



Educational Policy and Curriculum Innovation: A Study on Impactful Learning in Primary Schools

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Abstract

This study focuses on the implications of Kurikulum Merdeka to pedagogical delivery and student motivation in primary schools and the subjective institutional and infrastructural environment through which it is carried out. As it uses a convergent mixed-methods design, the study combines environmental scans administered to 100 teachers and 20 principals with qualitative classroom observations and interviews of urban and rural schools in Kendari. The results show that even though several teachers support the declared goals of practitioner-led, situation-based learning of the curriculum, the level of its implementation is strongly subject to the long-term professional growth of the teachers as well as enough availability of materials. The urban schools associate with more effective learning patterns, reinforced with better infrastructure and collaborative pedagogy ethic, and the rural teachers often establish a tradeoff against pedagogical change. Qualitative reviews show that once learners are involved in authentic and community-oriented activities, their agency, ethical sensibility, and learning self-regulation increase. Nevertheless, the results still hang uncertainly on the conditions, evenly and otherwise distributed, that are their conditions. This research supports the argument that the success of the Independent Curriculum ultimately depends not only on particular design features but also on the systematic appreciation of the teacher, fair learning conditions offered and the development of the school culture that does not treat innovation as an invariable prescription.

Introduction

Curriculum reform has become a prevailing policy tool to deal with general educational issue of relevance, equity and learner agency. However, implementation of reform is usually more complex than the initial design of policies envisaged. Under conditions of rapid decentralization, like in Indonesia, curricular change faces various mediations; curricular change must negotiate through the traditions of pedagogical practice, institutional memory, unequal infrastructures and heterogeneous teacher capacity. In such circumstances, the educational reform process should be not understood as a purely administrative activity but rather as a sociopolitical practice predestined to be informed by contradicting discourses and frictions in history (Bailey, 2017; Stetsenko, 2020; Veliz et al., 2025; Wilkins et al., 2024). Gershon & Helfenbein (2023) also argues that curriculum has to be understood both as an artifact and not just as a technical tool but as a signifier that writes specific ideas about the learner, teacher and the nation. Curriculum reform thus has to be contextualized into large questions about epistemic access, translation of policy and institutional ecology.

The launch of the Kurikulum Merdeka in Indonesia in 2022 marks an acute reorientation of the national curriculum policy in the direction of flexibility, contextualization, and student-

centricity. According to the official aims of the Independent Curriculum, the progression of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila, which is a mentally well-rounded profile of learners that includes critical thinking, moral foundation, cultural identity, and global preparation, is explained (Kemendikbudristek, 2022; Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2023). Through the provision of schools with considerable freedom to design teaching progressions based on local circumstances and student desires, the new framework claims to endeavor in unburdening the area of teaching practice of the shackles of the earlier overly rigid national benchmarks. However, this independence assumes that teachers can be skilled enough and that institutions are prepared enough in a non-evenly distributed fashion. Lestari & Wijaya (2023) show that the translation of the Independent Curriculum in the rural schools often breaks down into administrative improvisation instead of pedagogical experimentation, exactly because the technical potential of reform is too high to be absorbed by the school system as it is. Fadhillah (2024) also warns that not all teachers have adapted to several epistemic changes required by the new core ideas of the reform, which are flexibility, contextuality, and student agency. These texts make one have second thoughts about reading reform rhetoric, particularly where reform rhetoric takes the form of believing institutional change can autonomously occur just because policy has been declared.

On the pedagogical scale, the Independent Curriculum is consistent with international trends of project-based learning, interdisciplinary integration, and differentiated instructions as the means of achieving real student engagement (Vaithianathan et al., 2024; Rahman & Sari, 2023; Hall & Miro, 2016; Kristiyuana et al., 2025). Such approaches do not only guarantee cognitive growth but also will establish characters based on their applicability in real life. However, Sutrisno et al. (2024) reveal that achieving successful implementation of such models is not just about instructional design, but such implementation requires classrooms cultures of openness of emotions, mutual respect, and risk-taking in learning, which is not typically scaffolded by policy blueprints. Set against the facilitator-based tendency of teachers to engage in project-based learning in theory but, in practice, to be uncertain in the assessment and assessment procedures, time pressures arose in Aisyah & Nugraheni (2023) study. These patterns exercise that a change of a pedagogical orientation aligned to the reform is not a question of technique but of a process of long-term professional transformation. Curriculum is permissive, but the extent to which teachers will take this up or choose not to given the pressures and possibilities that knit their own locations means that curriculum is permissive.

