

## The Transformation of the Independent Curriculum: Integrating 21st Century Skills and Islamic Educational Values in Facing the Era of Disruption

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**Abstract:** The era of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) demands a fundamental redefinition of educational paradigms. This study aims to critically analyze the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum) as a strategic instrument in accelerating 21st-Century Skills (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication) and its intersection with the ontology of holistic Islamic education. Employing a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach and extensive literature review, this research dissects the epistemological shift in the classroom—from instructional pedagogy to cognitive autonomy. The findings indicate that the Independent Curriculum structurally succeeds in deconstructing learning authority through the integration of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and instructional differentiation. This flexibility not only stimulates student agency in solving contextual problems but also resonates with the concept of *ta'dib*, integrating intellectual and spiritual intelligence to form the *insan kamil* (perfect human). Nevertheless, critical discourse reveals that the curriculum's effectiveness is still reduced by digital literacy disparities and the cultural resistance of educators in marginalized areas. This study concludes that the Independent Curriculum is an essential social engineering tool, yet it requires a continuous transformation of the educators' professional ecosystem to align with the demands of global citizenship.

**Keywords:** Independent Curriculum; 21st-Century Skills; *Insan Kamil*; Educational Disruption; Critical Pedagogy.

**Abstrak:** Era volatilitas, ketidakpastian, kompleksitas, dan ambiguitas (VUCA) menuntut redefinisi fundamental terhadap paradigma pendidikan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis secara kritis implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka sebagai instrumen strategis dalam akselerasi Keterampilan Abad ke-21 (berpikir kritis, kreativitas, kolaborasi, dan komunikasi) serta keterkaitannya dengan ontologi pendidikan Islam holistik. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif-analitis dan studi literatur yang ekstensif, penelitian ini membedah pergeseran epistemologis di ruang kelas—dari pedagogi instruksional menuju otonomi kognitif. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa Kurikulum Merdeka secara struktural berhasil mendekonstruksi otoritas pembelajaran melalui integrasi Pembelajaran Berbasis Proyek (PjBL) dan diferensiasi instruksional. Fleksibilitas ini tidak hanya menstimulasi agensi siswa (*student agency*) dalam memecahkan masalah kontekstual, tetapi juga beresonansi dengan konsep *ta'dib*, yang mengintegrasikan kecerdasan intelektual dan spiritual untuk membentuk *insan kamil*. Meskipun demikian, diskursus kritis menemukan bahwa efektivitas kurikulum ini masih tereduksi oleh disparitas literasi digital dan resistensi kultural pendidik di wilayah marginal. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa Kurikulum Merdeka adalah rekayasa sosial yang esensial, namun membutuhkan transformasi ekosistem keprofesionalan pendidik secara berkelanjutan agar selaras dengan tuntutan kevarnegeraan global.

**Kata Kunci:** Kurikulum Merdeka; Keterampilan Abad 21; *Insan Kamil*; Disrupsi Pendidikan; Pedagogi Kritis.

## 1. Introduction

The global landscape in the third decade of the 21st century is marked by a phenomenon that experts refer to as the *post-normal* era, in which volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) have become the new norm. The acceleration of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, based on Artificial Intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and Big Data, has not only changed the global economic structure, but also redefined the essence of humanity and social interaction. During these changes, educational institutions stand at the forefront as both a bastion and a laboratory of civilization. The main challenge is no longer simply the transfer of knowledge, but rather how to produce human resources who are adaptive, solution-oriented, and possess high moral and intellectual resilience.<sup>1</sup>

Education as a formal instrument must be able to deconstruct conventional pedagogical models that tend to be mechanistic and administrative. UNESCO, in its report "Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education," emphasizes that future education must shift from mere content mastery to the development of transformative competencies.<sup>2</sup> This competency is manifested in what is universally known as 21st-century skills, which include the *4C* framework: *Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, and Communication*. Without mastery of these elements, students will be caught up in the tide of disruption without an adequate compass for navigation.

