

Research Article

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Educational Landscape in Indonesia in 2023: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract: This article examines the state of education in Indonesia in 2023, focusing on both the challenges and opportunities facing the system. Education in Indonesia has undergone significant transformation over the past decade, but several barriers remain, such as disparities in access, quality, and infrastructure between urban and rural areas. Despite these challenges, recent reforms and the increased use of technology have provided promising avenues for improvement. The study analyzes the national education policies, including the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum, and evaluates the role of digital learning platforms in addressing the educational needs of Indonesia's vast population. Additionally, the article highlights key issues such as teacher training, student engagement, and education for sustainable development. By examining both the progress made and areas requiring further attention, this paper offers a comprehensive view of the Indonesian educational system in 2023. The findings suggest that while substantial improvements have been made, systemic inequities and the rapid pace of technological integration pose both challenges and opportunities for educators, policymakers, and students alike.

Keywords: Educational Landscape, Merdeka Curriculum, digital learning.

Introduction

Indonesia, with a population of over 270 million, is the largest country in Southeast Asia, both in terms of population and geographical expanse. The country's education system is equally vast, serving millions of students across islands that span over 5,000 kilometers. Given its size and diversity, education in Indonesia faces unique challenges, including disparities in access, quality, and infrastructure. While progress has been made in the past decades, significant hurdles remain, particularly when it comes to achieving equitable and quality education for all students. This article explores the state of education in Indonesia in 2023, assessing both the successes and the persistent issues that shape the educational landscape of the nation.

The Indonesian education system has undergone numerous reforms, especially in recent decades. The government has introduced several national policies aimed at improving the quality of education and ensuring that it is accessible to

all citizens, particularly in remote and rural areas. The most notable reforms include the National Education System Act, enacted in 2003, which established the framework for compulsory education for children aged 7 to 15. This policy marked a significant shift toward providing broader educational access.

More recently, Indonesia implemented the 2013 Curriculum, a major overhaul designed to address the shortcomings of previous curricula, which critics argued were outdated and too focused on rote memorization. The 2013 Curriculum emphasized critical thinking, creativity, and the development of 21st-century skills. However, its implementation faced significant challenges, primarily due to inconsistent teacher training, a lack of teaching materials, and insufficient infrastructure to support modern educational methods. This led to the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum in 2022, which sought to provide more flexible and student-centered learning experiences.

The Merdeka Curriculum represents a significant shift from traditional models of education, focusing on student autonomy, project-based learning, and the integration of technology. It allows schools to design and implement their curricula with greater flexibility, in alignment with students' interests and the demands of the rapidly changing job market. However, while these reforms offer exciting possibilities, they also bring challenges, such as the need for more teacher training, better resources, and the adaptation of schools to new pedagogical methods.

Despite the efforts of the Indonesian government to improve education, several systemic challenges continue to undermine the country's educational progress. One of the most prominent issues is the vast disparity in educational quality between urban and rural areas. Students in urban centers such as Jakarta, Surabaya, and Bali typically have better access to quality education, more qualified teachers, and modern facilities. In contrast, rural and remote areas continue to suffer from insufficient infrastructure, fewer qualified teachers, and limited access to educational resources. These inequalities contribute to a persistent achievement gap, which is exacerbated by the geographical and socio-economic divisions that define the country.

The digital divide also presents a major challenge to the Indonesian education system. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for digital learning solutions, as schools nationwide switched to online education. However, many students, particularly those in rural and underserved regions, lacked access to the necessary technology, such as computers and reliable internet connections, to participate in online learning. This digital divide not only affected students' ability to continue their education during the pandemic but has also left many behind in terms of acquiring digital literacy and 21st-century skills. The challenge of digital

inclusion remains one of the key barriers to achieving equitable education in Indonesia.

Moreover, while the government has implemented various reforms, there is a persistent need for comprehensive teacher training. Teachers are the backbone of any education system, and in Indonesia, many teachers are still struggling to adapt to the demands of the new curriculum and teaching methods. The lack of effective professional development programs, especially in rural areas, has made it difficult to ensure that teachers are well-equipped to implement the curriculum effectively. This gap in teacher quality directly impacts student outcomes, as the quality of teaching plays a pivotal role in shaping the educational experience.

