

Grassroots-Based Curriculum Innovation: Integrating Research into Local Content Subjects in the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum

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Abstract: Grassroots-based curriculum innovation through integration into local content subjects is crucial in the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum. As a pilot project madrasah, consistency in curriculum development that integrates research is essential. This training aims to describe teachers' perceptions and experiences in research-based implementation, their active involvement in designing solutions for integrating research into local content subjects, analyze the impact of teacher participation in the training process, and outline the real challenges teachers face in developing a research-based curriculum. The community service method uses PAR, which consists of the stages: to know, to understand, to plan, to act, and to change. The training participants consisted of the Head of Madrasah Education, the Principal, the Deputy Principal, and 25 teachers. Based on the training results, the teachers successfully developed a semester program as a mapping of research material, a research syllabus integrated with the love-based curriculum, a lesson plan, and student worksheets with different themes. The training participants, including teachers outside the pilot project, were very enthusiastic and produced a set of learning curricula and actively participated in overcoming obstacles in the process of developing research curriculum documents for local content subjects. In this way, grassroots curriculum innovation can produce a set of learning curricula compiled by teachers for the learning process in local content subjects.

Keywords: Grassroots Curriculum Innovation, Research Integration, Local Content.

Introduction

Curriculum innovation grounded in grassroots contexts, particularly through teacher training that integrates research into local content subjects (*muatan lokal*), has become increasingly critical in contemporary educational reform. Such innovation is essential for ensuring that learning processes are responsive to local needs, cultural values, and community realities. In Indonesia, grassroots-oriented curriculum development supports the emergence of research-based madrasahs and schools that are adaptive, contextually relevant, and socially embedded. This approach aligns closely with the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes flexibility, contextualization, and the integration of local wisdom and indigenous

knowledge – often conceptualized through ethnoscience – into formal learning experiences (Fitriyah & Wardani, 2022; Widiyawati et al., 2023).

The *Kurikulum Merdeka* represents a paradigm shift toward educational autonomy and contextual learning, rooted in the principle of *merdeka belajar* or “freedom to learn.” This philosophy promotes student agency, differentiated learning pathways, and teacher empowerment, allowing schools to design curricula that reflect local characteristics and learner diversity (Al-Akmam & Pahmi, 2024; Handayani et al., 2024). By encouraging project-based learning, personalized instruction, and character education grounded in Pancasila values, the curriculum seeks to create meaningful and relevant educational experiences (Hidayat & Putro, 2024; Nursanti et al., 2024). However,

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the realization of these ideals depends heavily on teachers' capacity to translate policy into classroom practice, particularly within locally developed subjects.

Despite its strategic potential, *muatan lokal* in Indonesian schools remains largely administrative rather than pedagogical. Several studies indicate that local content subjects are often implemented merely to fulfill regulatory requirements, with limited instructional innovation and minimal integration of research-based practices (Nisa & Utanto, 2022; Supriyanta, 2021; Zulaiha & Wahyudin, 2024). This administrative orientation results in superficial learning experiences that fail to cultivate students' inquiry skills, critical thinking, or deep engagement with local knowledge systems. Moreover, the disconnect between curriculum development and empirical educational research further weakens the role of *muatan lokal* as a meaningful site for contextual and transformative learning (Basri et al., 2024; Nurkholis et al., 2023).

In response to these limitations, grassroots approaches to curriculum innovation have gained prominence as a means of fostering community-driven, participatory education. Grassroots curriculum models emphasize bottom-up development, active stakeholder involvement, and the co-construction of knowledge rooted in local realities (Hakim & Hasan, 2020; Rahmawati et al., 2023). Through this approach, curriculum design becomes a collaborative process involving teachers, students, and communities, thereby enhancing relevance, ownership, and accountability. Research shows that project-based and inquiry-oriented learning within grassroots frameworks can cultivate a research culture among students and prepare them for academic, scientific, and civic engagement (Dacumos & Silva, 2023; Tembo et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, implementing grassroots curriculum innovation—particularly research-integrated local content within the *Kurikulum Merdeka*—presents substantial challenges. Teachers frequently report difficulties in aligning curriculum content with new pedagogical demands, such as holistic assessment, project-based learning, and research integration, due to limited training and institutional support (Hafiz et al., 2024; Musid et al., 2024). These challenges are exacerbated in rural and under-resourced areas, where gaps in curriculum knowledge, technological skills, and access to relevant teaching materials hinder effective implementation (Cahyani & Subrata, 2022; Huliyah & others, 2024). As a result, the transformative potential of local content subjects remains underutilized.

