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The paradox of educational administration in the Merdeka Belajar era: Policy simplification and the complexity of school practices

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ABSTRACT

Merdeka Belajar is promoted as a reform to simplify educational administration and strengthen school autonomy. However, its implementation reveals a paradox between policy discourse and administrative practice. This study examines the paradox of educational administration in the Merdeka Belajar era by analyzing the gap between normative simplification and school-level complexity in public secondary schools in West Java. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observations, and analyzed thematically. The findings show that administrative simplification operates mainly at the policy level, while schools experience increased administrative workload due to fragmented digital systems and intensified accountability demands. Schools adopt adaptive strategies to manage these pressures, yet such practices remain informal and capacity-dependent. The study contributes by reframing Merdeka Belajar as an administrative governance reform and highlights the need for integrated systems and capacity-sensitive policies to achieve substantive administrative simplification.

Keywords: Merdeka Belajar, educational administration, policy implementation, school capacity

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INTRODUCTION

The policy of Merdeka Belajar represents a major reform agenda in Indonesian education, aiming to simplify administrative procedures, strengthen school autonomy, and shift the focus of education toward meaningful learning experiences. In principle, this policy is expected to reduce bureaucratic burdens on schools and teachers, allowing them to concentrate on pedagogical innovation and student-centered learning. The simplification of curriculum documents, assessment systems, and reporting mechanisms is positioned as a strategic response to long-standing criticisms of excessive administrative complexity within the education system (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi (Kemendikbudristek, 2021).

However, empirical realities at the school level indicate a paradoxical condition. While Merdeka Belajar is normatively designed to streamline administration, its implementation often generates new layers of administrative complexity. Schools are required to adapt simultaneously to multiple digital platforms, shifting policy instruments, and overlapping accountability demands from central and local authorities. This condition reflects a gap between the idealized policy narrative of simplification and the lived administrative practices experienced by school leaders and teachers. From the perspective of educational administration theory, such a gap illustrates the classic problem of policy implementation, where reform-oriented policies are recontextualized within existing bureaucratic structures that may resist or distort intended changes (Fullan, 2016).

Evidence from another educational context shows how limited support for policy implementation can lead to differences in school practices. One example is the study conducted by Tungul and Lapinid (2024), which evaluated the mother tongue-based multilingual education policy in the Philippines. Their evaluation identified limitations in training, learning materials, and procedural clarity, alongside variations in how teachers and schools interpreted the policy. Some teachers had to develop their own learning materials to meet students' needs. These findings provide a comparative perspective, suggesting that reform implementation needs to be examined through the clarity of operational guidelines and the support available to implementers, alongside its formal policy objectives.

Recent studies highlight that educational reforms emphasizing autonomy and flexibility frequently encounter administrative contradictions at the implementation stage. Research on school-based management and decentralization shows that increased autonomy is often accompanied by intensified accountability mechanisms, resulting in higher administrative workloads rather than reduced ones (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; OECD, 2020). In the Indonesian context, several empirical studies report that teachers and principals continue to face substantial administrative demands despite reform efforts, particularly related to reporting, digital data entry, and compliance with rapidly changing regulations (Prasojo & Yuliana, 2022; Suryadi et al., 2023). These findings suggest that simplification at the policy level does not automatically translate into simplification at the practice level.

In the context of Merdeka Belajar, the study by Thohir et al. (2021) shows that the translation of policy into practice among Islamic Religious Education teachers is related to teacher readiness, school readiness, and technological support. The authors identified limitations in technological competence and access to training, as well as difficulties experienced by some teachers in using the learning applications provided by their schools. Although the study was conducted in the context of distance learning during the pandemic, its findings provide a relevant basis for examining implementer readiness when studying educational policy changes. Therefore, the aims of educational policy reform need to be analyzed alongside the institutional conditions that support its implementation.

