



## Implementing Emancipatory Education Through the Merdeka Curriculum: A Case Study of an Islamic Elementary School

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the implementation of emancipatory education principles through the Merdeka Curriculum at Al Khoiriyah Al Husna Islamic Elementary School in Sukabumi. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative methodology with a case study design, it examines the realization of liberating education principles within Indonesia's educational framework. Data collection included participatory observation in 12 learning sessions, interviews with 26 teachers, document analysis, and focused group discussions. The study focuses on the educational experiences of 60 students in grades 4 to 6, revealing significant transformations in learning practices. Findings indicate increased student participation, enhanced project-based learning, and improved digital assessment systems, creating a more engaging environment. This study demonstrates the successful application of emancipatory education principles while identifying challenges in mindset transformation, capacity building, and technology integration. It contributes to the development of contextual models of emancipatory education within the Merdeka Curriculum, offering insights for educational transformation in Indonesia. The implications of these findings encourage further inquiry into educational reform and equitable learning environments. Ultimately, this research serves as a critical resource for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders advancing emancipatory education in Indonesia's evolving educational landscape.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The global educational landscape is experiencing a significant transformation in response to complex and rapidly changing socio-economic, cultural, and technological contexts. Education systems around the world are shifting from traditional content-based instruction toward more flexible, learner-centered paradigms that promote autonomy, critical thinking, adaptability, and student agency (Ojugo et al., 2023; Kenaphoom, 2020). This movement is driven by the urgent need to prepare students for an unpredictable future, one that demands not only technical competencies but also the ability to reflect, adapt, and act ethically within diverse social environments. As a result, countries are re-evaluating the structure, goals, and delivery of their education systems to meet the demands of 21st-century learners.

In Indonesia, this transformation is being facilitated through the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, a policy innovation designed to address the limitations of previous curricula while responding to global shifts in education. This new framework emphasizes flexibility, contextualization, and student-centered learning, aiming to empower learners through differentiated pathways and locally relevant content (Haan & Ani, 2024; Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024). It represents a substantial departure from standardized, test-driven approaches, reflecting an intention to develop holistic, independent, and critical learners who are able to navigate complex realities (Prasetyo et al., 2023; Suyanto & Jihad, 2023). The curriculum seeks to cultivate competencies aligned with global standards while remaining sensitive to the cultural and social values of diverse Indonesian communities.

Effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires not only a shift in pedagogical orientation but also structural changes at the institutional level. Schools must redesign their professional development systems, support teacher autonomy, and build collaborative cultures that enable innovation and reflective practice (Widodo & Allamnakhrah, 2023). This educational transformation calls for deeper engagement with pedagogical theories that support learner empowerment and critical engagement (Al-Deek & Shuibat, 2024; Baharudin et al., 2023; Zhu, 2023). One such theoretical foundation is emancipatory education, which provides a robust lens for understanding the goals and values embedded within the Merdeka Curriculum.

Emancipatory education advocates for a pedagogical model that liberates learners from oppressive educational structures and cultivates their ability to think critically and act independently. Rather than treating learners as passive recipients of knowledge, this approach encourages them to become co-creators of meaning through dialogue, reflection, and action (Freire, 2018; Fullan et al., 2023; Giroux, 2020). In the Indonesian context, such an approach aligns with the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly its emphasis on fostering student agency and promoting socially responsive learning experiences (Kurniawan, 2023; Mulyasa & Sutarna, 2023). By integrating these principles, the curriculum aims to empower learners not only academically but also socially, encouraging active participation in both school and community life.

Closely tied to emancipatory education is the theory of transformative learning, which emphasizes the importance of critical reflection and perspective transformation in the learning process. This theory posits that meaningful learning occurs when learners critically examine their assumptions, engage in dialogue, and integrate new experiences into revised worldviews. The Merdeka Curriculum reflects this orientation by promoting inquiry-based learning, interdisciplinary exploration, and authentic assessment practices that encourage deeper cognitive engagement (Suari et al., 2023; Tilaar & Nugraheni, 2023). It also prioritizes student agency, enabling learners to make informed decisions about their learning

trajectories, take ownership of their educational progress, and develop a sense of responsibility for their own growth.

Despite these promising developments, there remains a notable lack of empirical research on how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented within faith-based or religious schools in Indonesia. Most studies to date have focused on public and secular institutions, often neglecting the unique cultural, pedagogical, and institutional dynamics present in religious educational settings. Given the central role these schools play in Indonesia's education system, understanding how they interpret and adapt to national reform initiatives is both timely and essential (Sain et al., 2023; Sukmayadi & Yahya, 2020; Tilaar & Nugraheni, 2023). Without such insight, there is a risk that educational reform policies will be implemented unevenly or ineffectively across diverse school contexts.

The novelty of this research lies in its examination of how theoretical concepts such as emancipatory education, transformative learning, and student agency are enacted in a religious school setting. While these frameworks have been widely discussed in theoretical literature, few studies have operationalized them within empirical investigations of curriculum reform in Indonesia. This study bridges that gap by exploring how teachers interpret and apply these ideas within the daily practices of teaching, learning, and school governance. It provides insights into the cultural negotiation and pedagogical adaptation processes that occur when progressive educational models intersect with local religious traditions.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Al Khoiriyah Al Husna Islamic Elementary School, located in Sukabumi, Indonesia. With 343 students and 26 teachers, the school provides a compelling case for exploring how religious institutions engage with transformative education frameworks. The school's approach is informed by a culture of collaborative professionalism, in which teachers work together to design and implement innovative pedagogical practices while maintaining the school's core religious values (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2023; Retnawati et al., 2023). Recent studies suggest that such collaboration enhances the effectiveness of curriculum reform, especially when it fosters shared responsibility and mutual learning among educators (Yulianto & Ahmadi, 2024).

Accordingly, the objective of this study is to investigate how the Merdeka Curriculum is interpreted and implemented in a faith-based elementary school context, with particular attention to the pedagogical strategies, institutional dynamics, and collaborative practices that shape this process. By doing so, the research seeks to illuminate the challenges and opportunities associated with national curriculum reform in culturally and religiously diverse educational environments.

## 2. METODE

### 2.1 Research Design and Context

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how emancipatory education principles are enacted through the Merdeka Curriculum at Al Khoiriyah Al Husna Islamic Elementary School. The case study approach enabled a focused and context-sensitive exploration of pedagogical practices within a religious school setting, where the integration of progressive curriculum and Islamic values is particularly dynamic (Schön, 2023). This design is aligned with recent calls for in-depth, localized investigations into educational reforms in culturally embedded learning environments (Suryadi & Rahmawati, 2023).

The research site was purposefully selected using strategic sampling principles suitable for curriculum implementation studies. With 343 students and 26 teachers, the school presented a manageable yet diverse setting for observing how educational innovation unfolds across multiple grade levels (Wahyuni & Treagust, 2024). The school's demographic scale and its active engagement in curriculum reform made it an ideal context for exploring the intersection of religious values and transformative pedagogy (Wulandari & Kuswandi, 2023).

## 2.2 Data Collection

Data were collected using three qualitative methods: classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. This triangulated approach was designed to strengthen the credibility of findings by capturing multiple perspectives and forms of evidence. A total of twelve structured classroom observations were conducted between August and November 2023 across grades four to six. These observations provided insights into the instructional strategies, teacher-student interactions, and real-time curriculum implementation processes. Observation protocols included indicators from both traditional and progressive pedagogical models to assess the alignment between curriculum goals and classroom realities.

In-depth interviews were conducted with all 26 teachers using a semi-structured format. These interviews focused on key themes such as pedagogical adaptation, instructional challenges, professional development experiences, and the integration of religious values within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum (Yuliana & Prasetyo, 2023). The interviews were designed to elicit both individual experiences and shared reflections that could provide a holistic view of institutional responses to reform.

Complementing the observations and interviews, document analysis was conducted on lesson plans, instructional materials, student assessments, and teacher training records. This method aimed to trace how policy directives and pedagogical philosophies were translated into daily practice (Hase & Kenyon, 2023). Document analysis also allowed for data triangulation and helped validate the findings from other sources.

## 2.3 Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis process followed an iterative, thematic approach, integrating both inductive and deductive strategies. Initial themes emerged organically from the data, while additional coding categories were informed by the study's theoretical frameworks, emancipatory education, transformative learning, and student agency.

