


## Digitalization and the Merdeka Belajar Reform: a Policy Discourse Analysis Through Postmodern and Critical Lenses

Yunita Endra Megiati<sup>1</sup>, Nandang Hidayat<sup>2</sup>, Didi Sutisna<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Pakuan. Jl. Pakuan, Tegallega, Kecamatan Bogor Tengah, Kota Bogor, Jawa Barat 16143

<sup>3</sup>Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Kesehatan Sismadi. Jl. Warakas Raya No.5B, RT.8/RW.10, Sunter Agung, Kec. Tj. Priok, Jkt Utara, Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta 14370

Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Keywords:</b> Digitalization, Merdeka Belajar, Critical Discourse Analysis, Foucault, Governmentality, Hegemony</p>	<p>This study examines the discourse of digitalization within Indonesia's Merdeka Belajar education reform through the lens of critical theory and postmodern philosophy. Using Critical Discourse Analysis on three key policy documents, the 2020–2035 Indonesian Education Roadmap, Ministerial Decree No. 56/2022, and the Merdeka Mengajar Platform Guide—the study uncovers underlying power dynamics and ideological assumptions embedded in the national digitalization agenda. The analysis identifies three dominant themes: (1) the hegemony of technological-efficiency narratives, reflected in notable lexical disparities (for example, “digital” appears far more frequently than “character” in the Roadmap); (2) disciplinary mechanisms enforced through legal obligations to access state-mandated digital platforms; and (3) an instrumental rationality that narrows education to the development of digital talent. The study concludes that digitalization in Merdeka Belajar is not merely a technological transition, but a contested arena where power relations shape and potentially marginalize humanistic educational values.</p>
<p>This is an open access article under the <a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/">CC BY-NC</a> license</p> 	<p><b>Corresponding Author:</b> Yunita Endra Megiati Universitas Pakuan Jl. