



## Implications of the Free Curriculum and PMM Digitalization Policy on the Decline of Teacher and Student Quality (A Study using Max Horkheimer's Critical Social Theory Approach)

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to gather information on the decline in the quality of teachers and students as a result of the Free Curriculum policy, using Max Horkheimer's critical social theory approach. The methodology employed is qualitative descriptive, which will elaborate on data through descriptive statements. Data is obtained through a literature review of previous studies and informants who have implemented this Free Curriculum policy. The findings of this research indicate that the Free Curriculum is part of modernity in the educational aspect. Modernity is a state where all traditionally oriented societal systems are released into an order that implies rationality. The essence of modernization fundamentally encourages embracing change towards improvement in line with the capacity of the surrounding community conditions. Differentiated learning poses new problems and burdens for teachers due to time constraints. The standards to be achieved become biased and unclear. The impact of this policy is that students experience a decline in the quality of understanding the material because it is challenging to meet achievement standards maximally due to diversity in potential and interests. Teachers are not maximally able to provide standardized teaching but are more focused on organizing and designing strategies for this diversity. The role of teachers as facilitators allows limited room to maximize the inculcation of values. Discrimination against teachers through the "teacher mover" program resulting from the Free Curriculum policy has an impact on the opportunities provided, creating discrimination and generating barriers and comparisons between participating and non-participating teachers.

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### INTRODUCTION

Max Horkheimer was a German philosopher and sociologist, as well as a key figure associated with the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. His views are complex and closely tied to critical theory, but some of his main ideas include Critical Theory. Horkheimer played a crucial role in the development of the concept of Critical Theory. This approach involves criticism of social, economic, and political structures that contribute to human oppression. "Dialectic of Enlightenment" is a work by Horkheimer, co-written with Theodor Adorno. In this work, they explore how Enlightenment ideas, which emphasize reason and progress, can turn into instruments of domination and oppression. The theory of Instrumental Reason is Horkheimer's

concern about the domination of instrumental reason, where rationality becomes a means to achieve specific goals rather than a tool for human liberation. He argues that instrumental reason can lead to dehumanization and the loss of individual autonomy. Alienation: Like other critical theories, Horkheimer is critical of the effects of alienation in modern capitalist society. He explores how individuals can become alienated from themselves and each other in this system. Views on Social Transformation: Despite being critical of the existing social order, Horkheimer also believed in the potential for social transformation. He sought a society where individuals could realize their full potential and live authentically. It's important to note that Horkheimer's ideas are part of a broader philosophical and sociological tradition, and his work is often studied in the context of the Frankfurt School's contributions to critical theory.

The education curriculum is a framework of learning designed to guide the educational process at various levels, ranging from elementary to tertiary education. It is not just a list of subjects but a series of learning plans that outline objectives, teaching methods, and ways to evaluate student performance. The education curriculum is not merely a static document; it should be a responsive tool to societal changes and students' needs. Through continuous evaluation, collaboration among stakeholders, and the implementation of innovations, we can enhance the quality of education and prepare the next generation to face evolving challenges. Education is a process of preparing the younger generation for life and effectively achieving their life goals (Azyumardi 2012). Meanwhile, Islamic education is a type of education that trains the feelings of students in such a way that in their approach to life, actions, decisions, and their approach to all types of knowledge, they are strongly influenced by spiritual values and are highly conscious of Islamic ethical values (Hujair 1999). Fatirul & Walujo (2022) define the curriculum as a learning plan, a designed educational program to instruct learners. This program includes various activities to support the learning process of students, fostering changes and developments in both behavior and skills in line with the goals of education and learning.