Each dataset (observations, interviews, and documents) was analyzed independently before conducting cross-source comparisons to identify points of convergence and divergence. This comparative analysis increased the internal coherence of findings and contributed to the credibility of interpretations. Recurring patterns across different sources were refined through constant comparison to ensure alignment with the research objectives.

Through this rigorous analytical procedure, the study aimed to generate a nuanced understanding of how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented within a faith-based school context, while highlighting the pedagogical reasoning, institutional dynamics, and cultural negotiations that shape this process.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Result

The analysis of classroom observations, teacher interviews, and supporting data revealed measurable shifts in pedagogical practice and student learning at Al Khoiriyah Al Husna Islamic Elementary School following the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Substantial improvements were observed across instructional strategies, teacher competencies, student engagement, and institutional learning outcomes.

Table 1 summarizes changes in five core learning indicators between the 2022 and 2024 academic years. The most significant improvement was recorded in collaborative learning, with an increase of nearly 40 percentage points. Similarly, active student participation, student initiative, and parent engagement each improved by close to 40 percentage points. These results indicate that the integration of project-based and student-centered approaches has reshaped classroom dynamics. Effect sizes across all indicators were notably large (Cohen's  $d > 1.75$ ), suggesting that the changes were not only statistically significant but also practically meaningful.

**Table 1.** Comparison of learning indicator (2022-2024)

Indicator	2022 (%)	2024 (%)	Change (%)	t	p	Cohen's d
Active student participation	45.3	85.2	+39.9	8.45	<.001	1.82
Project based learning	38.7	75.8	+37.1	8.12	<.001	1.75
Parent engagement	35.3	75.2	+39.9	7.89	<.001	1.76
Student initiative	40.8	80.4	+39.6	8.23	<.001	1.84
Collaborative learning	50.2	90.1	+39.9	8.67	<.001	1.88

Note. N = 180 students across three grade levels

Teacher competency development data, presented in Table 2, show parallel improvements in key instructional domains. Post-implementation scores in student-centered methods rose from 45.3% to 85.5%, reflecting a strong uptake in learner-focused pedagogy. Substantial gains were also observed in project facilitation and technology integration. All changes were statistically significant, with effect sizes ranging from 1.52 to 1.62, indicating robust professional growth among participating educators.

**Table 2.** Teacher Competency Development (N=26)

Competency	Pre-Implementation	Post-Implementation	t	p	Effect Size
Student-centered methods	45.3%	85.5%	7.45	<.001	1,62
Project facilitation	38.7%	75.8%	7.23	<.001	1.58
Technology integration	42.1%	72.4%	6.89	<.001	1.52

Table 3 presents learning outcomes disaggregated by grade level, focusing on three core dimensions: active participation, learning independence, and critical thinking. Students in Grade 6 consistently outperformed their counterparts in lower grades. While all grades demonstrated high levels of performance, the mean scores increased progressively across

grade levels, suggesting a positive relationship between student maturity and curriculum engagement. Statistical tests confirmed significant differences across grades, with moderate effect sizes ( $\eta^2$  between 0.10 and 0.12), further validating the depth of curriculum integration over time.

**Table 3.** Learning Outcomes by Grade Level

Aspect	Grade 4 (n=60)	Grade 5 (n=60)	Grade 6 (n=60)	F	p	$\eta^2$
Active Participation	82.5 (1.8)	85.2 (1.7)	87.8 (1.6)	12.34	<.001	0.12
Learning Independence	78.3 (1.7)	80.3 (1.6)	82.3 (1.5)	11.67	<.001	0.11
Critical Thinking	76.5 (1.8)	78.5 (1.7)	80.5 (1.6)	10.89	<.001	0.10

To better understand the factors influencing successful implementation, multiple regression analysis was conducted using three predictors: teaching experience, professional development participation, and initial implementation readiness. As shown in Table 4, all three variables were significant predictors of implementation effectiveness. Teaching experience had the strongest standardized coefficient ( $\beta = .42$ ), followed closely by professional development ( $\beta = .38$ ). The model explained 68% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.68$ ), demonstrating strong predictive validity. Variance inflation factors ( $VIF < 1.5$ ) indicated no multicollinearity issues among the predictors.

