

Implementation of the Independent Curriculum Policy in Guidance and Counseling Subjects

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ABSTRACT

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The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning, instructional flexibility, and the development of character and competencies. The curriculum provides opportunities for Guidance and Counseling (GC) services to become more adaptive, holistic, and responsive to students' developmental needs. This study examines the implementation of GC services at Junior high school within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. The findings show that GC services have become an integral part of supporting students' personal, social, academic, and career development. Implementation involves adjustments in service strategies, collaboration among GC counselors, subject teachers, and homeroom teachers, as well as the use of technology for needs assessment, individual planning, and responsive services. The curriculum has been implemented gradually, supported by school management readiness and teachers' willingness to adapt. Its impact is reflected in increased student participation, more contextual learning experiences, and the shifting role of teachers toward facilitators. However, challenges remain, including uneven teacher understanding of instructional materials, limited collaboration within learning communities, and suboptimal use of innovative learning media for differentiated instruction. Therefore, this study recommends strengthening systematic training, providing continuous mentoring, and optimizing the use of the Merdeka Mengajar digital platform.

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INTRODUCTION

The Independent Curriculum is an innovative national education policy designed to provide educational units with the freedom and flexibility to develop learning processes tailored to the needs, characteristics, and potential of students

(Jusubaidi et al., 2024; Munawwaroh, 2024; Zuhdi et al., 2024). This curriculum marks a paradigm shift in learning from a mastery-oriented approach to student-centered learning. By simplifying the curriculum structure and emphasizing essential materials, the Independent Curriculum is expected to create learning experiences that are more meaningful, contextual, and relevant to the challenges of 21st-century life (Biney, 2023; Nwoko et al., 2024; Suprpto et al., 2021). In this context, educational units are given the space to innovate and adapt learning strategies to the real conditions of students and the school environment.

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum has important implications for Guidance and Counseling (BK) services. Guidance and counseling services play a strategic role in helping students achieve their adolescent developmental tasks, including personal, social, learning, and career planning. The Independent Curriculum provides greater opportunities for guidance and counseling teachers to design service programs that are adaptive, flexible, and oriented to individual student needs (Kabakçi & Ergene, 2024; Wahid et al., 2022). Within the Independent Curriculum framework, guidance and counseling teachers function not only as counselors addressing student issues but also as development facilitators, career mentors, and character builders, in accordance with the values of the Pancasila Student Profile (Fathurrahman et al., 2022; Nurrahman et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the Independent Curriculum positions teachers as facilitators, coaches, and learning companions, encouraging students to actively explore their interests, talents, and potential (Mastur, 2023; Utaminingsih et al., 2024). Students are given greater space to engage in the learning process through project-based activities, self-reflection, and real-life learning experiences. This approach aligns with 21st-century learning principles that emphasize critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and digital literacy. In the context of guidance and counseling services, this approach strengthens the role of school counselors in helping students identify themselves, develop independence, and make responsible decisions regarding their academic and career futures.

Curriculum changes are also inextricably linked to the increasingly rapid dynamics of digital transformation in education (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Taptiani et al., 2024). The digital era demands that education systems be more responsive, innovative, and adaptive through the integration of technology and competency-based learning (Baharun et al., 2025; Humaisi et al., 2024; Lenchuk & Mosiuk, 2023). The Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) is the government's strategic response to these challenges by encouraging the use of digital technology in lesson planning, assessment, and teacher professional development (Effendi & Sahertian, 2023; Nadya et al., 2023; Padang et al., 2023). For guidance and counseling services, digital transformation opens up opportunities for the use of technology-based non-test assessments, systematic

student profile data collection, and the provision of more flexible and accessible counseling services for students.

This research was conducted at SMP Negeri 44 Merangin, one of the educational units that has implemented the Independent Curriculum. Based on the author's initial observations on Wednesday, November 19, 2025, a significant shift in learning orientation was observed at the school. Teachers are required to shift from their conventional role as teacher-centered presenters to learning facilitators who encourage active student participation. This change impacts not only subject matter learning but also the Guidance and Counseling service model, requiring BK teachers to be more adaptive, collaborative, and responsive to student needs.