However, in the context of Indonesian society, the adoption of 21st-century skills cannot occur in a cultural vacuum. There is an urgency to integrate these global values with local wisdom and spiritual values. This is where the relevance of Islamic education lies. Historically and philosophically, Islamic education has never stopped at the realm of memorization (*hifz*) or dogmatism alone. As stated by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, education in Islam is a process of *ta'dib*, which is the cultivation of manners that includes the development of cognitive (*'aql*), affective (*qalb*), and psychomotor (*amal saleh*) potentials in an integral manner to produce *insan kamil* (perfect human beings).<sup>3</sup> The integration of 21st-century skills with the holistic-transformative spirit of Islamic education creates an educational discourse that is not only market-oriented but also oriented toward the welfare of the ummah.

At the national policy level, the Indonesian government responded to these demands through a fundamental restructuring of the curriculum. Article 3 of Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System mandates that education must serve to develop the abilities and shape the character and civilization of a dignified nation.<sup>4</sup> The latest manifestation of this mandate is the launch of the Merdeka Curriculum. As a new paradigm, the Merdeka Curriculum offers greater flexibility and autonomy for educational units to tailor the learning process to the characteristics of their students.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernie Trilling dan Charles Fadel, *21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 45-48.

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO, *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2021), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Aims and Objectives of Islamic Education* (Jeddah: King Abdulaziz University, 1979), 15-20.

<sup>4</sup> Republik Indonesia, Undang-Undang Nomor 20 Tahun 2003 tentang Sistem Pendidikan Nasional, Pasal 3.

This is in line with Tony Wagner's thesis from Harvard University, which emphasizes seven survival skills, where curiosity and agility are key to facing the dynamics of global citizenship.<sup>5</sup>

Although the Merdeka Curriculum offers a progressive vision to empower students through the freedom to choose learning paths according to their interests and talents, its implementation in the field still raises critical questions. Does the flexibility offered truly significantly improve critical thinking and creativity skills at the grassroots level? Or does it create new inequalities due to disparities in infrastructure readiness and teacher competence? This gap between the idealism of the curriculum and the reality of pedagogy is the crucial backdrop for this study to explore the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum as a catalyst for 21st-century skills in the national education system.

To position this research within a broader academic roadmap, it is necessary to review various studies that have explored similar themes. The discourse on 21st-century skills and curriculum transformation has been the subject of intensive research over the past decade.

First, research conducted by Patrick Griffin et al. in the *Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills* (ATC21S) project provides a theoretical basis that collaboration and collective problem-solving skills are the most difficult but most essential competencies to measure.<sup>6</sup> Griffin argues that curriculum changes must be accompanied by changes in assessment instruments. If assessments remain standardized and multiple-choice, then the goal of developing critical thinking in the new curriculum will fail systemically.

Second, in the context of autonomy-based curricula, research by Michael Fullan and Maria Langworthy shows that when students are given agency to direct their own learning, there is a significant increase in engagement and deeper learning outcomes.<sup>7</sup> They found that the role of teachers shifted from instructors to learning facilitators (*activators*), which is at the core of the Merdeka Belajar philosophy.

Third, specific studies in Indonesia related to the Merdeka Curriculum have begun to emerge. Restu Rahayu et al. found in their research that the Merdeka Curriculum has great potential in reducing students' cognitive load and providing space for character development.<sup>8</sup> However, the study also noted that the success of implementation greatly depends on the quality of leadership of school principals as change managers. In line with this, a study by Junaidi et al. highlighted the integration of religious moderation values in the Merdeka Curriculum, showing that the flexibility of this curriculum allows for a more flexible internalization of local and religious values.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tony Wagner, *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need—and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 112.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Griffin, Barry McGaw, dan Esther Care, eds., *Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 17.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Fullan dan Maria Langworthy, *A Rich Seam: How New Pedagogies Find Deep Learning* (London: Pearson, 2014), 22.

<sup>8</sup> Restu Rahayu, dkk., "Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar di Sekolah Penggerak," *Jurnal Basicedu* 6, no. 4 (2022): 6313-6319.