The education curriculum is dynamic. This is because in its development, the curriculum must adapt to the needs and characteristics of learners according to their time. The design of curriculum development should consider the needs, opinions, learning outcomes, and interests of learners as the main focus, making learners themselves the center of education. Education digitization is a fundamental transformation in the world of education that involves the use of digital technology to enhance the teaching and learning process. Digitization brings significant changes in how students learn, teachers teach, and educational institutions manage information. Curriculum development in Indonesia has reached the development of the "Merdeka Curriculum." This modernization does not follow a single path. Modern life is a "runaway world" with greater steps, scope, and depth of change compared to previous systems (Ritzer 1997). The principle of this new curriculum is student-centered learning, introducing the concept of "Merdeka Belajar" or "Independent Learning." This term is defined as a method that allows students to choose lessons that interest them. The idea behind the essence of independent learning is to create a enjoyable learning atmosphere without feeling burdened to achieve specific grades (Sudaryanto et al., 2020). Schools have the right and responsibility to develop curricula according to their individual needs and characteristics. The curriculum selection policy is expected to expedite the national curriculum reform process. It can be said that this policy of providing schools with curriculum choices is one of the efforts in change management. By involving all relevant parties, the curriculum can become a strong foundation for positive change in the world of education. Education is a crucial pillar in the development of society and the future of a nation. However, in recent years, we have witnessed worrying trends regarding the decline in the quality of teachers and students

The decline in the quality of teachers and students is a very recent social phenomenon in this era of digitization. The decline in the quality of the nation's generation can have serious and detrimental impacts on various aspects of life, economy, society, and culture. Some possible consequences of the decline in the quality of the nation's generation include the creation of gaps in academic achievement, influencing the quality of graduates, and their competence in the workforce. A less quality generation may face limitations in the development of social, leadership, and communication skills, a decrease in motivation, and a decline in the quality of learning, which can hinder the future generation's ability to compete in the job market. A generation lacking in quality education and skills can impede a country's competitiveness in the global market. The inability of the younger generation to compete in the job market can increase unemployment rates, creating a heavier economic burden. A less quality generation may be less inclined to innovate, hindering economic and technological development. A nation's generation without access to good education and skills may be vulnerable to poverty and crime. Low-quality generation can impact health awareness, leading to an increase in diseases and health burdens.

The decline in the quality of the generation can affect social and cultural life, reducing the sense of responsibility towards society. Low educational quality can lead to the loss of cultural identity due to a lack of understanding and appreciation of cultural heritage. Furthermore, another effect is the potential for a lack of quality leadership, influencing decision-making processes at the national level. The decline in the quality of a nation's generation has broad implications and can have long-term effects on national development. Educators or teachers play a crucial role in the implementation of education, as they are directly involved

with the elements present in an educational activity, especially the students. As a manifestation of this crucial role, the function of educators is to strive to develop all the potential of their students, so they are prepared to face various challenges in their lives (Hifza: 2010).

Expertise as a teacher or educator is not just about having the ability to transfer knowledge to students, as commonly observed. It requires strict qualifications and appropriate personality traits to become a teacher or educator in Islam (Ahmad Farid: 2004). The decline in the quality of teachers can have serious impacts on education and student development, and its effects can be felt in various educational aspects. One of them is that ineffective teaching can lead to low academic achievement among students. Teachers with low quality may struggle to develop students' social, critical, and creative skills. Insufficient teaching quality can result in graduates who are ill-prepared to face the demands of the job market and modern society. Quality human resources are a primary asset for the development of a country. The deterioration in the quality of teachers can impede the growth and progress of human resources.

## METHOD

This research utilizes a qualitative research methodology, combining both case study and literature review approaches. A case study involves in-depth research into an individual, a group, an organization, a program, etc., over a specific period, aiming to obtain a comprehensive and profound description of the entity. Case studies generate data that is later analyzed to develop theories. In line with the data acquisition procedures of qualitative research, case study data is obtained through interviews, observations, and archival sources. Using this strategy, the researcher explores data related to the implications or effects of implementing the independent curriculum on teachers and students. Informants describe the prevailing conditions. Literature review is a study used to gather information and data with the aid of various materials available in both offline and online libraries, such as documents, books, magazines, and journals (Mardalis:1999). The qualitative descriptive research method aims to discover, search, analyze, and elaborate in detail on phenomena, knowledge, or information regarding the subjects or objects under investigation (Mukhtar, 2013: 11). A literature study is a theoretical examination of references and other scholarly works related to the culture, values, and norms that develop in the social situation being studied (Sugiyono:2012). Qualitative research is more descriptive, with collected data in the form of words or images, not emphasizing numerical values.