However, the practical implementation of the Independent Curriculum is not without challenges, particularly related to teacher preparedness, understanding of teaching materials, and consistent application of student-centered learning principles. These conditions serve as the important background for this research, specifically to examine how Guidance and Counseling services within the Independent Curriculum framework are implemented at SMP Negeri 44 Merangin and how students respond to them. Thus, this research is expected to provide an empirical overview of BK practices in the Independent Curriculum era as well as serve as material for reflection and recommendations for the development of more effective and sustainable BK services.

METHOD

Study employed a descriptive qualitative research design aimed at exploring and analyzing the implementation of Guidance and Counseling (GC) services within the Merdeka Curriculum framework at SMP Negeri 44 Merangin. A qualitative approach was selected to obtain an in-depth understanding of how policy is interpreted and practiced in real educational settings (Köhler, 2024). The study focused on examining the alignment between the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum—particularly student-centered learning, flexibility, and character development—and the operational components of GC services. The research was conducted during the 2025 academic year and positioned the researcher as the primary instrument responsible for collecting, interpreting, and analyzing the data.

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through limited classroom and service observations, informal semi-structured interviews with Guidance and Counseling teachers, subject teachers, and students, as well as documentation of GC programs and Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening (P5) activities. Secondary data were derived from relevant policy documents and academic literature, including the Merdeka Curriculum implementation guidelines, the BK Teacher's Handbook, and regulations issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and

Technology. Data collection techniques included observation sheets, interview guides, and document analysis formats to ensure systematic data gathering. Triangulation of sources and methods was applied to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings.

Data analysis followed the interactive qualitative analysis model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Williams, 2021). During the reduction stage, data were categorized based on four core components of GC services: basic services, individual planning, responsive services, and system support. The data were then systematically presented in narrative form to identify patterns, relationships, and emerging themes related to curriculum implementation. Finally, conclusions were drawn by linking empirical findings with theoretical frameworks in guidance and counseling and the Merdeka Curriculum policy. The analytical process also examined the effectiveness of GC service strategies, the level of teacher adaptability, collaboration practices, and the integration of digital tools and P5 projects in supporting holistic student development.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Implementation Guidance and Counseling Services

The implementation of Guidance and Counseling (GC) services within the Merdeka Curriculum framework at the junior high school level demonstrates a shift toward more student-centered, flexible, and developmental practices. Orientation services are conducted using interactive and engaging approaches to introduce students to the school environment, academic regulations, and learning culture. Rather than merely delivering procedural information, counselors design orientation activities that foster independence, collaboration, and adaptation to the school setting. This approach aligns with the Pancasila Student Profile, particularly in strengthening the dimensions of mutual cooperation and self-reliance. The findings indicate that orientation services are no longer administrative in nature but function as an early developmental intervention that supports students' socio-emotional adjustment.

Information services have also evolved in response to the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. Counselors provide guidance on effective learning strategies, time management, and preliminary career planning through both face-to-face sessions and project-based modules. The integration of digital media, such as online forms for needs assessments and presentation tools, reflects efforts to support flexible and technology-enhanced learning. The flexibility of the curriculum enables counselors to adjust materials based on students' needs assessment results, making the services more contextual and relevant to students' daily academic and personal challenges.

Individual counseling services further illustrate the dynamic nature of implementation under the Merdeka Curriculum. Counselors prioritize a humanistic approach characterized by empathy, active listening, and

collaborative problem-solving. The flexible scheduling structure of the curriculum provides greater space for responsive services, allowing counselors to address students' personal, social, or academic concerns more effectively. Additionally, GC teachers actively participate in the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), including themes such as Healthy Lifestyle, Building Body and Soul, and Self-Creativity. In these projects, counselors play a facilitative role in helping students recognize their strengths, regulate emotions, and build self-confidence. This integration indicates that GC services are not isolated programs but are embedded within the broader character and competency development agenda of the school.

Student responses to these services tend to be positive. Based on observations and informal interviews, students report that counseling services feel more accessible and less intimidating. They perceive counselors not merely as disciplinary authorities but as supportive facilitators. Students express greater comfort in discussing personal concerns and future plans, indicating a reduction in stigma traditionally associated with counseling services (see Table 1). The interactive format of classical guidance sessions increases student engagement, while early potential and interest mapping helps students—particularly those in grades eight and nine—develop clearer academic and career aspirations.

