



Centering Ethics and Integrity in Teachers Instructional Innovation within the Merdeka Curriculum Implementation: A Multi Case Study in Bukittinggi

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ABSTRACT

The global landscape of educational innovation requires not only instructional effectiveness but also strong commitments to research ethics and teacher professional integrity. This qualitative multi-case study explores how teachers at two junior high schools in Bukittinggi (SMPN 1 and SMPN 3) implement the Merdeka Curriculum through the Platform Merdeka Mengajar (PMM). Data were collected from four participants—principals and vice principals for curriculum—through one-hour semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted using the 4I framework (ideation, incubation, implementation, iteration/diffusion) combined with an ethical lens. Findings reveal that innovation ideation is constrained by lecture-based routines and sporadic ICT use, while diffusion is weakened by fragile collaboration and entrenched seniority norms. Ethical risks include performative policy compliance, unequal access to professional development, and insecure management of digital assessment data. At the same time, practices reflecting professional integrity were identified, such as psychologically safe reflection routines, adaptive micro-training, proper attribution in PMM content curation, and transparent formative digital assessments. The study underscores the importance of ethics-by-design in curriculum innovation, highlighting the strategic role of the Platform Merdeka Mengajar as an enabler, accelerator, connector, and monitor. These insights contribute not only to strengthening the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia but also to the global discourse on professional integrity, digital ethics, and AI-driven teacher development.

Keywords: Centering Ethic, Teacher Instructional, Merdeka curriculum

1. INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia is currently undergoing a transformation through the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes competency-based learning, differentiation, and student independence. This change demands innovation in teaching practices carried out by teachers so that the educational process not only focuses on academic achievement but also on the formation of character, ethics, and integrity (Xu & Wu, 2025; Enwerezor, Onyishi, Albi-Oparaocha, & Amaeshi, 2020). Instructional innovation in this context becomes a key element in creating a more participatory, collaborative, and meaningful classroom environment (Rebecchi, Lubart, & Hagège, 2024).

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Education in the era of the Merdeka Curriculum requires renewal in teaching practices that are oriented towards independence, creativity, and the holistic development of students' potential. Teachers, as the main actors in the educational process, are required not only to present innovation in teaching but also to place ethics and integrity as the fundamental basis of every innovative step (Heikkilä et al., 2023; Jose, Varghese, & Oommen, 2025). Instructional innovation that is not grounded in ethical values risks obscuring the goals of education and may even create moral gaps in teaching and learning practices (Gunes & Liman-Kaban, 2025; Trabelsi, 2025).

However, instructional innovations implemented by teachers often face challenges. On one hand, teachers are required to present innovative teaching strategies in line with the spirit of Merdeka Belajar. On the other hand, they must ensure that such innovations do not neglect principles of ethics, fairness, and academic honesty (Mohammed, 2025; Li, 2025). In other words, ethics and integrity must remain at the center of every instructional innovation practice (Sudira & Rohmatika, 2025).

In developing instructional innovation, teachers are often faced with ethical dilemmas and integrity challenges, particularly in maintaining the balance between the freedom to innovate and their moral responsibility as educators (Jordan, 2025). Ethics and integrity are inseparable foundations of teacher professionalism because without them, instructional innovations may lose direction and their educational purpose (Song, 2025). Therefore, it is crucial to place ethics and integrity at the center of every instructional innovation carried out by teachers.

In practice, especially in the city of Bukittinggi as one of the progressive regions in adopting the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers have designed various teaching innovations to improve students' motivation, creativity, and learning outcomes. Nevertheless, ethical challenges remain present, such as ensuring fairness for all students, avoiding manipulative practices in assessment, and guaranteeing that the freedom to innovate does not neglect professional and moral norms as educators (Marzuki, Safei, & Omar, 2025).

Ethics and integrity play an important role in maintaining public trust in the teaching profession and ensuring that every instructional innovation remains within the corridor of noble educational values (Jose et al., 2025). Teachers are required not only to be creative in developing teaching methods and media but also to consistently uphold fairness, honesty, responsibility, and respect for student diversity (Gunes & Liman-Kaban, 2025). Without ethics and integrity, instructional innovation risks deviating from the true objectives of education, namely the holistic formation of students' character and competence (Heikkilä et al., 2023).