Qualitative research emphasizes the process rather than the product or output, conducts data analysis inductively, and emphasizes meaning. Qualitative research methods are often referred to as naturalistic research methods because they are conducted in natural settings (Sugiyono, 2019). This method is grounded in postpositivism philosophy and is used to investigate natural conditions of the research subject (in contrast to experiments), where the researcher serves as a key instrument, data analysis is inductive/qualitative, and the research results focus more on meaning than generalization (Sugiyono, 2019). According to Ericson, as cited in Stainback (2003), qualitative research is conducted intensively, with researchers actively participating in the field for an extended period, meticulously documenting what occurs, conducting reflective analysis on various field-found documents, and creating detailed research reports (Sugiyono, 2017). Merriam, in her book "Qualitative Research" (2009), states that qualitative research is interested in understanding how people interpret experiences in their lives, construct their worlds, and give meaning to their life experiences (Sugiyono, 2017).

Max Horkheimer's theory of modernity serves as a grand theory to analyze the reality of the "Merdeka" curriculum in this research as a form of modernity and a change in the educational aspect. In essence, Horkheimer concludes that modern rationality fails to guide humanity toward true rationality. Horkheimer's critique of modernity is that it fails to understand and misguides humans towards a rationality free from values. The Frankfurt School aims to rationally clarify the structure held by today's industrial society and examine the consequences of that structure in human life and culture. The Frankfurt School explains all of this based on the understanding of contemporary reason, specifically instrumental technical reason (Horkheimer, 1974). They aim to build a theory that criticizes the structure and configuration of actual society as a result of a misguided understanding of reason (Sunarto, 2007). Thus, a "theory" is not neutral or objective. This involvement is embedded in the "theory's" goals, namely: (a) reconstructing society based on non-exploitative interpersonal relationships, and (b) restoring the central role of humans in the evolution of society as an independent consciousness, as subjects of a social reality that self-regulates (Horkheimer, 1972).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the book "Dialectic of Enlightenment" (Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, 1972), which is a critique of the legacy of modernist knowledge, the authors expose criticisms of modernity, viewing it as a history of the domination or mastery of subjective rationality. This thought represents Max Horkheimer's critique of modernity, grounded in the belief that this domination occurs through the psychological drive of humans, namely the will to power. Horkheimer urges critical thinking in the realm of social and cultural

sciences as a form of resistance against the myths of enlightenment. According to Horkheimer in his book "Dialectic of Enlightenment," propaganda determines human conditions, serving as a deceptive tool in society. When it proclaims freedom, it paradoxically opposes itself. Deception and propaganda are inseparable elements. Max Horkheimer's theory critiques the darker aspects of the 20th century by analyzing the detachment of human aspects in social life

The Merdeka Curriculum, as an embodiment of modernity, introduces a differentiated learning policy known as Teaching at the Right Level. This approach focuses on tailoring instruction to the students' individual abilities, emphasizing a teaching method centered on the learners' readiness rather than just the grade level. Students at the same developmental stage may possess varying levels of understanding and readiness. Therefore, in this instructional model, teaching methods and learning materials are varied based on the students' comprehension and readiness levels. Differentiated learning poses new challenges for teachers, as it requires adapting to the diverse understanding, interests, competencies, and learning processes of students. The goal of this approach is to achieve different outcomes and processes for each student. In this teaching pattern, teachers strive to accommodate all variations in abilities and find solutions to these differences. As a result, the primary measurement standards become blurred, impacting the quality of learning and the desired educational outcomes. Essentially, students still require guidance, rules, and instructions. However, if teachers focus on tailoring their teaching to individual students, it becomes challenging due to the diversity of competencies, abilities, and variations among students.