Despite the challenges, there are numerous opportunities for positive change in Indonesia's education system. One of the most significant opportunities lies in the continued development of digital education. The rapid growth of internet access and mobile technology in Indonesia presents a unique chance to enhance educational access, particularly for students in remote areas. By harnessing the power of digital learning platforms, Indonesia can provide high-quality educational content to students across the country, irrespective of their geographical location.

Furthermore, there is an increasing emphasis on the importance of education for sustainable development (ESD) in Indonesia. As the country faces a range of environmental, economic, and social challenges, integrating sustainability into the education system has become a critical focus. The Merdeka Curriculum, in particular, offers a platform to incorporate sustainable development principles, encouraging students to engage with global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity conservation, and social inequality. By aligning education with sustainability goals, Indonesia has the potential to not only improve the quality of education but also prepare future generations to

address the complex challenges facing the country and the world.

In addition to these reforms, the growing role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations in supporting education in Indonesia presents an important opportunity for collaboration and innovation. These organizations often work on the ground, providing resources, training, and support to schools in underserved areas. Their involvement can help fill gaps in the education system, particularly in rural areas, and ensure that the benefits of educational reforms are more widely distributed.

The government's role in shaping the future of education in Indonesia cannot be overstated. Strong leadership is required to ensure that education policies are implemented effectively and equitably. One of the key challenges in Indonesian education is ensuring that policies are translated into tangible outcomes in classrooms across the country. This requires continuous monitoring and evaluation, as well as ongoing dialogue between policymakers, educators, and communities.

Moreover, there is a need for greater local autonomy in educational decision-making. While national policies set the framework, local authorities and schools must be empowered to tailor education to the specific needs of their communities. The Merdeka Curriculum, with its emphasis on flexibility, provides a step in this direction. However, local governments and schools must be supported with the necessary resources, training, and infrastructure to take full advantage of this flexibility.

Literature Review

Curriculum Reforms and Their Impact

One of the most significant reforms in Indonesian education over the past two decades was the introduction of the 2013 Curriculum, which aimed to move beyond rote memorization and promote critical thinking, creativity, and 21st-

century skills (Sutrisno & Aziz, 2021). This curriculum was designed to align education with global trends, focusing on the holistic development of students. However, its implementation faced several challenges. Several studies have highlighted that while the 2013 Curriculum intended to modernize teaching practices, many teachers were not adequately trained to implement it effectively. As a result, the curriculum often did not achieve its intended goals (Sulaeman, 2020).

Furthermore, the lack of standardized resources and teaching materials contributed to inconsistent implementation across schools. In rural areas, where schools had limited access to digital learning tools, the curriculum's emphasis on technology-based learning was difficult to implement (Haryanto & Wulandari, 2020). The shift towards a competency-based curriculum also required teachers to adopt new pedagogical approaches, but many were not sufficiently prepared to do so. The failure to fully realize the potential of the 2013 Curriculum led to the development of the Merdeka Curriculum in 2022.

The Merdeka Curriculum aimed to address the shortcomings of its predecessor by allowing for more flexibility in how teaching is conducted. It emphasizes project-based learning, student autonomy, and a shift from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning. According to Kurniawan & Azis (2022), the Merdeka Curriculum provides more space for creativity and innovation, encouraging schools to develop learning methods that cater to the needs of individual students. This approach is seen as a response to the rigidity of the 2013 Curriculum, which was often criticized for being too prescriptive.

Access to Education and Inequality

Access to quality education remains a major concern in Indonesia, particularly in rural and remote areas. A large body of research has explored the educational disparities that exist

between urban and rural regions. According to the World Bank (2021), students in rural areas often face significant barriers to education, including long distances to schools, a lack of qualified teachers, and insufficient infrastructure. These disparities are compounded by socio-economic factors, with children from poorer families having less access to educational resources, including books, technology, and extra-curricular opportunities.