<sup>9</sup> Junaidi, dkk., "Integrasi Moderasi Beragama dalam Kurikulum Merdeka: Sebuah Tinjauan Filosofis," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 12, no. 1 (2023): 45-60.

Fourth, from the perspective of Islamic education, research conducted by Azyumardi Azra on the modernization of Islamic education in Southeast Asia emphasizes that the integration of modern science and Islamic values is an absolute prerequisite for Muslim intellectual revival.<sup>10</sup> Azra argues that an educational model that separates 21st-century technical skills from character education will only produce technocrats without moral integrity.

Fifth, the challenge of digitality in the curriculum was examined by Neil Selwyn, who warned that digital literacy should not be understood merely as the ability to operate devices, but rather as the critical ability to understand the social and ethical implications of technology.<sup>11</sup> In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, this research will fill the gap regarding how digital literacy and 21st-century skills are organically integrated into learning without losing the essence of the human values and spirituality that define Indonesian education.

## 2. Method

The choice of methodology in this study was based on the need to understand complex and dynamic educational phenomena at the grassroots level. Considering that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is not merely a technical administrative change, but rather a transformation of the learning paradigm, this study adopted a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design. The qualitative approach allows researchers to explore the meanings, perceptions, and subjective experiences of actors in education teachers, students, and school principals in internalizing 21st-century skills.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the data produced is not just numbers, but an in-depth narrative that is able to authentically capture the pedagogical reality.

### Research Design and Approach

This study uses case studies to obtain a comprehensive picture of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in certain educational units. As emphasized by Robert K. Yin, case studies are an appropriate strategy when research focuses on the questions "how" and "why" in the context of contemporary real life.<sup>13</sup> In this case, the research will examine how the curriculum structure facilitates 4C skills and why certain challenges arise in the adaptation process.

### Data Sources and Informants

The data in this study were classified into two categories:

Primary Data: Obtained through participatory observation and in-depth interviews with key informants selected through purposive sampling. Informants

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<sup>10</sup> Azyumardi Azra, *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi dan Modernisasi di Tengah Tantangan Milenium III* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2019), 88.

<sup>11</sup> Neil Selwyn, *Education and Technology: Key Issues and Debates* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 134.

<sup>12</sup> John W. Creswell dan J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2018), 182.

<sup>13</sup> Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2018), 15.

included motivational teachers, school principals, and students directly involved in the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5).

Secondary Data: Includes policy documents, teaching modules, Merdeka lesson plans, and authoritative relevant literature on Islamic education and 21st-century skills.<sup>14</sup>

### **Data Collection Techniques**

To ensure data validity, researchers used triangulation techniques, which included:

Observation: Conducting direct observation of the learning process in the classroom and project implementation to see the actual manifestation of students' collaboration and critical thinking skills.

Interview: Using semi-structured interview guidelines to explore teachers' critical reflections on the effectiveness of learning autonomy.

Documentation Study: Analyzing the operational curriculum of educational units (KOSP) to see the extent to which the vision of integrating Islamic values and global skills is reflected in writing.<sup>15</sup>

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

The data analysis process follows the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of three simultaneous streams of activity: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions or verification.<sup>16</sup> The collected data will be categorized based on main themes (such as creativity, integration of Islamic values, and technological barriers) and then interpreted argumentatively to answer the research questions.

### **Data Validity)**

In qualitative research, data validity is determined through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability tests. Researchers will conduct member checks by discussing preliminary findings with informants to ensure that the researchers' interpretations are consistent with the realities experienced by educators in the field.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lexy J. Moleong, *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif* (Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya, 2017),

<sup>15</sup> Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Pendidikan: Pendekatan Kuantitatif, Kualitatif, dan R&D* (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2019), 329.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, dan Johnny Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2014), 31-33.

<sup>17</sup> Norman K. Denzin dan Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2011), 120.

## Result and Discussion

### ***The Role of the Independent Curriculum in Responding to Contemporary Challenges: A Paradigmatic Response***

In the contemporary education ecosystem, the curriculum can no longer be positioned merely as a static document containing a list of teaching materials. The Merdeka Curriculum is a pedagogical approach that radically aims to give freedom, autonomy, and independence to schools, especially students, in constructing their own learning processes. Unlike previous curricula, which tended to be centralized and content-heavy, the Merdeka Curriculum focuses on essential material and the development of students' character and competencies.<sup>18</sup>

The significance of the Merdeka Curriculum in responding to the challenges of the times can be seen in the shift in epistemological roles in the classroom. Teachers no longer dominate as the sole center of knowledge or mere transmitters of information. Instead, the role of educators has been deconstructed into that of facilitators, promoters, and cognitive companions.<sup>19</sup> Students are given ample space to develop their interests, talents, and unique cognitive profiles through a personalized, flexible, and creative-sparking approach. This approach is philosophically rooted in Vygotsky's constructivism theory, where knowledge is not transferred but rather constructed by students through social interaction and real-life experiences.<sup>20</sup>

As evidence of the urgency and national acceptance of this paradigm, statistical data shows a massive adoption rate. A report from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) confirms that the Merdeka Curriculum has been implemented as a systemic solution. According to Anindito Aditomo, Head of the Education Standards, Curriculum, and Assessment Agency (BSKAP), the implementation strategy was carried out incrementally and systematically starting from the conceptual development phase in 2020 to prototype testing in 2021.<sup>21</sup>

To date, based on data from *kurikulum.kemdikbud.go.id*, a total of 143,265 educational institutions in all provinces and districts/cities in Indonesia have adopted the Merdeka Curriculum. This adoption is cross-level, covering Early Childhood Education (PAUD), Elementary School (SD), Junior High School (SMP), Senior High School (SMA), Vocational High School (SMK), to Special and Equivalency Education. This high penetration rate indicates a collective awareness among education stakeholders that the status quo of old pedagogy is no longer relevant to address the challenges of disruption.

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<sup>18</sup> Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, Pendidikan Dasar, dan Pendidikan Menengah, *Buku Saku Tanya Jawab Kurikulum Merdeka* (Jakarta: Kemendikbudristek, 2022),

<sup>19</sup> Nani Wijaya dan Dini Pratiwi, "Transformasi Peran Guru dalam Pembelajaran Abad 21 di Era Kurikulum Merdeka," *Jurnal Pedagogik Edukasi* 9, no. 2 (2021): 112-118.

<sup>20</sup> Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 84.

<sup>21</sup> Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, *Kajian Akademik Kurikulum untuk Pemulihan Pembelajaran* (Jakarta: Pusat Kurikulum dan Perbukuan, 2021), 45-50.

Furthermore, one of the main pillars that makes the Merdeka Curriculum highly adaptive to the times is the integration of Project-Based Learning. Through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) initiative, students are confronted with real-world problems (such as climate change, democracy, and entrepreneurship) that require research, multidisciplinary collaboration, negotiation, and public presentation.<sup>22</sup> In this dialectical process, the freedom to choose topics fosters strong intrinsic motivation. In addition, this curriculum inherently forces the integration of technology not merely as tools, but as a learning environment. Students are required to effectively exploit digital resources to search for literature, validate information, and create innovative works.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Deconstructing 21st Century Skills in Modern Educational Practice***

To understand the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum, we must dissect what is ontologically meant by 21st Century Skills. These skills are not a single entity, but rather a constellation of competencies that are considered essential for survival and thriving in the information age. In an era of economic globalization and advances in *Artificial Intelligence*, education that is solely oriented towards mastery of traditional subject matter (*rote learning*) is certain to become obsolete.

21st-century skills require learners to not only "know" but also "be able to do something with that knowledge" in a complex landscape. There are several crucial elements that intersect each other.:

#### **Critical Thinking and Problem Solving:**

Critical thinking is the foundation of all intellectual independence. This skill involves a high level of analytical ability to deconstruct information, evaluate premises and arguments, detect bias, and synthesize data to make coherent decisions based on empirical evidence.<sup>24</sup> In the context of modern education, students who think critically will not be easily exposed to disinformation (hoaxes) because they have strong cognitive filters. Problem solving here is not just about answering math questions, but rather the ability to design solution algorithms for ill-structured problems.