Teachers are not only facilitators of learning but also role models in shaping students' character. Therefore, teaching innovations should not merely be oriented toward cognitive outcomes but must be grounded in values of ethics and integrity (Rebecchi et al., 2024). This is important so that innovations are not only technical strategies but also aligned with the mission of national education to build individuals of character (Jordan, 2025).

As the spearhead of education, teachers play roles not only as instructors but also as moral and character role models for students. Creative and adaptive teaching innovations must align with values of honesty, responsibility, and professionalism (Xu & Wu, 2025). Without ethics and integrity, innovations risk deviating from the true goals of education and may even weaken the character values that the Merdeka Curriculum aims to build (Song, 2025)

In practice, teachers are often faced with dilemmas between the need to innovate to create engaging and effective learning and the obligation to uphold professional ethics and academic integrity. For example, the use of technology in teaching can enrich learning experiences but also raises ethical challenges related to plagiarism, academic honesty, and student data protection (Trabelsi, 2025; Li, 2025). Similarly, in applying creative methods, teachers are required to remain grounded in moral values, fairness, and professional responsibility (Sudira & Rohmatika, 2025).

The context of Bukittinggi, as a region with cultural diversity and educational dynamics, provides an interesting space to examine how teachers implement the Merdeka Curriculum. A multi-case study in this region offers a real picture of the variations of instructional innovations developed by teachers and how ethics and integrity are positioned in each process (Mohammed, 2025). Thus, this research is expected to enrich the understanding of the importance of centering ethics and integrity in teachers' instructional innovation so that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum truly brings positive impacts on students' development.

This condition underlines the importance of multi-case studies to explore how teachers in Bukittinggi place ethics and integrity at the center of their instructional innovations. By understanding real practices in the field, it is expected to obtain a comprehensive picture of the challenges and strategies that can strengthen the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum so that it remains aligned with the goals of national education, namely to produce generations of intelligent, ethical, and responsible individuals (Enwereuzor et al., 2020).

Previous studies have shown that the success of implementing new curricula greatly depends on teachers' consistency in maintaining integrity and ethical commitment (Heikkilä et al., 2023). However, the reality in the field often reveals external pressures, limited resources, and administrative demands that may shift teachers' focus from principles of integrity to merely fulfilling targets (Jose et al., 2025). This condition makes it essential to examine how teachers in Bukittinggi place ethics and integrity at the center of their instructional innovations within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The multi-case study in Bukittinggi is relevant to understanding how teachers in this region apply student-centered instructional innovations while maintaining professional integrity. Bukittinggi, as one of the educational cities in West Sumatra, has dynamics and diversity in school contexts that provide a real picture of teachers' ethical practices in implementing the

Merdeka Curriculum (Sudira & Rohmatika, 2025). By understanding teachers' real experiences in balancing instructional innovation and professional ethics, this study is expected to contribute to strengthening teaching practices that are not only innovative but also highly ethical and integral.

This study focuses on a multi-case study in the city of Bukittinggi, known as one of the regions with significant educational progress in West Sumatra. Through this approach, the study seeks to explore how teachers interpret, design, and implement instructional innovations based on the Merdeka Curriculum while maintaining ethics and integrity in their professional practices (Xu & Wu, 2025). The results of this study are expected to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between ethics, integrity, and teachers' instructional innovations in the context of Indonesian education today.

This research is important because it will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between instructional innovation, ethical values, and teachers' integrity. The findings are expected to serve as a foundation for the development of educational policies, teacher professionalism, and the strengthening of teaching practices that are not only innovative but also character-driven (Rebecchi et al., 2024; Gunes & Liman-Kaban, 2025). This study seeks to answer fundamental questions: how do teachers center ethics and integrity in their instructional innovations within the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum? How do local values, professionalism, and students' needs interact in shaping ethical and integrity-based instructional innovations? Through a multi-case study approach, this research is expected to provide deep insights into best practices, challenges, and critical reflections that can enrich the discourse on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum both locally and nationally.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative multi-case study design to capture teachers' authentic practices in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum with the support of the Merdeka Mengajar platform. The research was conducted in two junior high schools in Bukittinggi: SMP Negeri 1 and SMP Negeri 3. The participants consisted of four key informants—the principal and the vice principal for curriculum from each school. A multi-case study design was chosen because it allows for the exploration of similarities and differences across multiple contexts, providing richer insights into educational practices (Yin, 2018; Crowe et al., 2015).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (approximately one hour per participant) and non-participant classroom observations, supported by field notes and school documents. The use of multiple data sources allowed for methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015).