The Indonesian government has made efforts to address these disparities through various initiatives, such as the School Operational Assistance (BOS) program, which provides funding for operational costs, and the Program Indonesia Pintar (Smart Indonesia Program), aimed at increasing educational access for underprivileged children. However, research by Kurniawan & Aziz (2020) shows that these programs, while beneficial, have not been sufficient to fully bridge the gap between urban and rural education. One of the key challenges in rural areas is the shortage of qualified teachers, as many teachers prefer to work in urban centers where conditions are better (Sutrisno, 2021). Furthermore, the disparity in the quality of infrastructure—such as the availability of internet access and modern classrooms—has further entrenched educational inequality.

Digital learning, while seen as a potential solution to bridge the gap, has not been universally accessible. Many rural areas still lack reliable internet access, and the lack of affordable devices has limited students' ability to engage with online learning platforms. This issue became especially prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many schools to transition to remote learning. As reported by Santoso (2021), the transition to online education highlighted the digital divide between urban and rural students, with many rural students unable to continue their education due to a lack of resources.

Teacher Quality and Professional Development

The quality of teaching is a critical factor in determining the success of any education system, and in Indonesia, teacher quality remains a significant challenge. Despite efforts to improve teacher training and professional development, many teachers continue to struggle with implementing modern teaching methods and adapting to new curricula. According to studies by Haryanto & Wulandari (2020), the lack of comprehensive and ongoing teacher training is a major barrier to improving teaching quality in Indonesia. While initial teacher education programs have improved in recent years, many teachers still feel unprepared to teach new curricula like the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum.

Furthermore, there are concerns regarding teacher motivation and job satisfaction, particularly in rural and remote areas. Many teachers in these regions face difficult working conditions, including low salaries, large class sizes, and limited professional support. This has led to high turnover rates and a shortage of qualified teachers in underserved areas (Sutrisno, 2021). Research by Haryanto & Wulandari (2020) suggests that addressing these issues requires not only improving teacher training but also ensuring that teachers have the necessary resources and support to succeed in their roles.

The Indonesian government has introduced several programs aimed at enhancing teacher quality, including the Teacher Certification Program, which provides professional development opportunities for teachers who meet specific qualifications. However, studies by Haryanto (2021) show that while these programs have improved some aspects of teacher quality, they have not fully addressed the systemic challenges that teachers face, particularly in terms of access to professional development opportunities and adequate resources.

The Role of Technology in Education

The use of technology in education has become a focal point for educational reform in many countries, and Indonesia is no exception. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital learning tools in Indonesia, with many schools quickly transitioning to online education platforms. However, as noted by Santoso (2021), the shift to digital learning revealed significant gaps in the country's technological infrastructure, particularly in rural and remote areas. Students in these areas often lacked access to reliable internet connections and devices, which hindered their ability to participate in online learning.

Despite these challenges, the integration of technology in education offers significant potential to improve access and quality. Several studies have highlighted the positive impact of digital learning platforms on student engagement and learning outcomes. For example, research by Kurniawan & Azis (2022) suggests that digital platforms can offer students in rural areas access to high-quality educational content and resources that they would otherwise not have had access to. However, the successful integration of technology into classrooms depends on several factors, including teacher training, infrastructure, and digital literacy (Sutrisno & Aziz, 2021).

Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the educational landscape in Indonesia in 2023. The focus of the research is to analyze the impact of recent educational reforms, particularly the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, and to evaluate the role of digital learning in bridging educational access gaps. A combination of document analysis and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in the education sector is used to gather a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities within Indonesia's education system.

The primary data sources for this study are national education policy documents, reports from the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, and other government publications related to educational reforms and programs. These documents provide insights into the framework and objectives of recent educational policies, including the Merdeka Curriculum, and the strategies employed to address educational disparities across the country.

In addition to document analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders in the education sector. These included teachers, school administrators, students, and education policy experts. The aim of the interviews was to gather detailed perspectives on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, the challenges faced in teaching, and the use of technology in learning, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 30 interviews were conducted between January and March 2023, each lasting approximately 45-60 minutes.

