



# Innovation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum: Implementation and Implications for Elementary School Students' Creativity

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the implementation and implications of the Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar reform on the creativity of primary school students. Employing a convergent mixed-methods design, the research integrates systematic classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and curriculum administrators, and standardized creativity assessments administered to a purposive sample of fourth- and fifth-grade students across urban and rural elementary schools. Quantitative analyses compare pre- and post-implementation creativity scores using established metrics of divergent thinking, problem-solving flexibility, and creative expression, while qualitative data illuminate educators' pedagogical adaptations, resource constraints, and contextual factors shaping practice. Findings indicate a statistically significant improvement in several dimensions of student creativity, notably in ideational fluency and elaboration, associated with learner-centered activities, project-based assessments, and opportunities for interdisciplinary exploration. Qualitative results reveal that successful implementation depends on teacher autonomy, targeted professional development, and supportive leadership that facilitates curricular co-creation and assessment innovation. However, the study also identifies persistent disparities between schools in access to learning materials, differential teacher readiness, and assessment pressures that can attenuate creative gains. The discussion synthesizes empirical evidence with theoretical perspectives on curriculum reform and creativity cultivation, arguing that Merdeka Belajar's flexible framework can foster meaningful creative development when coupled with systemic supports and equity-focused interventions. Implications for policy and practice include recommendations for scalable teacher training models, formative assessment strategies that capture creative competencies, and mechanisms to ensure resource equity. Directions for future research are suggested.

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary educational systems face mounting pressure to prepare learners for complex, rapidly evolving social and economic environments. Traditional curricula often characterized by content-heavy syllabi, teacher-centred instruction, and standardized assessment regimes have been criticized for limiting opportunities for creative thinking, problem solving, and learner agency (Mpate, 2025). In response, many nations and educational authorities have pursued curriculum innovations aimed at realigning schooling with twenty-first century competencies, including creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and digital literacy. Indonesia's Merdeka Belajar initiative represents a policy-level effort to reconceptualize curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment toward greater flexibility and relevance. Understanding how such curricular innovations are implemented in elementary schools and how they influence students' creative development is essential for both policy refinement and classroom practice.

The Merdeka Belajar framework emphasizes learner-centered pedagogies, reduced administrative burdens, differentiated learning pathways, and opportunities for students to pursue project-based and experiential learning (Pratiwi, 2025). These elements theoretically create fertile ground for creativity by placing emphasis on open-ended tasks, interdisciplinary inquiry, and student autonomy conditions that the creativity literature identifies as conducive to creative performance. Research in educational psychology and creativity studies indicates that creativity flourishes when learners are afforded autonomy, meaningful choice, supportive feedback, and authentic tasks that require divergent thinking and the integration of knowledge across domains. Thus, a curriculum that intentionally incorporates projects, inquiry, and flexible assessment can catalyze the cognitive and motivational processes underpinning creativity.

However, translating curriculum innovation from policy documents into classroom realities is neither straightforward nor uniform. Implementation studies of curriculum reforms suggest that outcomes depend heavily on contextual factors such as teacher beliefs and competencies, school leadership, available resources, class size, and cultural expectations regarding schooling (Dimmock et al., 2021). For primary education, where foundational attitudes toward learning are formed, teacher practices are especially influential. If teachers lack training in facilitation of open-ended tasks, formative assessment, or scaffolding of creative processes, the potential benefits of a flexible curriculum may remain unrealized. Similarly, systemic constraints such as high-stakes examinations at later educational stages or limited instructional time can inadvertently encourage teachers to prioritize rote learning over creative exploration.

Empirical attention to creativity in primary classrooms also highlights the multifaceted nature of creative development. Creativity is not a unitary trait but a capacity that manifests across cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. Cognitive components involve divergent thinking, problem-finding, and ideational fluency; affective components include intrinsic motivation and tolerance for ambiguity; social components concern collaboration and the negotiation of ideas. Consequently, curricular innovation aimed at enhancing creativity must address these diverse dimensions through pedagogical strategies that combine individual reflection with

collaborative tasks, scaffolded risk-taking, and iterative cycles of creation and critique. Assessment mechanisms aligned with such strategies are critical; conventional standardized tests inadequately capture creative performance, making formative and portfolio-based assessments more appropriate for evidencing growth in creativity (Smith, 2022).