At the center of such navigation is teacher professional learning. Mulyani & Herlina (2024) have reasoned that it is not the amount of training that matters in this case but rather the quality and continuity of the training that defines whether reform initiatives are treated as development opportunities or boredom. The research revealed that in their study, teachers who got constant mentorship would tend to incorporate curriculum principles in innovatively and those teachers who got minimal support thought that the reform was an additional burden to them. Extending this assertion, Hennessy et al. (2011) state that professional development should be integrated into the context of dialogic and collaboration wherein educators would have the opportunity to reflect, experiment, and edit their approaches. Their results echo those of Voisin & Avalos-Bevan (2023) who in a broader sense provides the same analysis where teacher learning is most effective when it is anchored within relationships of trust, inquiry, and shared purpose. It is possible that without these infrastructures of relations, reform efforts, even those carried through with good intentions, will result in surface of reform and not reforms in deep pedagogy.

Although the teacher-centered approach is focused on teacher agency, the reform is susceptible to infrastructural and institutional inequalities. Kusumawardhani et al. (2023) report that many rural schools lack the internet, never mind basic instructional materials and a stable power

supply, conditions that grossly limit the type of technology-rich pedagogy that can be used. Similarly, Hass et al. (2023) demonstrate that students in an excluded digital setting have their collaborative and exploratory learning opportunities dramatically reduced. Such research refutes the notion that flexibility in curriculum necessarily results in innovation. The flexibility might end up becoming pedagogical improvisation devoid of sufficient scaffolding in a scarcity context. Without such policies of differentiated support, reform can only serve to intensify rather than eliminate existing educational inequalities as Petreñas et al. (2021) state. Louie (2016) goes even further and posits that equity-oriented reform should not only create a space where the teacher could exercise discretion but should accommodate the material and discursive settings that determine which things are possible as far as discretion is concerned.

The key concept in the focus of the Independent Curriculum is the idea of an effective learning experience, the form of which encourages students not only to learn to achieve higher grades but also to learn to be an ethical thinker, an active citizen and a well-rounded person. According to Thompson (2024), it is what the authors call the subjectification accomplishments of education, an activity through which a learner is rendered something more than a consumer of knowledge, and which renders them as an agent of understanding and change, rather than a smart-guesser of right answers. Fitriadi et al. (2024) further apply it in Indonesian classrooms and suggest that effective learning has to be built on community relevance and cultural narrative so that it appeals to learners' experience. Passarelli & Kolb (2023) have demonstrated that the experiential learning setting forms more enduring dispositions than course of action instruction, especially when it initiates the student to consider their identities in connection with the world. Dowdall et al. (2021) also state that students who work on the locally bound projects demonstrate better motivation, empathy, and teamwork abilities. Nevertheless, attending to the warning of Keusters et al. (2024), their design does not ensure subsequent participation. It comes out when the students are faced with learning places that respect their views, question their assumptions and support their cultural knowledge.

The interaction between structural disparity and pedagogical imagination in curriculum enactment in varied schooling ecologies represents what has not been sufficiently theorized within the contemporary literature. The existing literature has analysed the macro-political requirements that have been driving curriculum change (Fadhillah, 2024) or identified the idiosyncratic variants implemented by practitioners. However, the influence of institutional forces, teacher action, and student experience in the curriculum development in practice has been under scientific development. This paper addresses this gap by examining how different notions of the high impact learning are in diverse ways understood, disputed and operationalised in primary schools in urban and rural districts carrying out the Independent Curriculum. Instead of viewing implementation as a process that involves a series of linear steps, the study views curriculum as something that exists in the form of lived practice that is mediated through power relations, distributions of resources and local pedagogical cultures. This means that reality reformulation is not a neutral administrative project, but rather a construction process, a place where struggle ensues, a place of contingency, where teachers do improvisation, students respond to it, and institutional pasts either construct possibility or inhibit it.

Methods

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design is embraced in the current study combining quantitative and qualitative processes to examine the execution of the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) in the Indonesian primary schools and whether or not adequate instructional strategies have been developed. The configuration of mixed-methods was selected

strategically in order to include measurable indicators and local contexts that are more subtle to allow the results of the educational reform to be read in more textural ways. Qualitative and quantitative data allowed the recognition of trends in both teacher practices and student achievement in various institutional contexts, whereas qualitative data were important to reveal how educators and school administrators define and interpret, modify and negotiate, curriculum in their respective context. Through the analytical stage, these sets of data were synthesized to determine convergence and complementarity.

The process of data collection was in several public primary schools in the city of Kendari, Southeast Sulawesi. The sample drew the institutions distributed across urban areas and rural areas in order to reflect the heterogeneity in the conditions that the Independent Curriculum is implemented today, both in-terms of infrastructural conditions as well as socioeconomic conditions. A purposive sample was used to select the participants so that they were adequately exposed to reform issues, where 100 primary school teachers and 20 school principals were invited having served at least one full academic year in participating in reform implementation in a vigorous manner. The educational background of all the respondents was relevant in teacher education and they had gathered a teaching or leadership experience of at least five years. Both classroom level teacher-pedagogical dynamism and broader strategic school-school responses towards curriculum change were meant to be captured by the inclusion of teachers and principals. The data gathering process was undertaken during three months with the use of three key research tools, viz. structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and face-to-face classroom observations. The systematic query comprised the main quantitative data-gathering instrument and raised answers related to comprehension by the teachers of the key postulates of the Independent Curriculum, their implementations of student-centered teaching methods, the challenges they faced, and their estimation of student reaction towards the model of the revolutionized pedagogical approach. The survey tool contained Likert-scale questions along with few open questions, and it was also administered in hardcopy and online versions to fit different technological exposure on various schools. The responses were anonymized before the analysis to protect privacy of the participants.