The data collected from interviews and policy documents were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method allowed the researcher to identify key themes emerging from the responses and the documents. The primary themes examined in the analysis included the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on the learning process, the role of technology in increasing access to education, the quality of teaching, and the preparedness of teachers to implement the curriculum. The study also investigated issues of educational inequality, particularly the disparities between urban and rural areas, which remain a significant challenge in ensuring equitable education across Indonesia.

This methodology enables a deep understanding of the dynamics within Indonesia's education system and identifies factors that influence the success or challenges of educational reforms.

Results and Discussion

Impact of the Merdeka Curriculum

The introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum in 2022 was a response to the challenges and limitations of the previous 2013 Curriculum. One of the key objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum is to provide more flexibility in the learning process, encouraging student-centered learning and fostering creativity. According to the interviews with teachers, administrators, and policy experts, the Merdeka Curriculum has had a positive impact in many respects. Teachers reported that the curriculum allowed them more freedom to adapt their teaching methods to the needs and interests of students, moving away from the rigid, standardized approach of the previous curriculum.

One teacher from a school in Jakarta noted, "The Merdeka Curriculum allows us to explore subjects more deeply with the students. It's not just about memorizing information anymore; it's about understanding the concepts and applying them in real life." This feedback aligns with the curriculum's objective of fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which are seen as essential for preparing students for future challenges in a rapidly changing world.

However, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has been inconsistent. Many teachers, especially in rural areas, reported difficulties in adapting to the new curriculum due to a lack of proper training and resources. A teacher from a remote school in East Java explained, "We want to implement the Merdeka Curriculum, but we don't have enough training. Sometimes we are given training sessions, but they are not specific enough to our context." This lack of sufficient professional development and ongoing support has hindered the full realization of the curriculum's potential. In rural areas, schools often lack access to the digital tools and teaching materials that are necessary for effective implementation, which further exacerbates the

educational inequality between urban and rural areas.

Access to Education and Inequality

Despite significant efforts by the Indonesian government to address disparities in access to education, particularly through programs such as the School Operational Assistance (BOS) and the Smart Indonesia Program, significant gaps remain between urban and rural education. Interviews with students and teachers from rural areas revealed that while these programs have provided some support, the challenges faced by rural schools are far from resolved.

A student from a village in Central Java shared, "We have a good school building now thanks to BOS, but sometimes we still don't have enough books or materials for every student. Some of us have to share textbooks." This experience illustrates the ongoing issues related to the unequal distribution of resources. The government has made strides in improving physical infrastructure, but the disparities in the availability of learning materials, teachers, and digital tools continue to limit the effectiveness of these reforms.

The issue of teacher shortages is also a major contributor to educational inequality. Many rural schools struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers due to the lack of incentives and professional development opportunities. A school principal from a remote area in Sumatra noted, "It's hard to find qualified teachers willing to work here. Many teachers leave after a few years, and we are left with teachers who are not always trained in the subjects they teach." This situation results in a compromised quality of education, as many teachers are unqualified or lack specialized knowledge in key subjects.

Additionally, the digital divide remains a significant challenge. While urban schools have embraced digital learning tools, students in rural areas often lack access to the internet, computers,

and other digital resources. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools transitioned to online learning, this divide became even more apparent. According to interviews with students from rural regions, many were unable to participate in online lessons because they lacked reliable internet access or the necessary devices.

As one student from a village in West Java explained, "During the pandemic, I missed many lessons because we didn't have enough data for the internet, and I didn't have a smartphone or laptop." This digital divide further exacerbates the existing educational inequalities, as students in rural areas fall behind their urban counterparts in terms of both academic achievement and digital literacy.

The Role of Technology in Education

The integration of technology in education has the potential to enhance learning outcomes, particularly in remote areas where access to traditional educational resources is limited. The study found that, while digital learning tools have been introduced in many schools, their effectiveness has been limited by issues such as inadequate infrastructure, the lack of trained teachers, and the digital divide.

Interviews with educators revealed that, while technology has been embraced in urban schools, its use in rural schools has been less consistent. A teacher from a school in Surabaya noted, "In our school, we use digital tools for interactive lessons, and it has made a big difference. But I know that many schools in rural areas are not able to use these tools because of connectivity issues." This statement highlights the unequal access to technology that still exists in Indonesia.