The situation in West Java Province is particularly relevant for examining this paradox. As one of the most populous provinces with a diverse range of school characteristics, West Java serves as a critical locus for observing how national education policies are operationalized in varied local contexts. Differences in institutional capacity, digital infrastructure, and administrative culture across schools potentially intensify the complexity of policy implementation. Yet, systematic studies that specifically analyze the administrative paradox of Merdeka Belajar at the school level, especially through an educational administration lens, remain limited.

Study seeks to address that gap by critically examining the paradox of educational administration in the era of Merdeka Belajar, focusing on the tension between policy-driven simplification and the complexity of school practices in West Java. By situating the analysis within theories of policy implementation and educational administration, this research aims to generate new insights into how administrative reforms are translated into everyday school operations. The study offers an innovative contribution by conceptualizing Merdeka Belajar not merely as a pedagogical reform, but as an administrative phenomenon with structural and managerial implications. Ultimately, the findings are expected to provide practical and theoretical benefits, informing policymakers and practitioners on how to align reform intentions with administrative realities in schools.

Several studies have examined Merdeka Belajar and related policies through teachers' perspectives and students' experiences. Thohir et al. (2021), for example, examined Islamic Religious Education teachers' perspectives on Merdeka Belajar. Solehuddin et al. (2024) investigated student well-being in the context of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project. These studies provide insights into the experiences of policy implementers and beneficiaries. However, they do not specifically examine how administrative simplification is translated into the allocation of tasks, reporting procedures, and coordination within schools. This

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leaves a specific question for the present study: how do schools experience and manage the administrative demands associated with the simplification agenda?

Previous research tends to frame administrative issues as secondary or technical challenges, rather than as structural elements that shape the success or failure of educational reform. Consequently, the administrative dimension of Merdeka Belajar remains analytically underexplored, particularly in relation to the paradox between policy simplification and implementation complexity.

This study offers a novel contribution by repositioning Merdeka Belajar as an educational administration reform, not merely a pedagogical innovation. Unlike prior studies that assess compliance or teacher readiness, this research conceptualizes administrative simplification as a governance mechanism and examines how it is reinterpreted through everyday school practices. By empirically demonstrating that simplification operates symbolically at the policy level while generating new forms of complexity at the implementation level, this study introduces the notion of an administrative paradox as an analytical framework for understanding contemporary education reform.

Furthermore, this study advances originality by integrating administrative capacity as a critical explanatory variable. Rather than assuming uniform school readiness, it reveals how disparities in leadership, digital infrastructure, and administrative competence condition policy outcomes. The focus on West Java as a case study adds contextual novelty, offering insights from a highly diverse and populous province that has been underrepresented in critical analyses of Merdeka Belajar. Collectively, these contributions extend existing literature by bridging policy implementation theory and educational administration studies within the Indonesian reform context.

This study examines the tension between policy-driven administrative simplification and everyday school practices in West Java. It draws on policy implementation theory and educational administration to analyze how schools interpret and carry out the simplification agenda. Particular attention is given to the allocation of tasks, reporting procedures, and administrative coordination. The analysis also considers leadership, digital infrastructure, and administrative competence shape implementation. The study contributes an administrative perspective to discussions of Merdeka Belajar by examining the relationship between reform intentions and school operations. Its findings are expected to inform efforts to align administrative requirements with schools' capacity to implement them.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the paradox of educational administration in the implementation of Merdeka Belajar at the school level. Qualitative design was selected to capture in-depth perspectives, experiences, and contextual dynamics that underline the gap between policy simplification and administrative complexity in practice. The case study approach allowed for an intensive examination of administrative processes within their real-life settings, making it suitable for analyzing policy implementation in education.