Institutional support and sustained professional development are therefore crucial for bridging the gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities. Studies emphasize that structured mentoring programs, collaboration between higher education institutions and

schools, and context-specific teacher training significantly enhance teachers' capacity to implement the *Kurikulum Merdeka* effectively (Kusumantoro & others, 2024; Virgiyanti et al., 2023; Yusron et al., 2024). However, many existing training initiatives rely heavily on self-reported perceptions rather than systematic evaluation of changes in teaching practice, limiting their long-term impact (Suryani et al., 2023). This highlights the need for participatory, practice-oriented training models that embed research competencies directly into local content instruction.

Although prior studies have underscored the importance of curriculum innovation, teacher training, and local wisdom integration, several critical gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature adopts top-down or descriptive approaches, offering limited applicative models that teachers can readily adapt in grassroots contexts. Second, community participation is often discussed normatively rather than operationally, leaving its practical role in curriculum development underexplored. Third, the integration of research within *muatan lokal* is frequently treated as a supplementary component rather than a foundational pedagogical strategy. Addressing these gaps, this study positions itself at the intersection of grassroots curriculum innovation, contextual teacher training, and research-integrated local content. It aims to develop a participatory and student-centered curriculum model that strengthens teacher capacity and enhances the effectiveness of *Kurikulum Merdeka* implementation in research-oriented madrasas and schools.

Method

Community service with a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, from (Agus Afandi, 2022), with the following process stages:

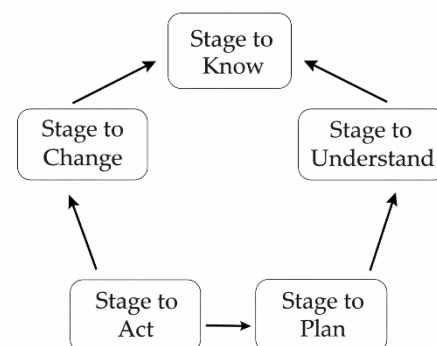


Figure 1. Participatory Action Research Cycle

The community engagement process was implemented as a continuous and cyclical methodological framework, emphasizing participatory and collaborative approaches throughout all stages. The

initial Stage to Know focused on an enculturation process through active engagement with the madrasah community to build trust and mutual understanding. This stage went beyond conventional training activities by fostering collaborative interactions aimed at identifying and understanding grassroots curriculum challenges. Data gathered during this phase indicated that research-based learning had not been effectively implemented; learning activities tended to rely heavily on task-based assignments, and there was no local content curriculum integrating research. The subsequent Stage to Understand involved a comprehensive and collaborative inquiry process to validate and deepen these preliminary findings. Through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis conducted jointly with teachers and school leaders, it was revealed that the absence of research-based learning stemmed from teachers' limited competencies in designing inquiry-oriented activities and the lack of a conceptual and operational framework for integrating research into local content subjects. These findings confirmed that the challenges were both structural and pedagogical in nature, necessitating curriculum-level interventions and systematic capacity building for teachers.

Building upon this shared understanding, the Stage to Plan was directed toward formulating strategic actions to address the identified issues through a participatory planning process. Rather than transferring problem-solving responsibility solely to researchers or school administrators, the planning stage adhered to the principle of shared ownership, with the madrasah leadership delegating curriculum-related development tasks to relevant stakeholders. This stage resulted in an action plan aimed at strengthening the implementation of research-based learning through structured training involving teachers, the curriculum development team, and the head of the madrasah. Key outcomes included the design of a research-integrated local content curriculum framework intended to reduce the dominance of task-oriented learning practices. The planning outputs comprised administrative and instructional components such as training permits, assignment letters, training schedules, syllabus formats, lesson plans, student worksheets, and thematic research mappings across grade levels. The Stage to Act translated these plans into concrete actions through the implementation of grassroots curriculum innovation, particularly the development of learning tools that systematically integrated student research activities, ensuring coherence between curriculum design, teacher practice, and contextual learning objectives.