To supplement and provide context to the quantitative results, as well as explore their lived experiences in more detail, fifteen teachers and five school principals were interviewed semi-structurally and their responses assessed their reaction to the new curriculum change, the working strategies they chose, the institutional resources or challenges that they had to face, and their experiences with regard to student learning during the new model. The interview protocol was not rigid, that is, it allowed emerging un-predicted important themes to predominate and achieve consistency across the participant. Face-to-face-interviews or online video conferences were carried out based on the availability and location of the participants. Each of the sessions was recorded at a consensual level and transcribed verbatim to ease correct analyses. Besides the quantitative and qualitative tools, the classroom observation as the third tool of methodology helped to record current aspects of classroom instruction and the degree of implementation of the effective principles of the learning. Ten classroom visits were preconcerted, five in urban schools and five in rural schools, through the application of a standardized observation rubric designed specifically to match the research. This rubric considers four observable signs that are: student participation in a project-based or thematic instruction, the teacher-student interactions patterns, and the usage of a contextual or interdisciplinary learning materials, all of which were evaluated through unobtrusive observation. This was organized through the administrators of the schools to ensure this did not pose too much interference and field notes of each session were captured.

SPSS was used to carry out quantitative analyses after data collection. The frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were used as descriptive statistics in summarising teacher perceptions and classroom practice. Comparisons between urban and rural schools were estimated by the help of inferential tests: independent sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA in case of continuous data and categorical data, respectively ($p < 0.05$). These tests were intended to understand how much difference in curriculum implementation and learning outcomes could be influenced by contextual factors, in particular, the location of schools that were examined and resources available to them. A thematic analysis of the qualitative data (the interviews and the transcripts of the interviews and the notes of the observation) was followed. Two researchers initially coded data inductively; following which, they grouped the evolving codes into higher level of thematic categories, and the differences between and among the groups were debated upon to attain analytical rigour. Themes developed on the basis of the presence of similar patterns in the data, and they were also guided by the theoretical framework of the study, specifically in reference to teacher agency, pedagogical innovation and student engagement. Questionnaires, interviews, and observations triangulation helped to keep results consistent and resulted in a complete image of classroom activities.

Results and Discussion

Participant Profile

This study involved 100 teachers and 20 school principals from various urban and rural areas in Kendari City. Demographic data show that the majority of teachers were between 30 and 45 years old, with an average teaching experience of over five years. Most of the teachers had been implementing the Independent Curriculum for at least one year and held a bachelor's degree in education. The participating principals had varying leadership experience, with an average tenure of 3 to 5 years. This participant profile is essential to provide contextual understanding of curriculum implementation, as the readiness and experience of both teachers and principals are key factors in the successful execution of impactful learning policies.

Understanding and Implementation of the Independent Curriculum

Survey data revealed that 85% of teachers reported a solid understanding of the core concepts of the Independent Curriculum, particularly regarding the flexibility in lesson planning and the importance of empowering students as active agents in the learning process. Teachers reported applying impactful learning methods such as project-based learning, thematic instruction, and problem-based learning, all designed to suit local contexts and students' needs.

Classroom observations supported these findings, indicating that in 70% of observed sessions, teachers successfully integrated activities that fostered creativity, teamwork, and students' critical thinking skills. Teacher-student interactions were two-way and communicative, in contrast to traditional teacher-centered approaches. In addition, teachers appeared to use varied learning media, although the use of digital technology remained limited especially in rural schools. The results are summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Summary of Survey and Observation Results on the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Primary Schools

Measured Aspect	Indicator	% Teachers Agree/Practice	Remarks
Teachers' Understanding of the Curriculum	Understanding the principle of curriculum flexibility	85%	High, most teachers understand

	Understanding students as active agents	80%	Teachers realize the importance
Implementation of Impactful Learning	Using project-based learning	72%	Many teachers apply this method
	Using thematic learning	78%	Thematic method is popular
	Collaborative student learning	75%	Two-way interaction has increased
Availability of Facilities and Tools	Adequate access to technology	55%	Lower in rural schools
	Varied learning media	68%	Teachers try to use diverse media
Implementation Challenges	Lack of facilities/infrastructure	60%	Main obstacle in rural schools
	Need for training and mentoring	70%	Teachers require more support
Impact on Students	Increased motivation and engagement	80%	Students are more active and motivated
	Development of character and social skills	75%	Supports Pancasila Student Profile

Innovative Teaching Practices Developed by Teachers

In-depth interviews with teachers and school principals revealed a range of instructional innovations developed in response to the Independent Curriculum policy. Several teachers designed project-based learning modules that connected subject content with real-life issues in the school's surrounding environment, such as waste management and water conservation. These innovations not only increased student engagement but also reinforced the character values promoted by the Pancasila Student Profile. Additionally, teachers reported implementing interdisciplinary learning approaches that facilitated the development of critical and creative thinking skills. For instance, some integrated mathematics and social studies in a project focused on mapping important locations within the village or school neighborhood, encouraging students to apply numerical concepts alongside socio-cultural understanding.