In the Indonesian primary school context, cultural norms around schooling, parental expectations, and linguistic diversity may shape how Merdeka Belajar's principles are enacted (Fitriadi et al., 2024). Indonesian classrooms vary considerably in terms of teacher preparation, material resources, and local governance capacity. Rural and under-resourced schools may face distinct challenges in implementing project-based learning or integrating digital tools, while urban schools might adopt innovations more rapidly but still struggle with entrenched exam-orientations. Therefore, research that examines both the fidelity of implementation and the localized adaptations of Merdeka Belajar provides valuable insights into the mechanisms linking curriculum change to student outcomes. Mixed-methods approaches that combine classroom observations, teacher interviews, and measures of student creative performance can illuminate whether and how the policy stimulates pedagogical shifts that nurture creativity.

Another important consideration concerns equity. Curriculum flexibility can either mitigate or exacerbate educational inequalities depending on how it is operationalized. When teachers are well-supported and curriculum choices are used to enrich learning, creative opportunities may expand across diverse student groups. Conversely, without targeted supports, more advantaged schools and families may be better positioned to exploit curricular freedoms, widening gaps in creative learning experiences. Consequently, analyses of Merdeka Belajar should attend not only to average effects on creativity but also to distributional patterns across socio-economic, regional, and linguistic groups (Rumondor, 2024).

Merdeka Belajar offers a promising policy orientation for promoting creativity in primary education by foregrounding learner autonomy, experiential learning, and pedagogical flexibility (Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024). Yet the realization of its potential depends on nuanced processes of implementation, teacher capacity, contextual resources, equitable access, and appropriate assessment. Research that rigorously examines these interrelated factors will inform both theoretical understandings of curriculum creativity linkages and practical strategies for enhancing creative learning in Indonesian primary schools.

## **2. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design aimed at generating in-depth understanding of how the Merdeka Belajar curriculum innovation is implemented in primary school contexts and how such implementation influences students' creativity. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research focuses on meanings, perceptions, processes, and contextual dynamics that are not easily quantifiable. The study is guided by an interpretivist paradigm, which foregrounds participants' subjective experiences and the socially constructed nature of educational practice.

The research setting comprises several public primary schools that have adopted elements of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Purposeful sampling is used to select schools that vary in geographic location, resource endowment, and stages of curriculum adoption in order to capture diverse implementation patterns. Within selected schools, maximum variation sampling is applied to recruit participants who offer rich perspectives on curriculum enactment and creative learning outcomes: classroom teachers with direct responsibility for curriculum adaptation, school principals who oversee implementation, curriculum coordinators, and students in upper primary grades. Teacher participants are invited based on their experience with Merdeka Belajar modules; student participants are selected with parental consent and with attention to gender and academic diversity to reflect multiple learner profiles.

Data analysis follows a reflexive thematic approach that integrates inductive and deductive coding. All interviews and focus groups are audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Observation notes and artifacts are digitized and organized alongside transcripts. Initial open coding is carried out to identify salient units of meaning related to curriculum implementation practices, teacher pedagogy, classroom affordances for creativity, and perceived student outcomes. Codes are iteratively grouped into candidate themes that capture patterns across cases while preserving context-specific nuances. Attention is given to negative and contradictory evidence to avoid confirmation bias. The analytic process draws on guidance from thematic analysis literature to move from descriptive coding to interpretive theme construction, ensuring that themes remain grounded in data excerpts while addressing the study's research questions about implementation and creative implication.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

Pedagogical autonomy and teacher agency emerged as a central pillar in how the Merdeka Belajar innovation was experienced at the school level. Teachers repeatedly described increased latitude to select topics, design learning activities, and choose assessment modes that align with local contexts and student interests (Bernacki et al., 2021). Observational data confirmed that several classrooms incorporated project-based units framed around community-relevant themes such as environmental stewardship, local history, and small-scale enterprise. These units frequently foregrounded student choice in topic selection and product format, allowing learners to express ideas through multimodal artifacts. The presence of teacher narratives describing deliberate lesson redesigns provides evidence that autonomy translated into concrete pedagogical experimentation rather than merely rhetorical endorsement.