The research was conducted in selected public secondary schools in West Java Province. The study subjects consisted of school principals, vice principals for curriculum and administration, and teachers who were directly involved in administrative and instructional processes related to Merdeka Belajar. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria: (1) active involvement in implementing Merdeka Belajar policies, (2) a minimum of three years of professional experience in the school, and (3) direct responsibility for administrative reporting or instructional planning. These criteria ensured that participants possessed adequate knowledge and experience relevant to the research focus.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and limited non-participant observation. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain participants' perceptions and experiences regarding administrative changes, policy demands, and practical challenges. An interview guide was developed based on the research objectives and key

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dimensions of educational administration, including planning, reporting, accountability, and use of digital platforms. Document analysis involved reviewing policy guidelines, school administrative records, and internal reports related to Merdeka Belajar implementation to triangulate interview data. Observations focused on routine administrative activities to capture actual practices and workflows.

The primary research instrument was the researcher, supported by interview guidelines, document review checklists, and observation notes. To ensure the quality and credibility of the data, the study applied several trustworthiness strategies. Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation across interviews, documents, and observations, as well as member checking by confirming interview summaries with participants. Dependability was enhanced by maintaining an audit trail that documented research procedures, decisions, and data analysis steps.

Data analysis was conducted iteratively using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts, documents, and observation notes were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns and themes related to administrative simplification and complexity. The analysis followed stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, allowing themes to emerge systematically from the data. The findings were interpreted by linking empirical themes to the research objectives, ensuring that the analysis remained ground in the data and replicable for future studies in similar contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The findings of this study are derived from a rigorous thematic analysis of interview transcripts, policy documents, and field observations conducted in selected public secondary schools in West Java. The analysis reveals a consistent pattern indicating a paradox between the policy objective of administrative simplification under Merdeka Belajar and the complexity of its implementation at the school level. To facilitate clarity and readability, the main results are summarized thematically in Table 1.

First, the findings indicate that administrative simplification is primarily realized at the normative policy level. Official policy documents emphasize flexibility in curriculum planning, simplified lesson plan formats, and reduced prescriptive requirements. School leaders generally perceive these intentions positively. However, document analysis shows that such simplification is accompanied by fragmented technical guidelines and frequent policy updates, creating uncertainty in operational execution.

Table 1. Presents four dominant themes that emerged from the data, reflecting how administrative simplification is interpreted and enacted in school practices

Theme	Key Empirical Indicators	Condensed Empirical Evidence	Interpretative Meaning
Normative Administrative Simplification	Simplified lesson plan formats; flexible curriculum guidelines	Policy documents emphasize simplification, yet operational instructions are dispersed across multiple technical guidelines	Administrative simplification functions mainly at the policy discourse level
Expansion of Administrative Workload	Multiple digital platforms; repetitive data entry; frequent reporting	Teachers and administrators report increased time spent on digital reporting and data synchronization	Digitalization restructures rather than reducing administrative work
Autonomy–Accountability Tension	Flexible instructional decisions vs. rigid reporting demands	Schools prioritize documentation and compliance to meet audit and monitoring requirements	School autonomy is offset by intensified accountability mechanisms
Unequal Administrative Capacity	Leadership quality; digital infrastructure; staff competence	Schools with limited resources experience higher administrative strain	Institutional capacity conditions policy implementation outcomes

Note. Themes were generated through iterative thematic analysis of interview transcripts, document reviews, and field observations

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Second, the data reveal an expansion of administrative workload through digitalization. Teachers and school administrators reported that the use of multiple digital platforms for reporting, assessment, and data management has increased administrative time demands. Although digital tools are officially framed as efficiency instruments, observational data confirm that they often require repetitive data entry and additional verification processes. This finding demonstrates that administrative tasks are not reduced but restructured into new digital forms.

Third, the findings highlight a persistent tension between school autonomy and accountability demands. While Merdeka Belajar grants schools greater discretion in instructional decisions, accountability mechanisms remain rigid and document-intensive. Participants described a tendency to prioritize administrative compliance over pedagogical experimentation, particularly in response to audits, monitoring, and performance evaluations. This tension reflects a structural contradiction embedded in the policy design.