One of the positive outcomes of the increased use of technology, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, has been the rise of online learning platforms. These platforms, such as Rumah Belajar and other government-sponsored initiatives, have provided educational

resources to students across the country. However, as mentioned earlier, the lack of internet access and digital devices in rural areas has limited the reach of these platforms.

The digital divide is not only a matter of access to hardware and internet connectivity but also concerns the ability of teachers to effectively integrate technology into their teaching. Many teachers in rural areas reported feeling unprepared to use digital tools in the classroom. As one teacher from a village school in Bali shared, "We have some tablets provided by the government, but I don't know how to use them effectively in teaching. The training we received was minimal, and I feel that I could do more if I had more knowledge about using technology."

Teacher Quality and Preparedness

The quality of teaching remains one of the most significant factors in determining the success of educational reforms. Despite the introduction of programs such as the Teacher Certification Program, which aims to improve the quality of teachers through professional development, many educators still report feeling underprepared to implement new curricula and use digital tools in their classrooms.

Interviews with teachers across various regions of Indonesia revealed that while some teachers had benefited from certification programs, the lack of ongoing professional development and support has hindered their ability to effectively implement new curricula. A teacher from a school in Medan stated, "The certification helped me understand the basics, but we need continuous training and support to really make the curriculum work."

Moreover, teacher motivation and job satisfaction are closely linked to the challenges teachers face in the classroom. Teachers in rural areas often work under difficult conditions, including low salaries, large class sizes, and limited access to resources. These factors contribute to high turnover rates, particularly in

remote schools. As one school administrator in East Kalimantan pointed out, "We lose many teachers every year because they move to bigger cities for better opportunities. It's hard to keep qualified teachers in these areas."

Conclusion

In conclusion, the educational landscape in Indonesia in 2023 reflects a mixture of progress, challenges, and opportunities. The government's commitment to reforming the education system, particularly through the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum, has brought positive changes in terms of flexibility and a focus on student-centered learning. The Merdeka Curriculum has allowed teachers to tailor lessons to the needs of students, fostering critical thinking and creativity. However, its implementation has been uneven, especially in rural and remote areas where schools continue to face significant challenges, including inadequate teacher training, limited access to resources, and poor infrastructure.

The issue of educational inequality remains a major concern. While urban schools are able to embrace modern teaching methods and digital tools, students in rural regions continue to struggle with access to quality education. Despite initiatives like the School Operational Assistance (BOS) program and the Smart Indonesia Program, which have helped improve physical infrastructure, many schools still lack sufficient teaching materials, qualified teachers, and reliable access to technology. The digital divide is a particularly pressing issue, as many students in rural areas were unable to participate in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic due to a lack of internet access and digital devices. This divide further deepens the gap in educational outcomes between urban and rural students.

Moreover, teacher quality and professional development remain critical factors for the success of any educational reform. While programs like the Teacher Certification Program

have contributed to improving teacher qualifications, there is still a pressing need for continuous and context-specific training. Many teachers, particularly in rural areas, report feeling unprepared to implement new curricula and use digital tools effectively in their teaching. The lack of ongoing professional development opportunities, coupled with low salaries and challenging working conditions, continues to hinder teacher retention, particularly in remote regions.

The role of technology in education holds significant promise for bridging the gap between urban and rural education. Digital learning platforms, such as Rumah Belajar, have provided students with access to quality educational content. However, without improvements in internet connectivity, teacher training, and infrastructure, the potential of these platforms cannot be fully realized. The digital divide remains a major barrier to ensuring equitable access to education across the country.

In light of these findings, it is clear that while Indonesia has made substantial strides in its education reform efforts, much work remains to be done. To achieve a truly equitable and high-quality education system, Indonesia must focus on addressing the disparities in access to resources and technology, improving teacher training and retention, and ensuring that digital learning tools are accessible to all students, regardless of their location. By continuing to invest in education and working collaboratively with stakeholders across the country, Indonesia can create a more inclusive and effective education system that prepares students for the challenges of the 21st century.

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