Table 2. Statistical Analysis Results of the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum between Urban and Rural Schools

Variable	Mean (Urban)	Mean (Rural)	t-value	p-value
Teachers' Understanding of Curriculum	4.2	3.7	3.56	0.001
Use of Impactful Learning Approaches	4.0	3.5	3.10	0.003
Availability of Facilities and Tools	4.3	2.8	6.45	<0.001
Impact on Student Motivation	4.1	3.6	2.90	0.005

As the independent t-tests results show in Table 2, there exist significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between the four core dimensions of curriculum implementation put at teachers knowledge base in the curriculum, application of powerful learning methods, access to educational resources and perceived influence on student motivation between the urban and rural schools. The differences in the mean scores are an indication that the location a school is placed, in urban _ (rural)_ settings, has a quantifiable impact on the understanding and implementation of the Independent Curriculum.

The mean score of the first variable, that is, the understanding of teachers of curriculum principles was 4.2 and 3.7 in the urban and the rural respectively, with the t-value of 3.56 and $p = 0.001$. This difference suggests unsymmetrical access to conceptual clarification and curriculum literacy: the greater exposure of urban teachers to policy dissemination, more training visits, and the presence of academic networks, all contribute to enhanced understanding by contrast with the routinely operating conditions that encourage incomplete or superficial readings of curricular reforms that affect rural teachers. This observation highlights the need to utilize well defined outreach and varied teaching strategies in rural districts when the objectives of Merdeka Belajar are intended to be fairly accomplished.

The second variable (use of impactful learning strategies) also demonstrates the similar tendency (urban mean = 4.0, rural = 3.5, $t = 3.10$, $p = 0.003$). The better results of urban schools show that pedagogical novelty (especially student-centred approach; project-based learning or thematic learning) is more often applied in them. The quality of the infrastructure, the robustness of professional development ecosystems, and more accommodative schools leadership structures probably account for these disparities. However, the trend points to the fact that the pedagogical innovation is becoming asymmetrical so much so that it is not because of teacher choice but rather due to limitations within the system. Effective spread of innovation projects to the rural school settings requires deliberate scaffolding, i.e., mentoring, illustrative models, and hands-on coaching. Such scaffolding is still relatively lacking and the outcome is that innovations are often confined in privileged places. The most significant is the gap in the facilities and tools, with urban schools indicating the average of 4.3 facilities and tools compared to the 2.8 in the rural schools ($t = 6.45$, $p < 0.001$). This major inequality, especially regarding digital tools, internet access, and additional teaching resources limits the application of a curriculum that allows creativity, contextuality and autonomy to the learners.

Alongside this infrastructure disparity, the disparity that exists in terms of student motivation and engagement is also statistically significant (urban = 4.1, rural = 3.6, $t = 2.90$, $p = 0.005$). Such finding implies that in urban classrooms, students respond more favorable to the new curriculum strategies, and the key reason is, probably, that they are presented more holistically or functioning better. Nevertheless, the finding is not a reflection on the inadequacy of the capability and interest of rural students; instead, this finding highlights the structure of frustration because it gives teachers few choices to operate within rural schools. In areas where effective learning is less delivered or has been delivered less in terms of its magnitude, then the low involvement of students is to be expected.

Table 5. One-Way ANOVA: Effect of Teacher Training Frequency on Implementation Outcomes

Implementation Variable	Group A Mean	SD	Group B Mean	SD	Group C Mean	SD	F-value	p-value
Use of Impactful Learning Strategies	3.30	0.51	3.78	0.59	4.20	0.46	8.12	0.0006
Student Engagement and Participation	3.45	0.55	3.92	0.58	4.18	0.50	5.76	0.004
Perceived Teaching Confidence	3.60	0.49	3.88	0.53	4.30	0.43	7.21	0.0012

Findings The current research uses one-way ANOVA to examine the correlation between the frequency of the teacher professional development and three instructional outcomes (1) adoption of powerful learning strategies, (2) student engagement, and 3) teaching confidence. The findings reveal that teachers having attended three or more development opportunities

(Group C) will show an increase in all the outcomes compared to their peers who have little or no encounters. The implementation fidelity effect size is especially large ($F = 8.12, p < 0.001$), and it seems that professional development cannot be abandoned in favor of maintaining a high degree of inserted evidence-based pedagogy.