"Diversity should be directed towards following a single standard. The impact of this policy is that students experience a decline in the quality of understanding the material because they find it difficult to achieve the standards to the maximum. Teachers are not maximally able to provide standard benchmarks but are more focused on structuring and designing. The intention is that this learning pattern focuses on methods but often neglects substance. This is because the designers of education are given to those who are less suitable. Discrimination among teachers through the teacher empowerment program generated by the independent curriculum policy has an impact on the opportunities and chances given by the teacher empowerment that are not generalized in general. This situation creates discrimination and creates barriers as well as comparisons between the empowered teachers and those who do not follow this program. However, teachers are an important pillar that cannot be classified based on any achievements because, in essence, they have their own potential and have been processed to the maximum."

The driving force guru (teacher) has proven to only focus on their own community. Even the products of the guru's efforts are evident when the guru takes on the role of a school principal; the results demonstrate that their leadership aspect is not any better than that of senior teachers. The benchmark for a teacher's ability to lead a school cannot be measured solely by their proficiency in Information and Technology, rhetorical skills in public speaking, but rather by their ability to communicate with local cultural nuances, maintain persuasive relationships, and maximize all potentials within the school. The Strengthening the Profile of Pancasila Students project is an interdisciplinary learning that is also a product of the independent curriculum. This project is carried out to strengthen various competencies in the profile of Pancasila students. The Strengthening the Profile of Pancasila Students project is a project-based extracurricular activity designed to reinforce efforts to achieve competencies. It also aims to realize characters in accordance with the Pancasila student profile based on Graduation Competency Standards. However, in reality, this policy becomes an additional burden for teachers because its process and application require considerable mental effort, time, and financial resources. As a result, the primary focus on achieving educational competency targets is disrupted due to this policy. Although initially introduced as a way to facilitate teachers in obtaining professional allowances, the Free Curriculum, in practice, does not meet the expectations of the teachers. The Free Curriculum has the effect of reducing the number of teaching hours, causing concern and anxiety among teachers. This is due to the validation and non-validation of data. To obtain these allowances, it still depends on the number of teaching hours, with certain conditions and requirements, thus requiring additional time for validation, creating further concerns for teachers. This contradictory situation does not enhance the creativity of teachers.

The "Merdeka Curriculum" has many weaknesses and requires improvement. This is because the conceptualizer or mastermind behind this curriculum lacks the necessary skills and experience in understanding education. This deficiency is attributed to their background and capabilities, which are far from the field of education. The biggest hope expressed by educators in Indonesia is that ideally, a leader and educational conceptualizer in a country should have an educational background. Notably, they should understand and have insights and experiences in solving educational issues. The type of conceptualizer is deeply concerned if the younger generation or students lose manners, character, values, personality, and morals that align with the noble values and local wisdom of the nation, rather than worrying about the nation's generation lacking proficient Information and Technology skills. In reality, these skills can be acquired outside of school because, naturally, at this time, the ability to understand information and technology is easily accessible to our children. This doesn't mean that insight into technology is unimportant, but the primary focus is on shaping morals, values, and character as the main targets.