This training activity was attended by three madrasahs, as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Distribution of Training Participants

No.	Name of Madrasah	Male Participants	Female Participants
1	MTsN 1 Balikpapan	3	7
2	MTsN 2 Balikpapan	1	4
3	MAN Balikpapan	1	9

The agreed action plan was implemented through teacher training on grassroots curriculum innovation, accompanied by guided support in developing research theme mappings, teaching modules, student worksheets, and syllabi, as well as pilot testing of project-based learning. Teachers applied the integration of simple research-oriented learning activities grounded in local environmental and cultural contexts, while the curriculum team conducted supervisory activities to ensure alignment with the developed local content curriculum framework. This action phase was primarily directed toward transforming instructional practices from task-oriented approaches to more varied pedagogical strategies, particularly project-based learning, which is strongly recommended in the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

In the subsequent Stage to Change, critical reflection and evaluation were conducted to assess the outcomes of the curriculum innovation training. Reflective activities took place through internal deliberations between the research team and the curriculum development community, fostering collective learning experiences. The primary objective of this reflection was to critically examine prior actions and extract key lessons to inform future improvements. Through reflective processes involving both the community engagement team and stakeholders, new insights and stronger commitments were expected to emerge, ensuring the continued relevance of the initiatives for all parties involved (Afandi, 2022). This ongoing self-reflection process was sustained through continuous evaluation and collaboration to enhance the quality of curriculum design and instructional practices in local content subjects, with evaluation outcomes summarized as indicators of the achievement of grassroots curriculum innovation training targets.

Table 2. Targets of the Community Engagement Program

No.	Component	Before the Program	After the Program
1	Teachers	Did not have a local content curriculum that integrates research into the learning process	Have a structured local content curriculum that integrates research-based learning
2	Students	Showed low motivation toward local content subjects, which tended to be monotonous and task-oriented	Are motivated through learning activities based on Project-Based Learning (PjBL)
3	Madrasah	Did not have a research-based local content curriculum consisting of a Semester Program, Syllabus, Lesson Plans/Teaching Modules, and Student Worksheets	Have a research-based local content curriculum consisting of a Semester Program, Syllabus, Lesson Plans/Teaching Modules, and Student Worksheets

Result and Discussion

Result

Based on the results of the grassroots-based curriculum innovation training, through the integration of research into Local Content Subjects in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, using the Participatory Action Research (PAR) method, the following steps were taken:

The "To Know" Stage

The "To Know" stage involves identifying and recognizing issues faced by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Madrasah Principals, and the community involved in developing the research curriculum through grassroots curriculum innovation. At this stage, the community service team and participants collaboratively identify real-world situations, needs, and problems within the local content curriculum. The initial findings revealed that the pilot madrasahs did not yet have a research curriculum, but this was achieved through direct experience, observation, discussions, and interviews. The following is documentation of the "To Know" stage in the madrasahs.

Interviews revealed that the madrasahs lacked a planned curriculum document, and learning tended to be based on assignments. This was due to the lack of mentoring or specific training in research curriculum development.

Understanding Stage

In the understanding stage, the community service team conducted in-depth discussions about their experiences teaching research and the challenges of integrating grassroots curriculum innovation into learning. Discussions with teachers, the Madrasah Principal, and the Deputy Principal revealed that the teachers had integrated research learning to the best of their abilities. In each Madrasah, the research themes to be taught had not yet been structured for each meeting. Learning took place in the classroom, with teachers giving more assignments for local content subjects. This was because the Madrasahs had not yet provided a

research curriculum, and the material at each grade level was not yet coherent.

Furthermore, teachers lacked syllabi, lesson plans, or student worksheets for all grade levels. Meanwhile, in the Junior High Madrasah, research integration into learning had not yet been implemented; they only produced scientific papers when competitions were approaching. This requires an understanding of the limited capacity of teachers to design research activities, the lack of good practice examples, and the absence of local content curriculum guidelines, as well as the relevance of training materials to real-world needs in madrasahs.

Planning Stage

In the planning stage, online discussions were held to discuss the time, venue, organizing committee, participant selection, and catering for the event. The discussion was concluded on October 29, 2025, in the Balikpapan Ministry of Religious Affairs Hall from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. WITA (Central Indonesian Time), with 25 participants, comprised of the Head of Madrasah Education, teachers from MTsN 1, MTsN 2, and MAN Balikpapan. The following is a participatory discussion between teachers and the deputy principal regarding the planning of the research curriculum innovation.



Figure 2. Discussion on Preparation for Research Curriculum Innovation Training

The final outcome of this phase is a participatory training action plan document, containing a training and mentoring schedule, role allocation, research themes, a syllabus, lesson plans, student worksheets, and follow-up actions. This will serve as a guide for the next phase.

To Act Phase

This phase is the implementation of grassroots curriculum innovation training that integrates research into local content subjects within the implementation of the independent curriculum. The following is documentation of the opening of the training by the Head of the Balikpapan City Ministry of Religious Affairs Office.



Figure 3. Opening of Grassroots Curriculum Innovation Training

The training took place in the Balikpapan Ministry of Religious Affairs Hall, coordinated by the Head of Madrasah Education and the Principal of Balikpapan State Islamic Senior High School (MAN Balikpapan) from the three participating madrasahs. The material was delivered according to the activity schedule, followed by the process of developing grassroots-based curriculum learning components integrated with the love-based curriculum. The following is documentation of the group work from MTsN 1 and MTsN 2 Balikpapan.



Figure 4. Grassroots Curriculum Development for the Independent Curriculum

Discussions and assignments focused on developing themes for research materials taught to students in local content subjects. The grassroots curriculum innovation development process continued with the creation of a syllabus integrated with the love-based curriculum, lesson plans, and student worksheets. Research activities at MTsN 1, MTsN 2, and MAN

Balikpapan included the creation of research curriculum learning tools.

This process was facilitated by a PAR facilitator through on-site coaching and formative observation. During this phase, implementation data was collected to evaluate the effectiveness of the learning design and identify innovative practices for integrating research into local content subjects within the implementation of the independent curriculum.

The Change Phase

The change phase represents the real transformation phase of the entire PAR-based training process. After undergoing in-depth reflection, teachers not only recognized the importance of research and local content in learning but also began to reorganize the curriculum innovation at the madrasah. At this phase, the results of the reflection were implemented into corrective actions, both in the form of revised curriculum documents and in more contextual and participatory learning policies. Teachers act as agents of change, bringing innovative ideas for curriculum development, and madrasahs become spaces for the growth of research learning in the implementation of the independent curriculum. This requires improvements to research themes, teaching modules, syllabi, and student worksheets, the implementation of project-based learning, and improvements to teachers' pedagogical competencies. A paradigm shift from assignment-based learning to inquiry-based learning is needed, and an institutional commitment to making research learning part of the culture of superior madrasahs is being built. The following is documentation of the presentation of the results of improvements in the development of the research curriculum, from MTsN 2 Balikpapan.



Figure 5. MTsN 2 Group Presentation Reflection Stage

Discussion

Based on the training results at the pilot project madrasah and participating madrasahs, teachers gained experience in implementing an independent curriculum based on research and diverse local content. Emerging initiatives often require a transdisciplinary approach to effectively disseminate knowledge across multiple contexts and scales, promoting sustainable practices to external parties (Ortiz & Vilsmaier, 2022). Madrasahs integrate a variety of innovative pedagogical approaches, including blended learning, project-based learning, and personalized learning, aiming to increase student engagement and foster critical thinking competencies, despite challenges related to adequate technology support and access (Rosa et al., 2024). The grassroots curriculum innovation approach emphasizes the importance of participatory grassroots participation (Anlimachie, 2022). Its implementation places greater emphasis on project-based learning and active learning strategies, where teachers act as facilitators, encouraging students to actively engage in their learning process (Asmarawati, 2022).

The implementation of research madrasahs is carried out through local content subjects, extracurricular activities, and only the creation of scientific papers in preparation for scientific writing competitions. To prepare for this, madrasahs are developing curriculum tools that integrate research. Teachers are crucial in designing and implementing learning strategies that align with the goals of the independent curriculum and utilize technology-based learning 5.0 (Ningrum & Suryani, 2022; Sutrisno & Yulia, 2022). The grassroots model is a concept of curriculum co-creation, in which students, instructors, and administrators collaboratively engage in the evaluation and design of educational programs, ensuring that the curriculum remains relevant and responsive to the needs of all stakeholders (Hsu et al., 2023). The integration of innovative elements such as flexible curricula, student-centered teaching, and the use of information technology supports the grassroots model, which fosters adaptability in learning practices (Rodríguez Pech et al., 2022).