Such results reinforce the fact that ongoing teacher education plays a pivotal role in the transfer of technical knowledge of curriculum planning, fostering pedagogical innovativeness, and strengthening self-efficacy tendencies. The noted difference in students engagement reflected on scales 3.46 in Group A to 4.18 in Group C confirms that the instructional efficiency cannot be attributed only to the text in the curriculum but to the competency of a teacher to interpret and apply adjustments based on expertise. At the same time, the amplification of perceived teaching confidence demonstrates further how the professional development is able to prepare educators to facilitate new instructional designs with even greater independence and confidence.

The implication of this policy is that there has to be a systematic, sustained and even access to teacher training so that I can get the high quality type of teacher training and especially those in underserved areas. Floaters are limited to one-off workshops or short-term professional development programs that cannot address the problem. Rather, an intelligible infrastructure of teacher learning, blending workshops, mentoring, peer exchange and classroom-based inquiry is necessary in accruing cumulative professional capital and in building enduring change in education.

Challenges in Implementing the Independent Curriculum

Despite the high level of enthusiasm shown by many teachers, this study identified several significant challenges that hinder the optimal implementation of impactful learning. In rural schools, limited facilities and restricted access to technology were reported as major obstacles. Approximately 60% of teachers in these areas stated that utilizing digital learning resources was difficult due to poor internet connectivity and a lack of supporting devices.

Teacher readiness also varied; some teachers acknowledged the need for further training, particularly on innovative teaching methods and effective ways to assess impactful learning. These findings align with those of Lestari & Wijaya (2023), who emphasized the importance of continuous training and mentoring to help teachers adapt to the demands of the new curriculum.

School principals also noted that policy support from both local and central governments plays a crucial role in resource provision and teacher capacity building. In some cases, a lack of coordination and technical assistance resulted in uneven implementation of the curriculum across different schools.

Table 3. Summary of Interview Results with Teachers and Principals

Theme	Key Statements	Interpretation
Understanding the Curriculum	“The Independent Curriculum gives us more freedom, but we need clear guidance.”	Teachers appreciate flexibility but need direction
Challenges Faced	“We lack proper facilities and often rely on personal funds.”	Resource limitations hinder implementation
Student Impact	“Students are more engaged and enthusiastic in learning projects.”	Positive effect on student motivation

Support Needed	“Training is helpful but mentoring and examples are essential.”	Ongoing professional support is critical
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The Impact of Impactful Learning on Students

In a bid to explore the lived experiences of teachers utilizing the pedagogies considered to have a significant influence within the classrooms, it was deemed in this exploration that the impact of the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) on student development transcends the measures of success that can be quantified using traditional academic indices. A rare semi-structured interview was used to provide reflections of evident changes in student motivation, confidence, behavior, and interpersonal relations. The qualitative data note that the classroom is being re-modelled toward a more dialogic, participatory and ethically resounding venue. The ensuing snippets of the interviews illustrate it, with critical explication that explains their pedagogical and socio-educational implication.

“I observed with the introduction of project-based learning, most of the students remain quiet but with the current project-based learning, they are more willing to volunteer with their ideas. One of the boys in my group even offered to take on the leadership in the team at least once.” (Teacher 04, Urban School)

This narrative shows that project-based learning reorganizes not only cognitive resources required to undertake tasks but also socially reallocates the action among learners. The fact that a once quiet student was ready to take on a leadership role can be taken as an implication that the new environment will also allow a feeling of ownership and safe psychological atmosphere. These transformations challenge deficit-based beliefs concerning the capabilities of students and disclose that hierarchies of classroom status which are frequently solidified by past success or vocabulary power, can be smoothed out or turned upside down using the membership of signifiante participation. The quote also highlights the power of learning in that it transforms the definition of what is in the name of ability and emphasis is placed on the initiative, collaboration and student voice instead of rote compliance.

“When students worked on a recycling project, they started bringing waste from home and educating their parents about it. The learning didn’t stop in the classroom it went into their community.” (Teacher 09, Rural School)

The described account brings to the fore a central precept of effective learning which means that such boundaries become permeable between the knowledge in school and the everyday world. A student-initiated process of transferring learning to family and social realms is one possible manifestation of so-called pedagogical spillover effect. Among other reasons, there is no mindless retention in this instance as learning is activated at a location other than where the instruction originated. The fact that the students have taken it upon themselves to educate their parents is both a cognitive assimilation and a demonstration of establishing a feeling of being responsible in the environment. This indicates a new kind of civic literacy, one in which the students start viewing themselves as an agent in larger ecological and ethical cycles. It is also an attack on the old perception seen of students in rural areas as passive recipients of knowledge handed down to them as it offers them as mediators of change to their own communities.

“They ask more questions now about everything. Before, they just listened. But with these new lessons, they challenge each other’s ideas and even mine, in respectful ways.” (Teacher 07, Urban School)

The above quote provides an epistemic shift of significant change in the classroom. The greater rate of student questioning also implies the development of dialogical norms in learning when knowledge ceases to be conveyed in a single direction, and instead, it becomes co-constructed.

