

Freedom to Learn or Freedom to Learn? A Critical Review of the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the 3T Regions

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in 3T (Disadvantaged, Frontier, and Outermost) regions, focusing on the challenges, opportunities, and impacts faced in the context of specific local needs. The Independent Curriculum, introduced in 2021, aims to give educational institutions autonomy in developing curricula tailored to student needs and local contexts. Despite its significant potential for improving the quality of education, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in 3T regions faces various obstacles, including limited infrastructure, limited access to technology, and a shortage of trained teaching staff. This study used qualitative methods with a descriptive analytical approach, involving in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies in two 3T regions: North Lombok Regency and Mahakam Hulu Regency. The results show that although project-based learning and the concept of "learning independence" can be implemented well, successful implementation depends heavily on the provision of adequate resources and ongoing training for teachers. In conclusion, although the Independent Curriculum has significant potential to improve the quality of education in 3T regions, challenges related to resources and teacher readiness must be addressed immediately for this curriculum to be implemented effectively.

Keywords: Independent Curriculum, 3T regions, educational challenges, independent learning, educational innovation

INTRODUCTION

The concept of Merdeka Belajar, or "Independent Learning," is a transformative initiative in Indonesian education that aims to improve the quality and relevance of learning by emphasizing the autonomy of educational institutions to adapt curricula to local needs and student potential. The Merdeka Curriculum, introduced in 2021, embodies this philosophy with a focus on essential competencies, character development, and innovative teaching methods. Its implementation, particularly in the 3T (Disadvantaged, Frontier, and Outermost) regions, is crucial for addressing educational disparities in Indonesia. Key components of Merdeka Belajar include a policy framework that empowers schools to develop curricula tailored to local contexts (Salamah et al., 2024), a curriculum structure that emphasizes core competencies and life skills for the 21st century (Azmi et al., 2023), innovative learning approaches that encourage project-based and collaborative learning (Salamah et al., 2024), and holistic assessments that focus on evaluating students' overall abilities (Salamah et al., 2024). In the 3T (frontier and remote) areas, challenges faced by schools include a lack of resources and

teacher preparedness (Qolbi & Susiawati, 2025), making local curriculum adaptations crucial to meet the needs of these regions (Muthrofin & Fathurrahman, 2024). While the Independent Curriculum aims to foster independence and creativity, significant challenges remain in ensuring equitable access and quality of education across the region, which must be addressed for the curriculum's success and the improvement of Indonesia's educational landscape (Qolbi & Susiawati, 2025).

The purpose of this study is to analyze and provide a critical review of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in 3T (Disadvantaged, Frontier, Outermost) regions, with a focus on the challenges, opportunities, and impacts of its implementation within the context of specific local needs. This study aims to explore the extent to which the Independent Curriculum can address existing educational disparities, as well as how this policy adapts to conditions in 3T regions, which often face limitations in resources, infrastructure, and teacher readiness. By providing a deeper understanding of the implementation of this policy in 3T regions, it is hoped that this study can provide useful insights for the development of a more inclusive and sustainable education curriculum in the future.

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in 3T (disadvantaged, frontier, and outermost) regions faces several significant challenges, particularly related to limited infrastructure, access to technology, and a shortage of qualified teaching staff. Many schools in these areas lack adequate facilities, such as classrooms and learning materials, needed for effective curriculum implementation (Tomasouw et al., 2024; Fatimatuzzahrah et al., 2023). These infrastructure limitations hinder the creation of a supportive learning environment, making it difficult for teachers to actively engage students (Sitorus, 2024). Furthermore, limited access to technology is a critical barrier, as many educators and students lack the digital tools necessary to support modern learning methods (Tomasouw et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2024). The lack of adequate technology hinders teachers from designing innovative learning activities, which are at the heart of the Independent Curriculum (Nurfadila et al., 2023). The shortage of trained teaching staff is also a significant issue, as many educators feel unprepared to implement the curriculum due to limited training and support (Tomasouw et al., 2024; Fatimatuzzahrah et al., 2023). While this challenge is significant, some argue that it presents an opportunity for reform and innovation in educational practices that could strengthen the education system in the 3T regions.