Table 1. Service Component

Service Component	Examples of Topics/ Activities at Junior High School	Implementation Strategies
Basic Services	Self-Potential and Learning Style Awareness (for all Grade VII students)	Classical Guidance (classroom-based sessions), ice-breaking activities, group discussions
Individual Planning	Interest and Talent Mapping for Preparation for the Next Educational Level	Brief individual interviews, questionnaire result analysis, consultation with parents
Responsive Services	Handling cases of bullying or interpersonal conflicts among students	Individual counseling, group counseling (for common issues), mediation
System Support	Collaboration with Subject Teachers to Support Differentiated Learning	Case conferences, provision of student profile data, anti-drug seminars (in collaboration with external institutions)

However, the findings also reveal that some students still lack a comprehensive understanding of the scope and function of Guidance and Counseling services. This suggests the need for more systematic outreach and continuous socialization of GC roles within the school community. The implementation of GC services under the Merdeka Curriculum demonstrates a meaningful transformation from reactive, problem-based counseling toward a proactive, developmental, and preventive model. The research interpretation indicates that when supported by institutional readiness and collaborative practices, the Merdeka Curriculum provides a conducive framework for

strengthening holistic student development and aligning counseling services with long-term educational and career planning goals.

Supporting Factors

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 44 Merangin has progressed relatively well, supported by a combination of internal and external factors that strengthen policy execution at the school level. These supporting elements include strong school leadership, teacher readiness to adapt to new pedagogical approaches, the availability of digital learning resources, and increased student engagement in classroom activities. Collectively, these factors create an enabling ecosystem that facilitates the transition from a content-centered curriculum to a more flexible and student-centered learning paradigm.

School leadership emerges as a central supporting factor in the successful implementation of the curriculum. The principal demonstrates a strong institutional commitment through structured academic supervision, periodic monitoring of classroom practices, and the provision of opportunities for teachers to innovate in developing teaching modules. The leadership style reflects transformational characteristics, particularly in fostering a shared vision, encouraging professional growth, and building a collaborative school culture oriented toward student-centered learning. This finding reinforces the argument that effective curriculum reform requires not only policy directives but also strategic leadership capable of translating policy into operational practice. From an interpretative perspective, the principal's active involvement functions as a catalyst that reduces resistance to change and strengthens teachers' confidence in experimenting with new instructional models.

Teacher readiness also plays a significant role in supporting implementation. Although adaptation levels vary, most teachers demonstrate pedagogical flexibility by applying project-based learning, authentic assessment, and experiential learning strategies. They show willingness to redesign lesson plans, integrate formative assessments, and position students as active participants in knowledge construction. This indicates that readiness is not merely technical compliance with curriculum documents but reflects an internalization of the student-centered learning philosophy. The research interpretation suggests that teachers who understand the epistemological shift embedded in the Merdeka Curriculum are more capable of creating meaningful, contextual, and differentiated learning experiences. Therefore, teacher competence in this context encompasses both methodological skills and paradigm transformation.

Another important supporting factor is the availability of digital learning resources, particularly through the Merdeka Mengajar platform. The platform provides structured guidance, teaching modules, assessment examples, and professional development materials that teachers can access independently. This accessibility reduces dependency on centralized training and accelerates

curriculum adaptation at the classroom level. The integration of digital tools also supports more efficient lesson planning and enables teachers to align instructional strategies with students' needs. From an analytical standpoint, the presence of digital infrastructure enhances institutional capacity and bridges potential gaps in training or mentoring. It functions not only as a technical tool but as a professional learning ecosystem that supports sustainable curriculum implementation.

In addition, increased student engagement constitutes a visible indicator of successful implementation. Classroom observations reveal that students participate more actively in discussions, presentations, collaborative projects, and reflective activities. They demonstrate greater confidence in expressing opinions and contributing ideas, both individually and in groups. This shift reflects the emergence of student agency, a core objective of the Merdeka Curriculum. The transformation is not limited to instructional strategies but extends to changes in classroom culture, where dialogue, collaboration, and critical thinking are more prominently practiced. The research interpretation suggests that when structural support (leadership), professional readiness (teachers), technological resources (digital platforms), and participatory learning environments converge, curriculum reform can generate measurable behavioral and attitudinal changes among students.