This behavior is a sign of the shift in the procedural compliance to the actual intellectual involvement. Notably, such a transition necessitates more than curriculum change: that is, this transition involves a change of teacher identity, namely, authority figure to intellectual companion. The fact that the challenges are defined as respectful hints at the effectiveness of learning culture which places an emphasis on the critical dialogue without deteriorating relationships. In these cultures, the higher order thinking skills are acquired and these will not be performed based on test conditions but rather entrenched in the culture.

*“Some students who used to struggle with written tests now shine in group presentations and creative tasks. Their confidence is visible.”
(Teacher 02, Urban School)*

This quote brings out the affordances of multimodal learning as applicable against the restrictive logic of assessment in conventional evaluation. Presentations and other creative approaches to making students describe their knowledge unlock new cognitive and emotional grounds in which the previously marginalized students can attain through expressing their knowledge. The reference to the visible confidence is significant here that indicates not only the behavioral change but also the drastic refactoring of the self-perception among the students. Such achievement in the alternative modalities can be psychologically restorative to the students especially those who are long classified as the low achievers and thus helps to develop a feeling of academic acceptance and authenticity. It also poses key policy issues as to the fairness of assessment and the necessity to make success criteria differentiated.

“In one project, students had to interview community members. They came back excited, saying they felt like ‘real reporters.’ It gave them a sense of purpose.” (Teacher 13, Rural School)

The story of this teacher explains how effective learning can produce narrative identity and the positive power of students to understand themselves as significant agents in some larger social narrative. The fact that the students were described as being a part of the real reporters team is not to be overlooked; it means that genuine learning activities could support the emerging drive of becoming not only reporters but real reporters and endow learners with what developmental psychologists call possible selves. The fact that the students developed a sense of purpose demonstrates that well-planned curricular activities trigger moral and career path assessment, especially in an environment with a largely impersonal and perhaps depersonalized educational subject matter. Such affective investments in learning, in fact, can be particularly transformative in under-resourced rural settings, where they can be a corrective to dropout risks or plummeting motivation.

“They’ve become more cooperative. Before, group work often led to conflict. But now they’re learning to divide tasks, listen, and support one another.” (Teacher 11, Rural School)

The developmental pattern that presents itself in this quote is friction to fluency in collaboration. First, group work can lead to tensions in interpersonal relationships or the disparities in contribution. But after a long period of exposure to the structured cooperative learning, students seem to learn not only the task-related strategies but also social and emotional behaviors as well-turn-taking, empathy and shared responsibility. This development suggests impactful learning as a territory of relational learning, through which students prepare the micro-ethics of democratically involved participation. Specifically, these competencies are usually neglected in courses based on material, but they are essential in promoting civic and

interpersonal maturity. These impacts of such socialization can very much impact the peers, family, and even work related behaviors in the future.

“During a local mapping activity, students shared stories about their neighborhoods. Some cried, others laughed. It turned into a powerful sharing moment I didn’t expect.”
(Teacher 06, Urban School)

This emotionally powerful narrative bears witness to how place-based learning can make individual stories and emotional realities emerge, that are otherwise buried in standardized curriculum. The affective reaction of the students, who laughed and were overwhelmed with emotions interchanged with crying, reflects the degree of investment and identification seen beyond instrumental purposes of studies. A mapping activity turned into a community event of storytelling and the classroom became an empathetic and solidarity place. The surprise of the teacher indicates that impactful learning cannot simply just exist within the logic of pedagogical purpose but it can also surpass it, and bring on unprepared but profoundly human interactions. These are very crucial moments in not only enhancing cohesion within the classroom but also in recognizing the lived geographies as places of acceptable knowledge among students.

“Even the students who usually play around during class were focused during the water-saving project. They kept asking, ‘Are we doing enough?’” (Teacher 14, Rural School)

The successful example of the change in the behavior of the students who were usually not engaged into the process and who became engaged now and think before their actions ethically well shows that purpose-oriented studying can change the motivational portraits. The project has seemed as it has offered a moral horizon, which has rearranged the focus of the students and learning has not only meant completion of tasks, but of giving. The repetitive phrase of questioning such as- are we doing enough can create the picture of internal accountability which when compared to the compliance driven behavior awarded in the normal classroom is very dissimilar. The curriculum moves from being external to the students to providing a mechanism of self-definition and a means of moral agency, once the learner reaches the point of self-censorship in vision toward community or environment. Here we see the effectiveness of issue-based education in developing sustainability awareness and this is particularly true with children in resource-limited contexts.