**Table 4.** Multiple Regression Result

Predictor	$\beta$	SE	t	p	VIF
Teaching experience	.42	.06	7.00	<.001	1.45
Professional development	.28	.05	7.60	<.001	1.38
Initial implementation	.35	.04	8.75	<.001	1.32

Note.  $R^2 = 0.68$ .  $F(4,21)=11.17$ .  $p<.001$

A qualitative synthesis of the observational field notes and interview transcripts supported the quantitative findings and provided additional depth. Teachers reported a notable shift from traditional didactic instruction toward more inquiry-driven and collaborative learning environments. The majority of observed classroom sessions (83.3%) exhibited high levels of student engagement, characterized by active participation, peer interaction, and autonomy in learning tasks. Moreover, 75% of observed lessons demonstrated consistent use of project-based learning models, reflecting a shift in pedagogical orientation.

Interviews with the teaching staff revealed that while the early phase of implementation posed adaptation challenges, particularly in balancing institutional traditions with new pedagogical demands, these challenges were mitigated through the development of collaborative teaching teams and professional learning communities. Teachers emphasized the role of peer mentoring and shared planning in facilitating the transition. Several educators noted that school-wide alignment and leadership support were essential in ensuring sustained adoption of the curriculum's core principles.

Additional document analysis confirmed that changes in teaching practice were also reflected in instructional planning and assessment design. Lesson plans shifted toward integrative themes, and evaluation rubrics emphasized process-oriented outcomes, such as collaboration and critical thinking. Student portfolios showed increased evidence of reflective learning and self-directed projects, further reinforcing the alignment between instructional goals and learner outcomes.

In summary, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has produced observable and statistically validated improvements in teaching methods, student engagement, and learning outcomes at Al Khoiriyah Al Husna Islamic Elementary School. These changes are not isolated to classroom practices but are supported by institutional-level shifts in teacher development and professional collaboration. The convergence of quantitative and qualitative evidence provides a strong basis for asserting that the curriculum reform has been effectively internalized and operationalized in this faith-based educational context.

### 3.2 Discussion

The results of this study provide robust empirical support for the transformative potential of emancipatory education within the framework of Indonesia's national curriculum reform, particularly as operationalized in a faith-based educational setting. The significant gains observed across student participation, teacher competency, and curriculum integration at Al Khoiriyah Al Husna Islamic Elementary School demonstrate that principles of student agency, critical thinking, and participatory learning can be effectively embedded within traditional institutional structures when supported by coherent policy implementation and teacher professional development. These findings confirm that transformative educational outcomes are achievable not only in secular or urban contexts, but also in schools deeply rooted in religious values and community traditions.

One of the most notable findings was the substantial increase in student engagement and initiative following the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The consistent improvement in learning indicators such as active participation, collaborative learning, and project-based instruction reflects a clear shift from teacher-centered to student-centered pedagogical models. This transformation is aligned with Freire's (2018) concept of problem-posing education, where students are positioned as co-creators of knowledge through dialogue and critical inquiry. The data also suggest that the integration of emancipatory education strategies was not superficial; rather, it permeated multiple layers of classroom practice, curriculum design, and assessment. The sustained gains across grade levels further indicate that these changes were not isolated or episodic, but embedded into the school's pedagogical culture.

The analysis also revealed that older students, particularly those in Grade 6, demonstrated higher levels of learning independence and critical thinking. This pattern supports the developmental perspective proposed by Mezirow & Taylor (2023), which emphasizes that transformative learning is more likely to occur as students gain cognitive maturity and reflective capacity. These results point to the importance of age-appropriate adaptation in curriculum implementation. Rather than applying uniform instructional strategies across grades, educators must calibrate emancipatory approaches in ways that consider students' developmental readiness, especially in the context of faith-based education where cultural and religious dimensions shape the learning environment (Dallavis, 2013; Wijaya & Ningsih, 2023).