The data analysis followed a thematic approach, guided by the 4I framework (ideation, incubation, implementation, and iteration/diffusion) to trace the process of instructional innovation (Crossan & Apaydin, 2017). An ethical lens was also applied to examine issues

of integrity and fairness in teachers' practices (Heikkilä et al., 2023). Coding was conducted manually and involved an iterative process of constant comparison across cases to identify recurring themes (Nowell et al., 2017).

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To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the findings, strategies such as data triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking were employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Birt et al., 2016). These measures strengthened the rigor of the study and provided confidence in the credibility of the interpretations.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. General Overview of School Conditions

The study was conducted at SMP N 1 Bukittinggi and SMP N 2 Bukittinggi, both of which demonstrated varying readiness levels in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. At SMP N 1, several teachers acted as advocates for technology use, integrating digital resources into lesson planning and classroom activities. The presence of these "teacher champions" became a stimulus for broader teacher engagement, signaling a growing professional culture of innovation.

At SMP N 2, however, a different reality was observed. A number of teachers remained passive and relied on traditional, teacher-centered practices. Classroom observations showed repetitive methods, minimal technology integration, and a reluctance to experiment with new strategies. This passivity had a direct impact on student motivation, with learners displaying lower enthusiasm for classroom activities.

These contrasting conditions highlight a gap in teacher preparedness for the Merdeka Curriculum. While some teachers embraced technology and demonstrated adaptive practices, others remained unprepared, hesitant, or resistant to change. This imbalance underscores the need for systematic professional development to ensure more equitable teacher readiness across schools.

B. Teachers' Innovative Behavior

The analysis of teachers' innovative behavior revealed two contrasting patterns.

Positive practices included the use of computers and internet-based resources to enrich lessons, the design of new classroom strategies tailored to students' contexts, and the visible involvement of school leaders in encouraging innovation. Teachers who demonstrated such behaviors also engaged in collegial collaboration, shared teaching strategies, and exhibited strong discipline and professional ethics.

Negative patterns, however, were more widespread. Many teachers relied heavily on lecture-based methods, offered limited opportunities for active learning, and showed minimal adoption of project-based or inquiry-based approaches. Resistance to collaboration, reinforced by a strong seniority culture, often inhibited knowledge sharing. In interviews, some teachers admitted to feeling "comfortable with old ways" and expressed anxiety about experimenting with new methods. Issues such as low motivation, weak self-efficacy, and strained communication with principals further compounded the challenges.

These patterns suggest that while innovative behavior is emerging, it has not yet become institutionalized as a collective professional culture across schools.

C. Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

The findings on curriculum implementation reveal both promising opportunities and persistent challenges.

On the opportunity side, the Merdeka Curriculum provides flexibility for teachers to design and adapt lessons, particularly through methods like Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and differentiated instruction. Classroom observations showed a few teachers experimenting with such methods, with positive responses from students. The integration of digital tools—ranging from simple presentation media to online learning resources—also enriched the teaching-learning process. Professional forums like MGMP were mentioned by participants as useful platforms for sharing experiences and strengthening collaborative practices.

On the challenge side, however, gaps remain. Many teachers had not received sufficient training aligned with classroom realities. Teachers often reported being overwhelmed by administrative workloads, which left little room for creativity and innovation. Leadership support was inconsistent: while some principals actively encouraged innovation, others failed to provide clear direction. In some cases, school culture itself was unsupportive, creating resistance and skepticism toward change.

These dynamics illustrate the tension between the potential of curriculum reform and the constraints of existing teacher capacity and institutional culture.

D. Role of Platform Merdeka Mengajar (PMM)

The PMM was found to play a pivotal role in mediating between teacher readiness and the demands of curriculum reform. Teachers reported that PMM provided accessible teaching materials, diagnostic assessments, and self-paced professional training. These resources enabled them to try out new approaches in their classrooms despite limitations in formal training.

The analysis highlights four strategic roles of PMM:

- a. Enabler: expanding equitable access to learning resources, particularly for teachers in resource-limited schools.
- b. Accelerator: providing micro-learning modules that allowed teachers to quickly upgrade their pedagogical knowledge.
- c. Connector: enabling peer collaboration and sharing of best practices across schools and regions, thus reducing isolation.
- d. Monitor: supporting school leaders and policymakers with data dashboards to evaluate teacher engagement and curriculum implementation.