“One of my students told me she wants to be a teacher now because she enjoyed helping her group understand the topic. That made me emotional.” (Teacher 01, Urban School)

This concluding quotation embodies the recursive aspect of effective learning: when a student receives enhanced channels of success as a learner, she would be motivated to behave the same in regard to another student. The fact that the student wants to be a teacher is not just professional ambition, but such wanted behavior is incorporated in the process of taking care, explaining, and uplifting in common as important things to do. Such an emotional connection between the teacher at this instance confirms also the affective loop that can be created by meaningful pedagogy too. In these generative circles within learning, as opposed to mastery, it is such circles that learning engenders: not only mentorship but also the most durable results the Independent Curriculum can give. The fact that this source of inspiration becomes possible in the course of peer-led learning activities implies that transformational learning has the potential to trigger the process of early leadership development and integrating the educational ethical code into the process of studying itself.

Interpreting Reform in Uneven Terrain

The information that was collected about this research verifies that educational reform in Indonesia is structurally imbalanced which can be displayed during the conceptualization phase as well as the implementation phase across diverse space. Even though the Independent Curriculum has been broadly discussed as an innovative reaction to the disruption of education caused by the pandemic, its course of implementation shows consistent dimensions of inequality. Urban schools are more in line with the pedagogical motives of the reform, especially, realizing the models of student-centered learning and project-based integration. Conversely, rural-based schools fail to apply such models in a small ecosystem of infrastructure. These results are supported by the recent criticism of Fadhillah (2024) and Lestari & Wijaya (2023) who stated that In Indonesia, decentralization of curriculum authority is progressively rhetorical but constraining institutionally unbalanced capacity. The reform can be proposing a universal structure, but its embodiment is fed through well-stratified material and epistemic situations.

The central issue between this implementation gap is the question of teacher capacity that comes out as a very important mediating factor. Teachers who had enduring access to organized and cyclic professional development had more confidence in their instruction, pedagogical versatility, and significant conformity to the fundamental ideals of effective learning. This is corroborated by Mulyani & Herlina (2024), who make the point that how often and how training is organized turn out to be more significant in predicting innovation as opposed to teacher demographics and years of experience. In such a way, training cannot be simplified to the transmission of the policy directives. Professional growth in teachers should be a dialogue process as it was presented by Tarling & Ng'ambi & (2016) that allowed the repackaging of existing pedagogies as well as the ability to frame new interpretive structures. In a like manner, Geletu & Mihiretie (2024) confirm that the teachers who were members of professional community of inquiries were more prone to contextualize curriculum principles into their administrative capacities rather than coming up with a fixed replica of what curriculum principles are. We find this relational understanding of teacher learning to be true, which is that curriculum innovation does not occur merely as the result of policy language but rather as the result of recursive negotiations between knowledge, identity and context.

The continued asymmetry of the resources between the urban schools and rural schools has far reaching implication on the decision-making process in pedagogy. Our polls on rural schools showed that teachers often felt that they knew about the intentions of the curriculum, but were limited structurally in which they had to make concessions. These facts resemble the results of Setiawan & Wardhani (2023), who report that in rural Indonesia, pedagogical innovation can be mentioned as the workaround strategies instead of the policy-aligned implementation. This kind of adaptation is not necessarily inadequate Enemuoh (2022) are quick to highlight that in a number of cases, improvisational practices can constitute types of context-responsive professionalism. However, the lack of supporting institutional frameworks causes pedagogical overworking, the lack of teacher support with systems having to struggle to their limits without sufficient support. It illustrates what Hindley (2022) call the ecological dissonance between national curricular ambitions and local schooling facts. Under such circumstances, curriculum reform runs the risk of turning into a language of conformity rather than a generator of pedagogic reformations.

The qualitative stories of this research present a strong case about the effects of effective learning transforming the social construct of classes. Pupils do not just perform assignments anymore, they start projects, play leadership roles in group activities and integrate school

learning in their family and social life. The current evidence on changes in student conduct has concurred with the contribution of Keating (2014) who suggest that the effective learning needs to be theorized not as a specific practice but as an attitude that re-orders classroom power, voice, and teacherstudent pairing. As per the theory of subjectification introduced by Dzurani et al. (2013), the conducted research shows that the value of education is gained via ethical education that it offers, but not the competencies that it bears. The same claims are further substantiated by empirical research by Rahman & Sari (2023) and Aisyah & Nugraheni (2023) who reported that after participating in interdisciplinary, and socially relevant challenges, a set of dispositions of responsibility, empathy, and situated reasoning were achieved. Such results are not accidental but rather show that the Independent Curriculum as an authentic implementation can have the ability to make learning a substantive humanizing experience.

It is impossible to separate such humanization and the emotional nature of teaching. With projects placed within their lived experiences, the classroom room becomes a space of vulnerability, acknowledgment, and relational intimacy when students are involved. The respondents described affective turning points-such as crying of students during place-based storytelling, and students expressing vocational aspirations following conducting peer conversations. Since they cannot be considered as being subject to typified analysis and regarded traditionally as the pedagogical heart of effective learning, the results undermine those curriculum success models that rely solely on cognition mastery to the detriment of emotional growth. These results, as Sutrisno et al. (2024) indicate, can only materialize in cases where the teacher exhibits relational literacy to allow learning to occur concurrently as both an intellectual and an emotional process. In a similar manner of thought, Ruhalahti et al. (2017) argue that authentic learning operates within an experience and dialogic context made firm by the embodied experience that students have with their environment. All of these studies imply that the strongest pedagogical results do not depend upon formal tests, but rather upon the fact that students become social and ethical individuals, which radically alters the way we conceive success of curriculum.