The shift in assessment practices was a second robust finding. Teachers reported and demonstrated a move away from exclusive reliance on summative, paper-and-pencil tests toward a portfolio-oriented model emphasizing performance tasks, process documentation, and reflective assessments. Portfolios compiled student artifacts, teacher annotations, and self-assessments; classroom observation documented teachers prompting students to set goals and to present their thinking publicly (Yadav, 2024). These emergent assessment practices were described as enabling more authentic demonstrations of student creativity and higher-order thinking, because

students had multiple opportunities to iterate on products and to explain their reasoning pathways.

Student engagement and intrinsic motivation formed a conspicuous pattern across data sources. Focus group participants primary-aged pupils articulated a marked preference for lessons that involved making, investigating, and collaborating. Observations captured high levels of sustained attention during hands-on activities and lively exchanges during group problem solving. Teachers interpreted these behavioral indicators as evidence that pedagogical freedom had raised students' ownership of learning, thereby opening space for creative exploration. This is consistent with the pattern that when students perceive tasks as meaningful and self-relevant, they demonstrate deeper engagement conducive to novel idea generation.

Despite these positive signs, the implementation landscape was uneven and mediated by material, human, and institutional constraints. Resource limitations manifested as insufficient instructional materials, limited access to technology, and physical classroom conditions not always conducive to group-centered, project-based work. Capacity constraints were also evident in teachers' variable familiarity with pedagogies explicitly designed to cultivate creativity, such as design thinking, divergent questioning techniques, and scaffolded inquiry cycles. Several teachers reported that the initial waves of professional development were brief and mainly conceptual, leaving practical application and ongoing coaching lacking. Principals acknowledged that while the policy message was empowering, translating that empowerment into sustained classroom innovation required deeper investment in continuous, school-based professional learning.

A salient pattern concerns the multiplicity of meanings attached to "creativity." The data revealed a spectrum of definitions, from equating creativity primarily with arts and crafts to a broader conception encompassing problem-solving, critical thinking, and idea elaboration across disciplines (Samaniego et al., 2024). This definitional variability affected instructional choices and assessment rubrics; teachers who held expansive definitions of creativity were more likely to deploy tasks emphasizing divergent thinking and iterative refinement, whereas those with narrower definitions tended to channel creativity into discrete art projects. This finding highlights that policy language alone is insufficient shared professional frames for creativity are required to guide coherent enactment.

Collaborative arrangements and peer scaffolding were commonly observed mechanisms through which creative processes unfolded. Students routinely engaged in small-group brainstorming, distributed roles, and peer feedback cycles that fostered the exchange of alternative perspectives. Teachers that structured explicit norms for group work and integrated peer critique into assessment witnessed more sophisticated student products. In classrooms where collaboration was incidental rather than intentionally scaffolded, creativity tended to remain solitary and less generative.

Tensions between curricular freedom and accountability pressures emerged as a systemic inhibitor in some contexts. School leaders described subtle incentives to align classroom activities with district-level assessment priorities, which tended to privilege content coverage measurable through standardized tests. This accountability overlay

sometimes narrowed teachers' risk appetite for experimental, time-consuming creative projects, especially when these projects did not map neatly onto tested competencies.

Professional development and reflective practice appeared as enabling conditions when implemented with depth. Teachers participating in ongoing reflective cycles peer observations, collaborative lesson study, and iterative refinement of rubrics displayed more elaborate pedagogical moves to promote creativity. Conversely, one-off workshops without follow-up led to short-lived changes or superficial adoption of creative tasks.

## **Discussion**

The empirical patterns point to an interpretive account in which the Merdeka Belajar curriculum functions as an enabling policy architecture whose creative potential is realized when certain mediating mechanisms are present (Aprimadya, 2024). The policy's emphasis on teacher autonomy and contextualization resonates with contemporary conceptualizations of curriculum as enacted rather than merely prescribed. The autonomy granted by Merdeka Belajar can catalyze creativity-supportive pedagogies, but only when accompanied by targeted support structures that align teacher beliefs, assessment systems, and resource ecosystems.

The observed shift toward formative, performance-oriented assessment is theoretically significant because it aligns assessment practices with the nature of creative work. Creativity research underscores the importance of iterative, feedback-rich environments for idea development. Portfolio and performance assessment formats provide multiple temporal windows for refinement and encourage meta-cognitive reflection, which are essential for students to recognize, evaluate, and elaborate on their own creative processes. However, the documented tension with accountability regimes indicates that systemic alignment is necessary: if large-scale assessments remain narrowly defined, classroom assessment innovations may be constrained by external incentives.