These roles positioned PMM not simply as a support tool but as an integral driver of educational transformation.

4. DISCUSSION

A. Teacher Preparedness and Technology Integration

The gap in teacher preparedness reflects broader global trends in curriculum reform. Teachers who acted as "digital champions" demonstrated that with the right support, technology integration can enhance both student engagement and instructional effectiveness. Similar patterns have been observed in Europe, where digital competence frameworks such as DigCompEdu stress equitable access to technology as a precondition for reform (Redecker & Punie, 2017). However, teachers' reluctance to use digital tools is consistent with studies by Howard and Mozejko (2015), who argued that resistance often arises from low confidence and insufficient systemic support.

The findings highlight the importance of embedding digital literacy not as an optional skill but as a core professional competence. Without it, the Merdeka Curriculum risks becoming unevenly implemented, with some teachers advancing while others lag behind.

B. Innovative Behavior and School Culture

The presence of innovative teachers aligns with the notion of "lead teachers" as catalysts for collective innovation (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014). Their behaviors-sharing practices, collaborating, and experimenting with new methods- mirror global findings on professional learning communities as drivers of pedagogical change (Avalos, 2016; Thurlings et al., 2015).

However, the persistence of hierarchical school culture and seniority-based resistance echoes concerns raised by Biesta (2015), who noted that educational reforms falter when institutional cultures are misaligned with innovation goals. The study further underscores that teacher self-efficacy is a critical factor: without confidence in their ability to innovate, teachers are likely to remain within their comfort zones (Sang et al., 2016).

C. Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

The study confirms that the Merdeka Curriculum offers significant opportunities for pedagogical renewal. The use of PBL, differentiated instruction, and digital integration resonates with international frameworks on 21st-century competencies (Voogt & Roblin, 2017). Yet, the challenges observed lack of training, administrative overload, and inconsistent leadership are also consistent with findings from OECD countries (Schleicher, 2018).

These findings suggest that curriculum reform cannot succeed without parallel investment in professional development, workload reform, and leadership capacity. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) emphasize that sustained teacher learning opportunities are essential for embedding reform into daily practice.

D. Strategic Role of PMM in Educational Transformation

The PMM plays a role far beyond being a technical application. Its fourfold function-enabler, accelerator, connector, and monitor-positions it as a systemic tool for transformation. Comparable international platforms, such as the European Schoolnet and UNESCO's teacher development initiatives, show that digital platforms can democratize access to resources, accelerate professional growth, and foster transnational communities of practice (Zhu & Urhahne, 2018).

In Bukittinggi, PMM was found to provide a lifeline for teachers who lacked access to in-person training. It enabled them to learn about Project-Based Learning, differentiated strategies, and assessment innovations. This aligns with the view that professional learning in the 21st century must be flexible, self-directed, and digitally mediated (Voogt et al., 2015).

However, PMM alone cannot guarantee transformation. Its effectiveness depends on whether teachers engage with its resources, whether school leaders encourage its use, and whether institutional structures support its integration. Thus, PMM should be seen as a catalyst rather than a replacement for broader systemic reforms.

5. CONCLUSION

This study shows that teachers in Bukittinggi are currently in a transitional phase toward practicing Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) with integrity. The transition is still marked by an imbalance between the opportunities available and the readiness of educational facilitators to take advantage of them. Although flexibility has been granted, the implementation is not yet fully optimal since teachers' innovative behavior remains varied and tends to be relatively low when viewed collectively. In this context, the Platform Merdeka Mengajar holds great potential to act as a catalyst in accelerating the emergence of an innovative culture among teachers. Through targeted training, facilitation of cross-teacher collaboration, and continuous mentoring, PPM can support teachers in moving away from monotonous teaching practices toward strategies that are more creative, contextual, and aligned with the spirit of Merdeka Belajar.

Furthermore, this research emphasizes three main pillars that must be strengthened to ensure the successful implementation of the independent curriculum: transformational school leadership, teachers' self-efficacy, and a supportive organizational climate. Visionary and inspiring principals are able to set the direction of change, teachers with high self-efficacy are more willing to innovate, while a healthy organizational environment provides a safe space for collaboration and experimentation with new methods. The synergy among these three aspects forms a solid foundation that can transform the transition toward Merdeka Belajar from mere discourse into real practice in the classroom.

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