support and capacity-building to translate policy into classroom practice; (2) Both schools integrated project-based learning, student-centered approaches, and contextually relevant thematic activities. SDN 1 focused on local environmental and cultural themes, fostering engagement and community participation, whereas SMPN 2 emphasized structured subject-based lessons aligned with national standards. Teacher mentoring and peer collaboration improved readiness, indicating that localized adaptation and reflective practice are key to effective curriculum implementation; and (3) The Independent Curriculum enhanced teaching quality and student outcomes. Teachers showed greater autonomy, creativity, and reflective practice, while students developed

critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills. Schools also benefited from better curriculum documentation, monitoring, and accountability, demonstrating that curriculum reform can drive professional growth, student engagement, and institutional improvement.

This study was limited to two schools, which may affect generalizability. The six-week research period restricted the ability to observe long-term impacts. Additionally, contextual factors such as limited digital infrastructure and varying teacher competencies influenced results. While triangulation and member checking were applied, findings remain context-specific to rural schools in East Lombok. Future studies should involve multiple schools across different regions to enhance generalizability and include longitudinal designs to examine long-term effects. Investigating digital literacy integration and comparing urban and rural contexts would provide insights into how local conditions affect curriculum implementation and outcomes. Expanding research to include broader perspectives of students, parents, and community stakeholders is also recommended to support equitable and sustainable educational improvements.

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