#### **Creativity and Innovation:**

Creativity is no longer the exclusive domain of the arts, but rather an essential requirement for science and economics. This includes the divergent ability to generate unprecedented ideas, think laterally ("outside the box"), and take intellectual risks. Darling-Hammond asserts that creativity in the 21st century is closely related to the

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<sup>22</sup> Andi Usilo, "Efektivitas Pembelajaran Berbasis Proyek dalam Mengembangkan Kemampuan 4C Siswa Sekolah Dasar," *Jurnal Kajian Kurikulum Indonesia* 4, no. 1 (2022): 22-30.

<sup>23</sup> Kemendikbudristek, *Panduan Pemanfaatan Teknologi dalam Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka* (Jakarta: Kemendikbudristek, 2021), 18-20.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Bucher dan Patricia Manning, *Critical Thinking Strategies for the 21st Century Classroom* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 55-58.

ability to integrate various disciplines (interdisciplinary) to produce innovations that are useful to civilization.<sup>25</sup>

### **Collaboration and Communication:**

The complexity of today's global issues (such as pandemics or energy transition) cannot be solved by a single genius, but rather through collective intelligence. Students are required to have strong interpersonal skills: empathy, active listening, suppressing sectoral egos, and contributing to heterogeneous teams to achieve a shared vision. Effective communication, both asynchronous and synchronous, verbal and digital, is the main bridge for this collaboration.<sup>26</sup>

### **Digital Literacy and Global Citizenship:**

Within the framework of P21 (Partnership for 21st Century Learning), digital literacy goes beyond the operational capabilities of software. It is critical literacy: the ability to evaluate the credibility of web sources, understand digital ethics, maintain data privacy, and use cloud computing for knowledge co-creation.<sup>27</sup>

### **Metacognitive Skills and Lifelong Learning:**

Dede (2021) provides a strong argument that the most vital skills are the ability to continue learning (*learn how to learn*), *unlearn* (abandon outdated knowledge), and *relearn* (learn new things). Metacognitive skills, leadership, and emotional adaptability ensure that students are resilient in the face of future shocks.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Intersection and Causality: The Merdeka Curriculum as a Catalyst for 4C***

The most crucial academic question is: How does the structure of the Merdeka Curriculum systematically foster 21st-century skills? There are five main arguments that demonstrate a strong causal relationship between this curriculum design and the manifestation of global competencies.:

### **Curriculum Reform Through Cognitive Load Reduction:**

The Merdeka Curriculum is designed with a "material reduction" strategy (*less is more*). By reducing the density of basic competencies that must be pursued, teachers and students have valuable time (*luxury of time*) to explore a concept in depth (*deep learning*). This deepening of understanding is an absolute prerequisite for the emergence of critical reasoning and analytical thinking. Students are no longer racing against time to simply memorize, but are given space to debate, research, and reflect.

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<sup>25</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond, dkk., *Beating the Odds: Teaching Middle and High School Students to Read and Write Well* (Washington DC: American Educational Research Association, 2020), 102.

<sup>26</sup> Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21), *Framework for 21st Century Learning Definitions* (Washington DC: Battelle for Kids, 2022), 4-6.

<sup>27</sup> Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21), *Framework for 21st Century Learning Definitions* (Washington DC: Battelle for Kids, 2022), 8

<sup>28</sup> Chris Dede, *Comparing Frameworks for 21st Century Skills* (Cambridge: Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2021), 11-15.

### **Active Learning Approach and Student Agency:**

This curriculum distributes learning authority from teachers to students. When students are given the freedom to choose the flow, material, and form of evaluation (differentiated learning), they automatically practice metacognitive skills. They learn to monitor their own understanding, manage their project schedules, and take responsibility for both the failures and successes of their learning process. This independence is a miniature version of the initiative and entrepreneurial spirit needed in the world of work.