Factors Inhibiting the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum

Despite the presence of strong supporting elements, the findings reveal several inhibiting factors that affect the optimal implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 44 Merangin. These challenges are primarily related to unequal teacher understanding of key curriculum concepts, suboptimal professional collaboration within the school learning community, and limited competence in utilizing digital learning media. Collectively, these obstacles indicate that curriculum reform is not merely a structural adjustment but requires deep pedagogical transformation and sustained institutional support to ensure long-term sustainability.

One of the main constraints identified is the unequal level of teacher understanding, particularly regarding diagnostic assessment and differentiated learning. While several teachers have begun applying student-centered strategies, others still demonstrate inconsistency in designing formative assessments, identifying students' initial learning needs, and differentiating content, processes, or learning products. This condition suggests that the philosophy of differentiated learning has not been fully internalized across all teaching staff. The research interpretation indicates the existence of a concept-practice gap, where teachers may understand the theoretical foundation of differentiation but encounter difficulties translating it into practical classroom strategies. The quality of implementation varies between classes, potentially affecting equity in students' learning experiences. This finding highlights the

need for structured and continuous mentoring programs such as coaching, lesson study, and peer-assisted reflection to bridge theoretical knowledge and classroom application.

Another inhibiting factor concerns the limited effectiveness of professional collaboration within the school’s learning community. Although teacher meetings are formally available, reflective discussions, sharing of best practices, and collaborative problem-solving have not yet become routine and systematic activities. Consequently, teachers tend to work individually, and innovative practices are neither well-documented nor widely disseminated. From an analytical perspective, this situation weakens the formation of a professional learning ecosystem, which is a critical foundation for sustaining curriculum reform. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes collaborative professionalism, where teachers continuously learn from one another rather than relying solely on external training. Therefore, the limited intensity of collegial interaction reduces opportunities for collective growth and slows the process of pedagogical transformation at the institutional level.

In addition, limited competence in utilizing digital media remains a significant barrier. Although digital platforms such as Merdeka Mengajar and other educational applications are available, not all teachers are able to use them optimally for instructional design, assessment, and student engagement. The findings indicate that the challenge is not primarily the lack of infrastructure, but rather limitations in technological literacy, creativity in media utilization, and structured digital training. This gap affects the diversity of assessment methods and reduces opportunities to create more interactive and personalized learning experiences. From a research interpretation standpoint, digital competence should be viewed not merely as a technical skill but as an integral component of contemporary pedagogical competence. Without adequate mastery of educational technology, the transformative goals of the Merdeka Curriculum—particularly flexibility and innovation—cannot be fully realized (see Table 2).

Table 2. The Inhibiting Factors Identified

Inhibiting Factor	Empirical Condition	Impact on Implementation	Research Interpretation
Unequal teacher understanding	Inconsistent diagnostic and differentiated learning practices	Variations in learning quality across classes	Indicates a concept–practice gap requiring continuous mentoring
Weak professional collaboration	Irregular reflective meetings and limited sharing of best practices	Slow dissemination of innovation and isolated teacher practices	Professional learning community not yet institutionalized
Limited digital competence	Suboptimal use of digital platforms and assessment tools	Less varied and less innovative learning experiences	Digital literacy must be strengthened as part of pedagogical competence

The inhibiting factors identified in this study demonstrate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is an ongoing transformation process rather than an instantly achieved reform. The success of curriculum change depends not only on policy adoption but also on the deepening of teachers' pedagogical understanding, the strengthening of collaborative culture, and the enhancement of digital capacity. Addressing these barriers through systematic training, mentoring, and institutional support will be essential to ensure that the intended student-centered transformation becomes sustainable and equitable across all classrooms.