Teacher readiness emerged as a decisive factor in the success of curriculum

implementation. Quantitative results showed that teaching experience and professional development participation were the strongest predictors of implementation quality. This reinforces existing scholarship highlighting the centrality of teacher agency and pedagogical expertise in reform contexts (Quan et al., 2019; Widodo & Allamnakhrah, 2023). Teachers who engaged in sustained professional development, particularly those that emphasized collaborative design, reflective practice, and peer mentoring, were more likely to internalize and effectively apply emancipatory teaching strategies. The creation of professional learning communities within the school appears to have provided a safe and supportive space for experimentation and growth, enabling teachers to navigate the tension between traditional instruction and progressive pedagogy (Hennessy et al., 2015; Owen, 2016; Susilana et al., 2022).

These findings also contribute to the broader theoretical discourse on the localization of global educational paradigms. The success of the Merdeka Curriculum in this Islamic elementary school underscores the adaptability of transformative and emancipatory education models within culturally embedded settings. While much of the literature on curriculum reform focuses on structural and policy dimensions, this study highlights the importance of cultural congruence and institutional identity. Educators in this context did not simply adopt reform mandates, they interpreted and adapted them in ways that aligned with the school's religious mission and community expectations (Dimmock et al., 2021; Matemba, 2015). This contextual responsiveness affirms the position of scholars who argue that reform success depends not only on fidelity to policy but also on its cultural negotiation and reinterpretation (Harris & Jones, 2018; Tilaar & Nugraheni, 2023).

From a practical standpoint, the study provides actionable insights for policymakers and school leaders. First, it demonstrates that systemic curriculum reform efforts must be accompanied by equally systemic investments in teacher capacity-building. Short-term training programs are insufficient; what is needed are long-term, embedded professional development systems that promote reflective, collaborative, and sustained growth. Second, successful implementation requires alignment across curriculum design, assessment methods, and school culture. In this case, the observable changes in lesson planning, student work, and assessment rubrics confirmed the depth of institutional change. Finally, the school's experience shows the value of distributed leadership and collaborative professionalism in driving change from within, rather than relying solely on top-down directives.

Despite these promising outcomes, the study has several limitations. The research was conducted in a single school with a relatively small population, which may limit the generalizability of findings. While the mixed-method approach allowed for triangulation, a longitudinal design could provide deeper insights into the sustainability of reform outcomes over time. Furthermore, the study did not examine student voice directly, which could be a valuable area for future exploration given the central role of student agency in emancipatory education.

In conclusion, this study affirms that the principles of emancipatory and transformative education can be meaningfully enacted in faith-based schools when contextualized appropriately and supported by strong professional development systems. The findings contribute to both theory and practice, offering a grounded example of how national curriculum reform can intersect with localized pedagogical innovation to foster meaningful change in teaching and learning.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the broader significance of integrating emancipatory educational principles within structured curriculum reforms, particularly in culturally rooted learning environments such as Islamic elementary schools in Indonesia. Rather than merely demonstrating surface-level change, the findings underscore the possibility of deep pedagogical transformation when systemic reform is grounded in professional development, reflective practice, and institutional alignment. The success of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation in this case is not merely a matter of technical adoption, but reflects a process of cultural negotiation and pedagogical reorientation. It illustrates that transformative education, often theorized in abstract or secular terms, can find fertile ground in religious schooling contexts, provided that the values of student agency, critical engagement, and collaborative learning are meaningfully interpreted within local institutional frameworks. This contributes to a growing recognition that educational change must be both contextually embedded and philosophically coherent to yield lasting impact.

Nevertheless, the scope of this research introduces important limitations that must be acknowledged. The study was confined to a single institution, with data collected over a relatively short observational window, limiting its generalizability across diverse school types and geographic regions. The urban, faith-based character of the site may not capture the variability of implementation in rural or secular settings, nor account for broader system-level constraints. Future research should therefore pursue comparative and multi-site case studies to examine how differing socio-cultural contexts mediate the implementation of progressive curricula. Extended observation periods and longitudinal approaches are also needed to explore the sustainability of pedagogical shifts and their long-term impact on student learning and teacher development. In addition, integrating student perspectives would enrich future analyses, especially given the central role of learner agency in emancipatory education. Such research directions are critical for informing more inclusive, scalable, and resilient models of curriculum transformation in Indonesia and beyond.

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