Fourth, the study identifies unequal administrative capacity among schools as a critical factor shaping implementation outcomes. Schools with stronger leadership, stable administrative teams, and adequate digital infrastructure were better positioned to manage policy demands. In contrast, schools with limited resources experienced administrative overload, leading to reliance on procedural compliance rather than substantive innovation.

Taken together, these findings empirically demonstrate that the promise of administrative simplification under Merdeka Belajar is mediated by institutional capacity, governance structures, and implementation mechanisms. As summarized in Table 1, the paradox of simplification and complexity is not incidental but systematically produced through the interaction between policy design and school-level realities.

Adaptive strategies developed by schools to manage administrative complexity

The data indicate that schools are not merely passive recipients of administrative demands. Instead, they develop adaptive strategies to cope with increasing complexity. These strategies include informal redistribution of administrative tasks among staff, centralization of digital reporting responsibilities to specific individuals, and the creation of internally simplified documentation formats for daily operational use.

However, these adaptive practices are largely informal and highly dependent on individual initiative and leadership capacity. They are not institutionally standardized and tend to function as short-term coping mechanisms rather than sustainable solutions. This finding suggests that schools actively negotiate policy demands, yet such adaptations do not resolve the structural sources of administrative complexity

Shift in teachers' roles from pedagogical to administrative functions

Another significant finding concerns a shift in teachers' professional roles. Interview data reveal that teachers experience an increase in administrative responsibilities, particularly related to digital reporting, documentation of learning activities, and performance indicators. Field observations confirm that a considerable portion of teachers' working time is allocated to administrative compliance rather than instructional planning or pedagogical reflection.

This shift indicates that administrative complexity under Merdeka Belajar has direct implications for teaching practice. The paradox of administrative simplification thus extends beyond governance structures and enters the pedagogical domain, affecting how teachers prioritize their professional tasks.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce and extend existing scholarship on educational reform by demonstrating that the implementation of Merdeka Belajar generates an administrative paradox in which policy-driven simplification coexists with increased operational complexity at the school level. Consistent with policy implementation theory, reforms that aim to decentralize authority and reduce bureaucracy are often reinterpreted within established administrative structures, leading to outcomes that diverge from original policy intentions (Fullan, 2016).

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The difference between formal objectives and school practices can be considered alongside the findings of Wibawa et al. (2026) on the implementation of Pendidikan Khas Kejogjaan. In their study, cultural displays, such as posters and slogans, received higher scores than behavioral practices and material support. These findings suggest that program visibility is insufficient to demonstrate the depth of its implementation. In the context of the present study, this comparison directs attention to changes in procedures and implementers' work experiences as a basis for assessing administrative simplification. Although the two studies examine different policies, the comparison highlights the importance of assessing implementation through everyday practices as well as formal policy statements.

The emergence of adaptive strategies developed by schools provides important theoretical insight into how educational institutions negotiate reform pressures. From the perspective of organizational adaptation, these strategies represent forms of street-level bureaucratic discretion, whereby school actors pragmatically reinterpret policy demands to maintain organizational functionality (Lipsky, 2010).

These adaptive patterns can be compared with the findings of Tungul and Lapinid (2024). Teachers developed their own learning materials and used code-switching to address limited resources and difficulties in policy implementation. These strategies helped maintain the learning process, although the need for training and procedural clarity remained. This comparison suggests that adaptation by policy implementers can sustain educational services without necessarily resolving limitations in policy support. In this study, schools' administrative strategies need to be assessed in terms of their capacity to address problems sustainably, alongside their success in meeting everyday work demands. The informal and individualized nature of these adaptations raises questions about whether they have developed into shared organizational practices. Such strategies may ease immediate administrative pressures while leaving broader problems of policy coordination and implementation support unresolved.