Although introducing curriculum reform is based on the premises of inclusivity, there is apparently a slow yet increasing of the asymmetrical nature of student experience. Students in well-funded schools experience not only more media types on offer but also a learning culture of experimentation and other deep learning media that often are dealt out diluted and in limited form to the rural counterparts. The research by Jackson (2023) argues that unless digital disparities and content-access gaps can be successfully eliminated, reform initiatives, the most prominent of which is Kurikulum Merdeka, are likely to perpetuate educational marginalization instead of alleviating it. Argyriou (2025) in another study coined this condition, calling it symbolic inclusion, where equity and diversity, in discourse, and stratification, in practice, co-exist with one another. Our results take direct support of the claim that without reducing the difference in infrastructure, professional mentoring and instructional support, the promise of transformation associated with the reformed curriculum will continue to be spatially and institutionally unfair.

There is further complexity brought about by the idea of innovation ecology. The urban practitioners tend to label the innovation as thematic incorporated, micro-designed digital, and responsive evaluation, whereas, their counterparts in the countryside tend to describe innovation as improvisation within restriction. Della Porta & Keating (2008) warn readers about construing that kind of variability as deficient and promote a pluralist view of innovation according to which resource-scarce conditions should be presented as appropriate loci of curricular agency. This stance is in line with Zahoor et al. (2024) who states that innovation should be situated, emergent, and responsive as opposed to being externally characterized and

benchmarked. Subscribing to the failure to recognize context-bound creativity is hazardous as it runs the danger of marginalizing the ingenuity that reform policies attempt to bring about. As a result, we must extend an adjustment of existing discourses to a discourse that will acknowledge the diversity of pedagogy without reaffirming the urban-based norms.

This study once again puts focus on the issue of teacher identity in bringing desirable reforms. It was found that the teachers who had strong sense of efficacy and had a high response rate in students also reported to work in dialogical, supportive, and academically engaging environments. Zhang (2022) notes that each teacher-learning should be relational first and then it could be instructional, and that School-based learning communities promote innovation at a higher level than an externally delivered training module (Chen, 2022). Our information supports this assertion: the frequency of training sessions in and of itself does not trigger instructional change; what is crucial is the integration of the sessions with a culture of inquiry into a culture of mutual responsibility. As Erixon & Hansson (2023) remind us, however, the only effective professional development should be set towards recognizing teacher agency and representing the educators as epistemic agents instead of recipients of policies. And, at last, the moral arc of the shape of the Independent Curriculum comes to life when students recount themselves the learning as the making of the self.

When a learner claims to want to be a teacher because s/he saw a purpose in helping the cohort, this statement engulfs the entire force of pedagogical change. It discloses that learning as situational, active, and dialogical does not just create knowledge, but also a dream. According to Putri et al. (2023), the Pancasila Student Profile is not a set of values on an unchangeable list but rather a dynamic path of student development. Such understanding is replicated by Barber et al. (2021) who demonstrates that in participatory learning environments, emergent accounts of civic identities are developed. Our analysis supports such stances and posits that effective learning cannot be technologically designed by utilizing content formats; there has to be a pedagogical spirit, an institutional devotion to equality and a readiness to acknowledge both the teachers as well as the students as complete moral agents in the teaching-learning approach.

Conclusion

This current paper takes a critical look at the tensions, opportunities and iniquities of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in primary education in Indonesia. In these findings, the curriculum demonstrates sound design in changing instructional focus to relevancy, contextuality and student agency, it is adaptable to the local conditions to execute its effective implementation. In the point where infrastructural readiness, continuity of professional development and pedagogical imagination meet, effective learning is evident not only where it is in instructional practice but even in the ethical and aspirational outturn of the students. However, this is not a lump sum emergence; inequalities between the urban and the rural schoolspaces expose structural incoherence between all the national expectations of education with the localities of schooling-ecologies. The primary aim of the teachers is not to follow the general curriculum but rather to navigate the material constraints, institutional cultures, and the changing pedagogical norms as the interpretive agents. In their turn, curriculum documents do not provide a response, it is affordances and limits of the learning environments in which students operate that trigger a response. Given this, what the Independent Curriculum potentially allows in theory needs to be propped up in reality through a longer-term investment in teacher learning, equitable resource provision and a reworking of educational leadership that appreciates the innovation as situated and relational as opposed to standardized. To truly surpass the surface meaning of reform, it will need to take into

consideration the epistemic, infrastructural and affective environments that can support meaningful learning to be able to occur in all classrooms and not just the most advantaged.

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