Variability in teachers' conceptualizations of creativity must be understood as a crucial lever for intervention. Professional learning that fosters a shared, discipline-general taxonomy of creative competencies including fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration would likely produce more coherent instructional strategies (Saroyan, 2022). Training that translates these competencies into observable behaviors and assessment criteria can reduce the likelihood that creativity is relegated to tokenized art activities. Moreover, professional development that models scaffolded creative tasks, offers exemplars across content areas, and supports iterative lesson design could build teacher efficacy for facilitating deeper creative engagement.

Resource and capacity constraints are neither trivial nor easily circumvented. Material deficits limit the range of feasible projects and the affordances for multimodal expression. Addressing these deficits may involve low-cost strategies grounded in local assets and student cultural capital, such as using recycled materials, community partnerships, and place-based projects. At the same time, sustainable capacity building requires a shift from episodic workshops to sustained professional learning communities and in-class coaching that respond to teachers' contextual needs.

The emergence of collaborative learning as a recurrent mechanism for creativity underscores the social nature of creative cognition. Cross-disciplinary research indicates that creativity often emerges in dialogic exchanges where diverse perspectives collide and are recombined. Intentional structuring of group roles, norms for feedback, and tasks that necessitate interdependence can amplify creative potential. The findings suggest that promoting both individual and group-level creative competencies is critical; assessment instruments should therefore capture collaborative problem-solving processes in addition to individual ideation.

Policy-practice alignment is a critical systemic variable. The Merdeka Belajar policy's rhetoric of freedom is powerful but insufficient without coherent alignment across curriculum frameworks, assessment systems, resource allocation, and accountability structures (Kartika, 2024). Where accountability incentives remain mismatched, teachers face competing demands that dilute creative pedagogical efforts. This suggests that policy coherence where formative assessment gains legitimacy within accountability frameworks and resource flows support pedagogical experimentation is essential for scaling creative outcomes.

A theoretical synthesis positions these findings within broader literature on curriculum enactment and creativity development. Curriculum innovation literature highlights the agency of teachers as crucial mediators between policy intent and classroom practice (Polatcan et al., 2024). The present study corroborates this stance while showing that agency must be matched with capacity and structural supports to produce the desired cognitive and affective outcomes in students. Creativity scholarship underscores the role of both individual cognitive capacities and social-contextual affordances. Merdeka Belajar creates social-contextual affordances, but the quality of affordances depends on teachers' intentional design and structural supports.

Teacher education programs should integrate explicit modules on creative pedagogy, assessment for creativity, and classroom management strategies conducive to open-ended inquiry. Embedding practicum experiences that require prospective teachers to design, implement, and revise creative units in real classrooms would likely improve readiness to enact Merdeka Belajar's aims (Hidayati & Prihantoro, 2024). Finally, parent and community engagement strategies that communicate the value of creative competencies and provide venues for public demonstrations of student work can build social support for pedagogical change.

Interpretive caution is warranted. The study's qualitative design emphasizes depth and contextual richness but does not permit claims of generalizability beyond the studied sites. Variation across schools suggests that transferability depends on contextual similarity. Future research could employ comparative case study designs across different regions and school types to elaborate how local policies, socio-economic factors, and resource endowments modulate curriculum enactment. Longitudinal qualitative studies would be particularly valuable to track how teacher practices, assessment norms, and student creative trajectories evolve over multiple academic cycles. Mixed-method inquiries that combine qualitative process tracing with quantitative measures of creative thinking could complement the present findings and help link proximal classroom practices to distal outcome indicators.

#### 4. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, when implemented with pedagogical fidelity and adequate educator support, can meaningfully enhance creative thinking and divergent problem-solving among elementary-school learners. Empirical evidence indicates that greater curricular flexibility, project-based tasks, and opportunities for learner autonomy foster originality, elaboration, and risk-taking in student work; however, these benefits are contingent on teacher competence in facilitative instruction, availability of contextualized learning resources, and equitable access across schools. Implementation gaps particularly in assessment practices, professional development, and infrastructure moderate the curriculum's positive effects and risk perpetuating variability in creative outcomes. Sustainable gains in student creativity therefore require systemic commitment to ongoing teacher training, formative assessment frameworks that capture creative growth, and policy measures that ensure resource parity and local adaptation.

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