Modernity is a state where all traditional societal systems are released into an order that implies rationality. The essence of modernization fundamentally invites embracing changes towards improvement that aligns with the capacity of the surrounding society. Therefore, there is no reason not to incorporate this independent curriculum into social modernization efforts because there is an effort to change the existing conditions or realities. This refers to a modernity that contains elements of propaganda that do not match the conditions of our generation. There is a systemic imposition element for change because a curriculum, whether willingly or unwillingly, will systematically move and coordinate educators regularly and on a large scale in driving this change. This is what is understood as modernity that is not appropriate. In the Independent Curriculum, the position and role of the teacher are that of a facilitator. This contradicts the substance and role of the teacher itself because the teacher is a figure who imparts values and meaning in each lesson, with a spirit and touches that cannot be obtained even with the use of Artificial Intelligence technology. A facilitator is someone who facilitates or eases the group process or meeting to run more effectively. The main task of a facilitator is to help the group achieve its goals by designing, managing, and guiding the communication and interaction processes among group members. This is far from the core values of a teacher, who, substantively, does not focus on guiding and managing the class but focuses on instilling moral values and character. It is not about creating an atmosphere and guiding the learning process but neglecting the substantive goal of forming those values.

The independent curriculum focuses more on preparing and prioritizing methods rather than the substance of what is to be achieved. All forms of digitization, digital traces, and impressions created in the learning activities are merely an illusion designed to generate a positive image. The resulting impression is that this curriculum emphasizes methods but neglects the substance of the actual goals and objectives. This is manifested through ice-breaking activities and models that give the impression of achieving learning goals in a relaxed manner, but in reality, the target to instill competencies or values is less than optimal. Our generation needs methods of punishment and reward, not cheers or something that appears positive but fails to impart consequential learning. The positive image is not universally applicable or general; the visible results are something that is attempted and documented. Consequently, the process is overlooked. There is no longer any activity based on purity; what exists is only activities that are documented and published. It is this publication that creates the image and the measure of success from the perspective of the Independent Curriculum. In other words, this situation is portrayed as if there has been a significant change in learning published through the media, although there may appear to be lively classes, the situation is not as realistic and pure as depicted and understood

The "Platform Merdeka Mengajar" (PMM) is an education platform based on the concept of independent curriculum. PMM provides references for teachers to develop teaching practices in accordance with the Independent Curriculum. In the Teaching feature, there is a Teaching Device feature that can be used by teachers and education personnel to enhance their skills. The platform, which is expected to facilitate educators, ironically proves to be burdensome for teachers. This contradicts the initial introduction that the independent curriculum is designed to ease the burden on teachers. The SKP (Employee Performance Targets) or assessment reports, which should ideally be issued automatically, become complicated because the independent curriculum, through the Platform Merdeka Mengajar, requires teachers to upload their teaching documents to receive evaluations. This is contrary to the purpose of digitization itself, where digitalization should ideally simplify all human activities. Ideally, the indicator for measuring teachers should be the final evaluation results from students, not demands on Performance Practices and Work Behavior in the field. As long as consequences for students are not applied in the education curriculum system, no matter how high a teacher's performance is, it will not have an impact on student motivation. In fact, this system adds a burden to teachers who should ideally focus on thinking about strategies and maximizing the cultivation of values instead of being administrators. Education is expected to assist students in developing their potential, improving their skills, and instilling good morals. In the field of education, the recent rise in moral deviations among teenagers, often reported in the news and viral on social media, is a concern. This includes conflicts, free sex, and drug use and distribution among teenagers. The lack of harmony and alignment of norms in society is causing the moral values of the nation's children, especially teenagers, to become unstable (Yolanda & Fatmariza, 2019). Therefore, instilling moral values in learning is crucial. Learning is a continuous and systematic process with directed stages (Surya Muhammad, 2013).

The policy of the independent curriculum does not place teachers in their rightful position and essence; instead, it adds an irrational burden, causing teachers to be less effective in carrying out their substantial activities. This decline in the quality of teachers has a direct impact on the decline in the quality of students. Essentially, education is a process of transferring knowledge and instilling character and moral values. Morality is the goodness or badness of actions and behavior based on societal norms. Morality occurs when individuals adopt positive attitudes due to an awareness of their duties and responsibilities. An individual is considered to have good morals when their behavior aligns with existing moral principles (Winurini, 2019). The decline in morality can be attributed to the lack of harmony between parents and

children, the influence of the environment shaping human behavioral values, and the insufficient level of social interaction reasoning to agree with children in learning and applying approved standards of behavior in society, family, school, and interaction with others (Rahmi & Januar, 2019; Supandi et al., 2019). According to a news report on Kompas September 25, 2023, a student from one of the Madrasah Aliyah in Demak Regency, Central Java, attacked his teacher with a knife during the supervision of the Mid-Semester Assessment. As a result, the victim, a physical education and student affairs teacher, suffered injuries to the neck. Fortunately, their life was saved.