Discussion

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Guidance and Counseling (GC) services at school reflects a significant shift toward a developmental and student-centered approach. Orientation, information services, individual counseling, and involvement in P5 projects illustrate how GC practices are increasingly aligned with holistic student development. This transformation confirms that curriculum reform influences not only instructional strategies but also support services within schools. As curriculum change requires systemic alignment across educational components, the integration of GC into broader learning reforms strengthens the institutional ecosystem of student development (Efendi, 2022; Kholifah et al., 2024; Yusuf et al., 2024). In this regard, GC services function as both preventive and developmental instruments within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

From a theoretical perspective, the implementation aligns with adolescent developmental principles emphasizing identity formation, autonomy, and social adjustment. The incorporation of humanistic counseling approaches—characterized by empathy, active listening, and unconditional positive regard—indicates that counselors are moving beyond reactive problem-solving roles toward proactive facilitation of student growth. This shift supports the view that effective counseling practices must adapt to students' psychosocial developmental stages (Ayeni et al., 2024; Farid et al., 2023). Furthermore, the experiential orientation of P5 activities reflects constructivist learning assumptions, where students actively construct meaning through participation and reflection. Thus, the convergence of developmental psychology, humanistic counseling, and constructivist pedagogy strengthens the conceptual coherence of GC implementation.

The study also highlights the crucial role of school leadership and teacher readiness in supporting curriculum transformation. Transformational leadership demonstrated by the principal contributes to building a shared vision, encouraging innovation, and reducing resistance to change. This finding reinforces previous research emphasizing that curriculum reform success is strongly influenced by school leadership capacity in managing change and

fostering professional growth (Hollweck & Lofthouse, 2021; Martínez et al., 2022). In addition, teachers who internalize the philosophy of student-centered learning are more capable of implementing project-based learning, authentic assessment, and differentiated instruction effectively.

However, the presence of inhibiting factors—particularly unequal teacher understanding, limited professional collaboration, and insufficient digital literacy—reveals that implementation remains uneven. The inconsistency in applying diagnostic assessments and differentiated strategies suggests a gap between conceptual understanding and classroom practice, a phenomenon widely reported in curriculum transition studies (Chen & Xiao, 2021; Munawwaroh et al., 2024). Similarly, weak learning community structures reduce opportunities for reflective dialogue and peer mentoring, which are essential for sustainable professional development (Al-Thani et al., 2021; Suryadi et al., 2024). These findings imply that curriculum reform is not merely a policy shift but requires continuous capacity building and institutional learning mechanisms.

Another important dimension emerging from this study is student response. Students reported feeling more engaged, heard, and valued within GC services, and they demonstrated increased participation in classroom and project activities. This supports the argument that the Merdeka Curriculum enhances student agency by creating dialogical and participatory learning spaces (Kholifah et al., 2024; Nazilah et al., 2024). The reduction of stigma toward counseling services further indicates a cultural shift within the school environment. When students perceive counselors as facilitators rather than disciplinary authorities, the counseling function becomes more accessible and effective.

The implications of this research emphasize the need for systemic and sustainable professional development. Continuous mentoring programs, structured professional learning communities, and digital literacy training must be strengthened to ensure equitable implementation across all classrooms. Moreover, policymakers should consider integrating structured GC development frameworks within national curriculum guidelines to reinforce the role of counseling in holistic education. Ultimately, the findings imply that the success of the Merdeka Curriculum depends not only on instructional reform but also on the alignment of leadership, teacher competence, collaborative culture, digital readiness, and student empowerment within a cohesive educational ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SMP Negeri 44 Merangin has strengthened the strategic role of Guidance and Counseling (GC) services as an integral component of holistic student development at the junior high school level. GC services have evolved from a predominantly problem-oriented function into a developmental and preventive framework aligned with

the principles of student-centered learning, flexibility, and character education embedded in the Independent Curriculum. Through the integration of basic services, individual planning, responsive services, and system support, counselors contribute significantly to students' personal, social, academic, and career growth while reinforcing the values of the Pancasila Student Profile.

The findings further reveal positive impacts on student engagement, including greater participation, enhanced self-awareness, and reduced stigma toward counseling services. However, challenges persist, particularly in the areas of unequal teacher understanding of differentiated learning, limited professional collaboration, and suboptimal utilization of digital learning media. These findings underscore the necessity of sustained professional development, continuous mentoring, strengthened collaborative learning communities, and enhanced digital literacy to ensure that the implementation of GC services within the Independent Curriculum framework remains effective, equitable, and sustainable.

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