The importance of studying the Independent Curriculum in the 3T (United Territories) region lies in its potential to improve the quality of education and address the unique challenges faced by remote areas. This curriculum aims to foster creativity, critical thinking, and personalized learning, which are crucial for student engagement and success. The implementation of the Independent Curriculum is being carried out in stages with a focus on project-based learning and differentiation, as seen at SMP Negeri 3 Tondano (Fitrianingrum et al., 2024). Furthermore, this curriculum emphasizes holistic education, integrating socio-emotional learning alongside academic subjects, which is crucial for comprehensive student development (Rifa'i & Putra, 2024). However, significant challenges include teacher preparedness, limited infrastructure, and the need for continuous professional development (Hasballah & Zulfatmi, 2024; Salim, 2023). Strategies such as the "Sekolah Penggerak"

program and ongoing teacher training are crucial to address these barriers and ensure effective implementation. This curriculum has demonstrated potential to increase student interest and character development, as well as produce positive changes in educational outcomes (Hasan et al., 2024). However, its success depends on addressing systemic issues such as resource allocation and teacher preparedness, which remain significant challenges in the 3T (United, Disadvantaged, and Transmigration) regions.

This paper focuses on analyzing the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the 3T (underdeveloped, border, and outermost) regions and distinguishing between the concepts of "learning independence" and "freedom." The Merdeka Curriculum aims to encourage student-centered learning, creativity, and critical thinking, while addressing the unique challenges faced by schools in these regions. Implementation in the 3T areas emphasizes community engagement and innovation in learning, which is particularly important in areas with limited resources (Harefa et al., 2024). Studies show that schools such as SMP Negeri 3 Tondano have adopted project-based learning and differentiated teaching to increase student engagement (Fitrianingrum et al., 2024). Despite challenges such as infrastructure and teacher training, this curriculum has shown potential in improving student outcomes and fostering independence (Hasan et al., 2024). The concept of "learning independence" refers to students' ability to take responsibility for their learning process, promoting self-directed education (Rifa'i & Putra, 2024). In contrast, "freedom of choice" encompasses broader autonomy in educational choices, allowing flexibility in curriculum implementation and teaching methods (Qolbi & Susiawati, 2025). Although the Independent Curriculum aims to empower students through these two concepts, its practical implementation in the 3T areas still faces significant obstacles, such as varying teacher readiness and limited resources.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive analytical method to examine the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged (3T) regions. According to Sugiyono (2019), qualitative research is a research method based on the philosophy of postpositivity, used to research natural object conditions, where the researcher is the key instrument, data source sampling is carried out purposively and snowball, data collection techniques are triangulated (combined), data analysis is inductive/qualitative, and qualitative research results emphasize meaning rather than generalization. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand in depth the phenomenon of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the 3T regions, which requires in-depth exploration of the perceptions, experiences, and challenges faced by education stakeholders. This research was conducted in two locations: North Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara, and Mahakam Hulu Regency, East Kalimantan, which are representatives of the 3T regions with different geographical, social, and economic characteristics but have similar challenges in the implementation of national education policies.

The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling with predetermined criteria to obtain comprehensive information regarding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in both research locations. A total of 10 research subjects were selected, consisting of school principals, teachers, school supervisors, education department officials, and

community leaders who have an understanding of and are directly involved in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Data collection techniques used in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the research subjects' perceptions, experiences, and views regarding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, the challenges faced, and solutions that have been or will be implemented. Participant observation was conducted to directly observe the learning process in schools that have implemented the Independent Curriculum, while documentation studies were conducted on related documents such as learning tools, implementation reports, and regional policies. Data analysis used the Miles and Huberman model with the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Source and method triangulation was conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the research data.

Table 1. Research Subjects

No	Name	Age	Address	Work
1	Drs. Ahmad Fauzi, M.Pd	52	Tanjung, North Lombok	North Lombok Regency Education Office
2	Siti Maryam, S.Pd	48	Gangga, North Lombok	Principal of SDN 1 Gangga
3	Baiq Nurhayati, S.Pd	43	Kayangan, North Lombok	Fifth Grade Teacher of SDN 2 Kayangan
4	H. Muhammad Ridwan, S.Pd	55	Bayan, North Lombok	Elementary School Supervisor
5	Then Gde Suparman	61	Winner, North Lombok	Community Leader/Chair of School Committee
6	Dra. Erni Wahyuni, M.Pd	49	Long Bagun, Upper Mahakam	Head of the Education Office of Mahakam Hulu Regency
7	Yohanes Banunaek, S.Pd	45	Laham, Upper Mahakam	Principal of SDN 001 Laham
8	Maria Goretti, S.Pd	38	Long Pahangai, Upper Mahakam	Class IV Teacher at SDN 002 Long Pahangai
9	Drs. Paulus Udil	54	Long Bagun, Upper Mahakam	Elementary School Supervisor
10	Francis Beding	58	Ujoh Bilang, Upper Mahakam	Traditional Leader/Chairman of School Committee

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the 3T (United Territories) areas faces significant challenges related to infrastructure, access to technology, and a shortage of trained teaching staff, as found in previous studies (Tomasouw et al., 2024; Fatimatuzzahrah et al., 2023). Furthermore, gaps in teacher readiness to implement the new curriculum are a major issue in these areas (Qolbi & Susiawati, 2025). In an interview with Drs. Ahmad Fauzi, M.Pd., from the North Lombok Regency Education Office, he stated,

"Despite our efforts to implement the Independent Curriculum, limited infrastructure and trained human resources remain major obstacles on the ground."