The impact of teacher participation through PAR-based training on the implementation of the independent curriculum is the availability of documents. Teachers successfully developed semester programs, including mapping research materials, developing research syllabi integrated with the love-based curriculum, developing lesson plans, and developing student worksheets with different themes for each madrasah. Furthermore, the implementation of this curriculum has demonstrated a positive impact on students' academic and social skills, as it encourages project-based and research-based learning, which

enhances critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Wahyuni et al., 2024). Teachers are not only facilitators of knowledge but also role models and leaders in the classroom, whose competencies and strategies significantly impacts the successful realization of educational goals within the Merdeka curriculum framework (Hamdi et al., 2022). Meanwhile, grassroots curriculum innovation with a collaborative approach empowers students by recognizing their existing knowledge and skills, motivating them to actively participate in education and community development. These training initiatives not only enhance teachers' professional skills but also contribute to the overall quality of education by fostering a dynamic and high-quality learning environment (Humaira et al., 2024).

This training demonstrated enthusiastic interest from teachers outside the pilot project. Participants actively participated in designing solutions to address challenges, resulting in the development of research curriculum documents for local content subjects. Five participants outside the pilot project Madrasah participated voluntarily. This was supported by an exploration of motivations for participating in research, which revealed the potential for increased community engagement to enhance the generalizability and impact of psychological interventions (Rheinberger et al., 2021). Teacher professional development is crucial for effectively integrating research into teaching practice, emphasizing the importance of moving beyond self-reports to evaluating the effectiveness of their performance (Firestone et al., 2020). Community-based participatory action exemplifies how engaging communities in the research process can lead to sustainable social change and improved outcomes (Ambuehl et al., 2024). Thus, the integration of research and the development of tools for equitable community-academic partnerships demonstrates the value of collaborative approaches in research (College & Gates, 2022; Dolata et al., 2025).

Real challenges faced by teachers in developing research-based and locally-based curricula include a lack of training, access to technology, financial support, implementation policies, and external partners in developing research-based curricula. These conditions require teacher training that is adaptive to local challenges through innovative strategies (Yang, 2023). Teacher approaches model pedagogical practices that strengthen local engagement (Spillman et al., 2023), while in Indonesia, the implementation of the independent curriculum emphasizes teacher autonomy and community involvement in curriculum development (Suryani et al., 2023). Teacher innovation in incorporating research-oriented components is driven by curriculum reforms to increase research capacity to address barriers to implementing research-oriented

education (Sarsenbayeva et al., 2024). Similarly, support for teachers through training and collaborative groups remains a gap in the depth of research and analysis needed to guide effective practice (Almeida et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the problems and steps in the PAR activity, Grassroots-Based Curriculum Innovation: Integration of Research in Local Content Subjects in the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the training activity, it can be concluded as follows; This Participatory Action Research (PAR)-based training activity shows the active involvement of the Madrasah Principal, Deputy Madrasah Principal, Teachers and Head of Madrasah Education Section in encouraging real transformation in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. The service and mentoring process opens up space for teachers to understand and internalize the concept of research and Local Content Subjects as the basis for context-based curriculum innovation. Through this activity, teachers are not only policy implementers, but also service implementers and learning design teachers who are able to explore the potential of mapping research materials as semester programs, syllabi, teaching modules and student worksheets.

The final results of the training and mentoring show the following: first, the capacity for direct involvement of the Madrasah Education Section Head, Madrasah Principal, and teachers in integrating research into the local content research subject curriculum; second, designing institutional capacity through the formation of a grassroots curriculum innovation development team community; and third, a more contextual, adaptive, and participatory curriculum transformation for the entire madrasa community. Thus, the PAR approach has proven effective as an innovative strategy for fostering curriculum innovation, reflection, and collaboration to overcome the obstacles and challenges of implementing madrasah research.

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LKPD, so that they can be implemented in the classroom learning process.

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