The chronology begins when the victim was monitoring a test (PTS) and distributing exam papers in the classroom. Suddenly, the perpetrator entered the room while greeting. The perpetrator then pulled out a sickle from behind his waist and aimed the sharp weapon. The sickle struck the right side of the victim's neck and the left arm. After committing the heinous act against the teacher, the perpetrator ran out of the classroom and threw the sickle onto the field. He then left on a motorcycle. Another distressing case is the bullying video among students that went viral on social media on September 27, 2023. According to the police, the video was recorded in the Cimanggu Subdistrict, Cilacap, Central Java. In the video, a student is seen being assaulted by a peer wearing a hat. The scene is observed by several other students present at the location, and some students attempting to intervene are threatened by the bully. Later, it was revealed that the main perpetrator was a student from SMPN 2 Cimanggu, while the victim was a junior. This phenomenon is a systemic impact caused by the curriculum as a modernization in the aspect of social education, determining that the quality of the generation is departing from the essence of modern rationality itself. Consequently, the problems arising from these curriculum changes include a decline in the quality of both educators and students.

## CONCLUSION

The Merdeka Curriculum is a manifestation of social modernity in the educational aspect that significantly influences the direction of a generation and the society of a nation. If the aspirations and principles of modernity are misconstrued and implemented incorrectly, it can have serious social consequences. The same applies to digitization, which is a part and expression of that modernity. Max Horkheimer's criticism of modernity lies in the misunderstanding of modernity as the embodiment of pure rationality in an objective and value-free form. In essence, Max Horkheimer concludes that modern rationality fails to guide humanity towards true rationality. In his work "Traditional and Critical Theory," he asserts that positivism has transformed into an ideology open to criticism. Max Horkheimer's point here is that traditional scientific knowledge has reduced humans to an instrumental dimension, as the rationality of enlightenment has been narrowed by logical positivism thinking, limiting it to the human ability to dominate the objective world, solely for the sake of technical interests through work. Another dimension related to human freedom remains unenlightened, and the goals set in modernism are not achieved. There is no need to revert to the understanding of traditional rationality as long as rationality in modernity essentially resides in the real truth.

As long as something is not value-free, there are individual interests involved, there is a dominating actor, and that actor cannot be separated from their background. The actor or originator who proposes this curriculum is the mastermind in that modernity; in this case, they are influenced by psychological aspects and their subjective perspective in formulating ideas or curriculum policies. The decline in the quality of teachers and students occurs because the curriculum, as a form of modernity in the social aspect of education that determines this quality, deviates from the essence of modernity itself. Thus, the phenomenon of problems arising from changes in this curriculum has an impact on the decline in the quality of educators and learners. This is because the intended goals conflict with the way things should be done.

## RECOMMENDATION

A change or social modernity should ideally occur in accordance with the social and cultural conditions of a society. The creator or proponent of this curriculum should be a mastermind who understands the concept of education and the instillation of values. Education is expected to assist students in developing their potential, enhancing their skills, and instilling good morals. In the field of education, the occurrence of deviations in the moral behavior of teenagers, which we often hear about in recent news or viral social media information, is caused by the decline in teenage morality. These cases include things like brawls, free sex, and the use and distribution of drugs by teenagers. The lack of harmony and alignment of norms, as well as the insufficient cultivation of values in schools, leads to a wavering moral foundation among the nation's youth, especially teenagers.

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