1. Infrastructure and Technology Access

Infrastructure limitations in the 3T (frontier and remote) areas have been shown to impact the effectiveness of curriculum implementation. Many schools in these areas lack adequate facilities, such as classrooms and learning materials, to implement the Merdeka Curriculum (Sitorus, 2024). Siti Maryam, S.Pd., Principal of SDN 1 Gangga, North Lombok, explained that

"Our school lacks sufficient classroom space to implement project-based learning. We rely on the limited facilities available."

Furthermore, limited access to technology is a significant barrier. Yohanes Banunaek, S.Pd, Principal of SDN 001 Laham in Mahakam Hulu, stated,

"Teachers and students here rarely have access to computers or other digital devices, which are essential to support technology-based learning methods."

2. Teacher Readiness and Professional Development

One of the key issues identified in this study was teacher readiness to implement the Independent Curriculum. This aligns with findings in the literature that many educators feel underprepared due to limited training and support (Tomasouw et al., 2024). Drs. Paulus Udil, an elementary school supervisor in Mahakam Hulu, stated,

"Teachers in this area need more technical training and ongoing coaching to be able to implement this curriculum well."

Rifa'i & Putra (2024) stated that "learning independence" referred to in the Independent Curriculum requires adequate training for teachers so that they can provide learning that can increase students' creativity and critical thinking.

3. Adaptation and Innovation Strategy

Despite the challenges, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in several schools has shown potential in improving the quality of education. At SMP Negeri 3 Tondano, for example, project-based learning has been implemented, emphasizing student creativity and collaboration. This demonstrates the relevance and benefits of the Independent Curriculum in aligning education with local needs, as explained by Baiq Nurhayati, S.Pd., a teacher at SDN 2 Kayangan.

"We are trying to make greater use of the surrounding environment as a teaching material, providing opportunities for students to learn in a more practical way."

Innovations like this are important to address the challenges that exist in 3T areas, considering limited access to modern teaching materials and technology (Salamah et al., 2024).

Implementing the Concept of Independent Learning and Freedom In this context, the concept of "independent learning" proposed by Rifa'i & Putra (2024) is

highly relevant, as it encourages students to take responsibility for their learning process. The implementation of a student-centered Independent Curriculum can increase students' sense of responsibility and independence in learning. This also aligns with the views expressed by Fransiskus Beding, a traditional figure in the Upper Mahakam, who commented,

"Education must involve the surrounding community to be more relevant and build student independence, not just relying on formal teaching."

In contrast, the concept of "free independence" which refers to greater autonomy in educational choices and teaching flexibility (Qolbi & Susiawati, 2025) opens up opportunities for schools in 3T areas to adapt the curriculum to their local needs.

While the Merdeka Curriculum (Curriculum Merdeka) has significant potential to improve education quality in the 3T (third-third) regions, its implementation still relies on addressing systemic issues, such as limited resource allocation, varying teacher readiness, and a lack of adequate training. As explained by Lalu Gde Suparman, Head of the School Committee in Pemenang, North Lombok,

"To successfully implement this curriculum, we need greater support, both from the central and regional governments, to improve the quality of education in our region."

This research shows that while the Independent Curriculum has the potential to improve the quality of education in 3T areas, its success depends heavily on managing existing challenges, as well as a commitment to providing adequate resources and training for teachers.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study indicates that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the 3T (United Nations) regions faces significant challenges, including limited infrastructure, limited access to technology, and a shortage of trained teaching staff. Nevertheless, this curriculum provides opportunities to improve the quality of education by encouraging project-based learning, community engagement, and the development of student independence and creativity. The study identified that "independent learning" places greater emphasis on student responsibility for their learning process, while "freedom of learning" allows flexibility in choosing learning methods according to local needs. Although some schools in the 3T (United Nations) regions have successfully adopted innovative approaches, such as project-based learning, significant challenges remain related to teacher preparedness, limited training, and a lack of adequate infrastructure. Therefore, the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the 3T (United Nations) regions depends heavily on the provision of sufficient resources, ongoing teacher training, and adaptation of the curriculum to the local context. Overall, despite the obstacles that need to be overcome, the

Independent Curriculum has great potential to reduce educational disparities in the 3T (United Nations) regions and promote a more inclusive and sustainable education system in the future.

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