



Integration of Balinese Local Wisdom into the *Merdeka* Curriculum Policy: An Analysis of Its Implementation and Challenges in Educational Institutions

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ABSTRACT

However, limited empirical studies have examined how Balinese local wisdom is systematically integrated into the Merdeka Curriculum and the challenges faced by schools in its implementation. This study aims to critically analyze the pedagogical strategies, institutional dynamics, and implementation gaps in integrating Balinese local wisdom into the Merdeka Curriculum. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and curriculum coordinators, participant observation in classrooms, and document analysis of lesson plans and teaching materials. Findings reveal that the integration occurs through interdisciplinary thematic approaches, reflecting a contextual adaptation of curriculum policy at the school level. However, the study also identifies challenges, including pedagogical challenges (teacher readiness), structural constraints (limited resources), and policy alignment issues, and difficulties aligning cultural content with standardized curriculum objectives. The study highlights the need for a culturally responsive curriculum framework that systematically integrates local wisdom into national policy implementation. These findings contribute to the discourse on culturally responsive curriculum by providing an empirical model for integrating local wisdom within standardized national education systems.

Keyword: Balinese Local Wisdom; Merdeka Curriculum; Curriculum Integration; Cultural Literacy; Primary and Secondary Education

INTRODUCTION

Despite continuous curriculum reforms in Indonesia aimed at responding to social and cultural dynamics, a persistent challenge remains in translating policy intentions into contextually grounded classroom practices, particularly in culturally rich regions such as Bali. While the Merdeka Curriculum formally promotes pedagogical flexibility and contextual adaptation, emerging evidence suggests that such flexibility is not always accompanied by sufficient institutional guidance, resulting in uneven implementation across educational contextS (Kemendikbudristek, 2023 in

Setiawati, 2023). In the context of Bali, despite its rich cultural resources, the integration of local wisdom into formal education remains inconsistent, raising concerns about the sustainability of cultural transmission within standardized national curricula.

Balinese local wisdom can be conceptualized as an integrated system of ethical, ecological, and socio-cultural knowledge, exemplified by principles such as Tri Hita Karana and the Subak system, which function not only as cultural practices but also as indigenous knowledge frameworks relevant to contemporary education (Wahyuni et al., 2023).



Previous studies suggest that the integration of Balinese local wisdom into subjects such as science, mathematics, and social studies facilitates contextual learning by bridging abstract academic concepts with students' lived cultural experiences; however, the mechanisms and consistency of such integration remain underexplored.

Existing literature on the early implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (2022–2024) reveals a fragmented pattern of integration, with most studies Tri Hita Karana and Subak to specific subjects such as social studies and primary-level science, indicating a lack of comprehensive and cross-disciplinary investigation. These findings indicate that, although integration is possible, its application remains limited and uneven across subjects and educational levels.

Other studies highlight the potential of integrating Balinese local wisdom to enhance cultural literacy and ecological awareness through the development of locally-based digital teaching materials. Udiyana and Arnyana (2020) demonstrated that the use of digital teaching materials rooted in local wisdom can improve students' cultural understanding and engagement in learning.

However, several challenges arise when connecting policy with classroom practice. Teachers often face limitations in understanding local cultural values and a lack of resources to implement these values comprehensively into lesson planning (Lestari et al, 2025). Research at the science education level revealed that teachers encounter difficulties in effectively integrating scientific concepts with local wisdom due to constraints in time, learning media, and professional development opportunities.

Furthermore, studies on social studies instruction in Grade 5 indicate that this pattern reflects a form of policy enactment that is highly dependent on individual teacher agency, indicating weak institutionalization and limited curriculum coherence at the school level.

From a pedagogical perspective, research in secondary schools has also evaluated how culturally-oriented teaching strategies can enhance students' awareness and engagement in learning. Initial findings suggest that learning approaches incorporating local cultural values can increase mindful learning and students' emotional involvement in educational activities.

Comparative evidence from other regions highlights that while the Merdeka Curriculum creates structural opportunities for cultural integration, disparities in teacher readiness and institutional capacity result in uneven implementation, thereby reinforcing the need for context-specific investigation in Bali.

Empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals have demonstrated that locally contextualized learning modules significantly enhance students' learning outcomes and character development, particularly when the content aligns with their socio-cultural environment.

Despite its recognized potential, there remains a critical lack of empirical studies that systematically examine how Balinese local wisdom is operationalized across subjects and educational levels, as well as how implementation challenges are negotiated within institutional contexts. However, it faces substantial implementation challenges. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the implementation of Balinese local wisdom within the Merdeka Curriculum, focusing on the strategies employed by educators and the challenges encountered in bridging policy and practice at the school level.