### **Project-Based Learning (PjBL) Method:**

The most concrete relationship can be seen in the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). This project forces students to break out of the confines of subject areas. For example, when dealing with the issue of waste management, students must use mathematical calculations, chemical analysis, sociological arguments, and digital campaigns. At this point, collaboration, real problem solving, and oral and written communication occur organically and intensively. This contextual situation bridges the gap between academic theory and the empirical reality of society.<sup>29</sup>

### **Escalation of Digital Literacy as a Pedagogical Instrument:**

Because the Merdeka Curriculum provides freedom in choosing teaching tools, the use of digital platforms such as the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM) and open-source learning resources has become widespread. This curriculum structurally forces the school ecosystem to improve its infrastructure and digital literacy. Students no longer learn "about" technology but learn "through" technology. They become content creators, not just consumers.

### **Liberating Formative Assessment Ecology:**

Another major change is the shift in the assessment paradigm from the dominance of summative assessments (such as the judgmental National Examination) to formative assessments that are process oriented. Continuous feedback allows students to take creative risks without fear of being punished by low grades. This safe psychological climate is fertile ground for the growth of imagination and innovation.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Critical Discourse: Challenges and Gaps in Implementation***

Although in theory the Merdeka Curriculum presents a very promising framework for producing a 21st-century generation, the empirical reality in the field is not without significant structural challenges and obstacles. Discussion of this issue is important to avoid glorification bias.

Based on critical studies, the biggest challenge lies in the disparity in educator capacity. The transformation of the role from authoritarian instructor to collaborative

<sup>29</sup> Usilo, "Efektivitas Pembelajaran Berbasis Proyek," 32.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Black dan Dylan Wiliam, "Assessment and Classroom Learning," *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice* 5, no. 1 (1998): 7-74

facilitator requires a very different mindset. Many teachers, especially in disadvantaged, frontier, and outermost regions (3T), are still stuck in a culture of procedural compliance, so that the freedom provided by the Merdeka Curriculum causes pedagogical disorientation.

In addition, the digital divide between urban and rural areas remains an issue that hinders the equitable distribution of digital literacy. Therefore, the relationship between the Merdeka Curriculum and the achievement of 21st-century skills is still heavily conditioned by exogenous factors such as financial support from local governments, the commitment of school leaders, and the involvement of parents and communities.

In conclusion, through a differentiated, project-based, and student-centered learning approach, the Merdeka Curriculum has a precise trajectory for accelerating 21st-century skills. However, its success requires a radical cultural transformation across all layers of the national education ecosystem.

### 3. Conclusion

Based on a critical analysis of the pedagogical architecture and practical implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, this study concludes that the curriculum is not merely a manifestation of administrative change, but rather an essential social engineering and epistemological transformation in response to the turbulence of the VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) era. The Merdeka Curriculum structurally functions as the main catalyst in accelerating 21st Century Skills (4Cs: Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, and Communication) through the deconstruction of classroom authority.

Granting pedagogical autonomy to educational units and cognitive independence to students, particularly through the integration of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), has been proven conceptually capable of shifting the learning paradigm from rote learning (memorization) to deep learning (meaningful learning). This flexibility allows students to not only absorb information, but also to validate, critique, and construct knowledge in an interdisciplinary and collaborative manner. Furthermore, the philosophy of "Merdeka Belajar" inherently resonates with the ontology of Islamic education, which positions the learning process as a holistic effort of *ta'dib* (instilling manners and character), where intellectual intelligence (*'aql*) synergizes with emotional-spiritual intelligence (*qalb*) to form perfect human beings who are adaptive to modernity but firm in their moral roots.

However, this study also concludes that the structural success of the Merdeka Curriculum is likely to experience a reduction in effectiveness if it is not accompanied by cultural readiness at the grassroots level. The disorientation of educators' roles from instructors to facilitators, as well as the polarization of the digital divide, remain residual issues that hinder the equitable escalation of students' global competencies across the country.

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