The sustainability of adaptation also emerges in the study by Saryono et al. (2026). In their study, Saryono et al. reported that teachers developed learning practices suited to local needs, despite limited curriculum and institutional support. The authors cautioned that dependence on individual initiative could leave these practices isolated and difficult to sustain. Their findings provide a comparison for schools' administrative adaptation strategies in the present study. If these strategies depend on particular individuals, their continuity needs to be supported by the allocation of responsibilities, shared procedures, and organizational support. Therefore, schools' capacity to address administrative demands cannot be assessed solely by whether tasks were completed during the study period.

The finding regarding the shift in teachers' roles from pedagogical to administrative functions further deepens the analysis of the administrative paradox. Previous studies on educational governance have warned that intensified accountability regimes often redirect teachers' professional energies toward documentation and compliance (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; OECD, 2020). This study empirically confirms that phenomenon within the context of Merdeka Belajar, showing that administrative demands directly encroach upon pedagogical time. As a result, simplification at the policy level paradoxically contributes to pedagogical displacement at the practice level.

Moreover, the unequal administrative capacity identified across schools aligns with institutional theory, which emphasizes that policy outcomes are contingent upon organizational resources, leadership, and contextual readiness (Suryadi et al., 2023). Schools with stronger administrative capacity are better positioned to absorb reform pressures and develop adaptive responses, while less-resourced schools experience heightened administrative strain.

The importance of implementer readiness is also discussed by Thohir et al. (2021). The authors identified limitations in technological competence and difficulties experienced by some teachers in using the learning applications provided by their schools. These findings provide context for the discussion of administrative capacity. The use of learning technology examined by Thohir et al. differs from the use of administrative systems. The analysis needs to distinguish difficulties arising from limited user competence from those arising from procedures or system demands. This distinction is important because training can help address competence gaps, but it

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does not automatically eliminate repeated reporting or unclear divisions of authority. The differences observed across schools highlight the need for implementation support that reflects variations in administrative capacity.

Taken together, these findings advance the literature by conceptualizing Merdeka Belajar as an administrative and governance reform, rather than merely a pedagogical initiative. The administrative paradox identified in this study suggests a tension between the simplification agenda, accountability demands, and schools' implementation capacity. By integrating adaptive strategies and role shifts into the analysis, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how educational reforms are enacted in practice.

The implications of this study extend beyond the Indonesian context. Similar paradoxes have been observed in international reform initiatives that emphasize flexibility, digitalization, and accountability (OECD, 2020). Therefore, future research may build on this study by conducting comparative analyses across regions or by incorporating longitudinal designs to examine how adaptive strategies evolve over time. Such research would contribute to refining reform designs that align administrative simplification with pedagogical sustainability.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of Merdeka Belajar in schools produces an inherent administrative paradox. Although the policy is normatively framed as an effort to simplify educational administration and strengthen school autonomy, its implementation at the school level generates new forms of administrative complexity. Simplification largely operates at the level of policy discourse, while day-to-day practices are characterized by expanded digital reporting, intensified accountability demands, and fragmented technical guidance.

The findings demonstrate that schools actively develop adaptive strategies to cope with these pressures; however, such strategies remain informal, capacity-dependent, and insufficient to address structural misalignments in policy design. Moreover, the shift of teachers' roles toward administrative functions indicates that administrative complexity has direct pedagogical consequences, potentially undermining the core objective of Merdeka Belajar to enhance meaningful learning. Differences in administrative capacity among schools' further condition the uneven outcomes of policy implementation.

From a policy perspective, these conclusions suggest that administrative simplification cannot be achieved solely through regulatory reduction or digitalization. Effective reform requires coherent integration of administrative systems, alignment between autonomy and accountability mechanisms, and capacity-sensitive support for schools. Policymakers should therefore reposition Merdeka Belajar as both a pedagogical and administrative reform, ensuring that governance arrangements and implementation instruments genuinely enable schools and teachers to focus on learning rather than compliance. Such alignment is essential for transforming symbolic simplification into substantive administrative improvement.

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