METHODS

This study employs a multiple-case qualitative case study design, in which several primary and secondary schools are treated as distinct yet comparable cases to systematically examine how Balinese local wisdom is integrated into the Merdeka Curriculum across different institutional and socio-cultural



contexts, allowing for both within-case and cross-case analysis of implementation patterns and challenges. A qualitative approach was selected because the study seeks to explore complex, context-dependent processes of cultural integration that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures, particularly in understanding how educators interpret, negotiate, and enact curriculum policy within their specific socio-cultural environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was conducted in selected primary and secondary schools in Bali, representing different regencies to capture variations in cultural context, resource availability, and institutional support (Kapoh et al, 2023). Data collection took place over a two-month period, during which semi-structured interviews were conducted based on an interview guide containing key thematic questions; participatory observations were carried out during two class sessions to document teaching practices firsthand; and document analysis focused on a systematic review of curriculum guidelines, lesson plans, and teaching materials to assess the extent to which and how local wisdom was integrated. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of teachers, school principals, and curriculum coordinators to explore their experiences, strategies, and perceived challenges in applying the Merdeka Curriculum with local wisdom integration (Yin, 2017). Participant observation was conducted using a moderate participation approach, where the researcher observed classroom interactions without direct intervention, employing an observation checklist to systematically document how cultural values such as Tri Hita Karana and Subak were embedded in instructional activities across different subjects. Document analysis provided supplementary evidence on institutional efforts, teaching strategies, and the degree of formal inclusion of local wisdom in educational planning (Patton, 2015). Data analysis followed a rigorous inductive thematic procedure, beginning with

open coding to identify initial meaning units, followed by axial coding to establish relationships among categories, and culminating in selective coding to generate overarching themes that capture patterns of cultural integration, pedagogical practices, and institutional challenges (Khatimah et al, 2023). To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed data triangulation, member checking with selected participants to validate interpretations, and an audit trail documenting the analytical process, thereby ensuring transparency and methodological rigour. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent prior to data collection; confidentiality was ensured through anonymization of data, and cultural sensitivity was maintained by adhering to local norms and protocols during fieldwork. This methodological framework enables a systematic and context-sensitive examination of how Balinese local wisdom is enacted within the Merdeka Curriculum, providing a robust empirical basis for analyzing both implementation practices and the structural challenges encountered across educational settings. (Setiawati, 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings reveal a differentiated pattern of curriculum enactment in which the integration of Balinese local wisdom is not merely varied in form but structurally shaped by institutional capacity, teacher epistemological orientation, and access to culturally grounded pedagogical resources, thereby demonstrating that curriculum flexibility under the Merdeka framework produces uneven but contextually adaptive implementation outcomes across schools. Observation and document analysis indicate that teachers predominantly integrate local wisdom through contextualized instructional examples, as reflected in one



teacher's statement that 'concepts such as Tri Hita Karana are introduced during discussions on environmental balance to make abstract ideas more relatable to students,' highlighting how cultural values are operationalized in classroom discourse (Wahyuni et al., 2023). For instance, the use of the Subak system in science lessons reflects a constructivist pedagogical approach in which students construct scientific understanding through culturally familiar ecological systems, thereby facilitating the internalization of sustainability concepts through experiential and context-based learning processes. (Udiyana & Arnyana, 2020). In social studies and civic education, traditional ceremonies and community practices are integrated to enhance students' awareness of local governance, social responsibility, and ethical behavior (Xiaolong et al, 2025). This finding can be further interpreted through the framework of culturally responsive pedagogy, which posits that meaningful learning occurs when instructional content is aligned with students' cultural backgrounds, thereby positioning local wisdom not merely as supplementary content but as an epistemological foundation for knowledge construction. (Setiawati, 2023).

Despite these positive practices, the study also highlights several challenges in implementation (Tuhuteru et al, 2023). One prominent issue is the uneven distribution of teacher professional capacity, which reflects differences in pedagogical competence, cultural literacy, and teacher agency, ultimately influencing how curriculum policy is interpreted and enacted in classroom settings. Interview data suggest that many teachers depend on personal knowledge rather than formal training, as illustrated by participants who reported limited access to structured professional development programs, resulting in fragmented and inconsistent approaches to integrating local wisdom across different classrooms (Karmini et al., 2024). Some educators expressed difficulty in aligning traditional cultural concepts with

learning objectives stipulated in the Merdeka Curriculum, citing limited instructional resources and a lack of culturally adapted teaching materials as major obstacles (Santika, 2020). These findings corroborate earlier studies indicating that professional development and institutional support are critical factors for effective curriculum localization (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Another significant finding is that student engagement manifests in observable forms such as increased participation in classroom discussions, improved ability to relate academic concepts to real-life contexts, and heightened enthusiasm during culturally contextualized learning activities (Wahyuni et al, 2022). Participant observation and interview data show that students demonstrate higher motivation, increased participation, and deeper comprehension when learning activities connect to their immediate cultural environment (Sutika et al, 2024). For example, field-based activities exploring Subak irrigation systems or participation in local rituals provide hands-on experiences that enhance understanding of ecological and social principles (Udiyana & Arnyana, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2006). These observations align with prior research demonstrating that culturally relevant pedagogy can foster meaningful learning experiences and promote critical thinking by contextualizing abstract concepts within familiar cultural frameworks (Yin, 2017).

Document analysis reveals that while some schools have successfully developed structured modules integrating local wisdom, such innovations are often contingent upon strong leadership, teacher collaboration, and access to resources, indicating that systemic scalability remains limited. These modules not only provide structured content but also offer assessment rubrics that reflect both cognitive and socio-cultural competencies (Correia et al, 2025). Such institutional efforts demonstrate a proactive response to the policy framework of



the Merdeka Curriculum and provide models that can be adapted by other schools in Bali and beyond (Setiawati, 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2023). However, the study also found that these initiatives remain limited in scope and scale, often constrained to pilot programs or motivated teachers' classrooms rather than being implemented institution-wide.

The analysis of challenges highlights both structural and conceptual barriers. Structurally, schools face limitations in budget, instructional time, and access to culturally relevant teaching materials, which inhibit the systematic integration of local wisdom (Santika, 2021). Conceptually, some teachers struggle to reconcile traditional cultural knowledge with standardized curriculum outcomes, particularly in subjects like mathematics and science where abstract reasoning is emphasized (Cemara et al., 2023). This tension reflects the complexities of policy enactment, where teachers must negotiate between standardized curriculum expectations and localized cultural knowledge, thereby highlighting the need for a coherent curriculum alignment framework that integrates cultural relevance with academic rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Furthermore, the findings emphasize the role of community-based learning, where collaboration with cultural practitioners and local stakeholders functions as an extension of the learning environment, reinforcing the authenticity and contextual relevance of educational experiences. Schools that actively collaborate with local cultural practitioners, village elders, and community organizations report more effective integration of local wisdom, as these stakeholders provide authentic knowledge, cultural artifacts, and mentorship for both teachers and students. This finding supports the argument that curriculum localization is not solely an educational task but requires a participatory approach involving broader cultural and social networks (Karmini et al., 2024).

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest the necessity of developing structured implementation guidelines, targeted professional development programs, and institutional support systems that can standardize best practices while preserving contextual flexibility. Professional development programs, resource allocation, and the development of culturally adaptive teaching materials are critical to bridging gaps between policy intentions and classroom realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Additionally, ongoing monitoring and evaluation are essential to identify best practices and areas requiring improvement, ensuring that cultural integration contributes meaningfully to educational outcomes (Yin, 2017).

Comparative analysis indicates that while similar patterns of selective cultural integration are observed in other regions, Bali presents a more immersive and community-integrated model, thereby contributing a distinctive case that illustrates the potential of deeply embedded culturally responsive curriculum practices. However, Bali's rich cultural heritage and community engagement create a uniquely immersive environment that enhances both the depth and relevance of learning experiences, highlighting the potential of culturally responsive education as a model for other regions (Wahyuni et al., 2023; Udiyana & Arnyana, 2020).

In conclusion, this study contributes to the theoretical discourse on culturally responsive curriculum by demonstrating that the integration of local wisdom is not merely a pedagogical enhancement but a complex process of policy enactment shaped by teacher agency, institutional capacity, and socio-cultural context. Nevertheless, implementation challenges related to teacher readiness, resource limitations, and alignment with standardized curriculum outcomes remain significant. Addressing these challenges through structured professional development, community collaboration, and culturally



adaptive instructional materials is essential for achieving a sustainable and effective integration of local wisdom into Indonesian education.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that the integration of Balinese local wisdom into the Merdeka Curriculum constitutes a context-dependent process of curriculum enactment, in which cultural values are selectively interpreted and operationalized by educators, thereby revealing how policy flexibility interacts with local epistemological frameworks to shape educational practices. The findings indicate that the integration of local values such as Tri Hita Karana, Subak, and traditional rituals operates as a pedagogical mechanism that bridges abstract curricular content with students' lived cultural experiences, thereby facilitating the development of cultural literacy, environmental awareness, and socio-ethical competencies through contextually meaningful learning processes. Student engagement is manifested through increased participation in classroom discussions, improved ability to relate academic concepts to real-life cultural practices, and heightened motivation during learning activities, indicating that culturally responsive teaching enhances both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning.

However, the study identifies a set of interrelated challenges that collectively hinder the systematic implementation of local wisdom integration, reflecting structural, pedagogical, and epistemological. These include variability in teacher preparedness, limited access to culturally adapted teaching resources, and difficulties in aligning local wisdom with standardized curriculum objectives. Furthermore, institutional support and community involvement play critical roles in ensuring successful integration, highlighting the importance of participatory approaches that connect schools with local cultural practitioners.

Overall, while the Merdeka Curriculum provides a flexible framework conducive to local wisdom integration, sustainable and effective implementation requires structured professional development, adequate instructional resources, and continuous monitoring. Addressing these factors will enable educational institutions in Bali to fully operationalize cultural values in daily learning, contributing to the holistic development of students and the preservation of regional cultural heritage.

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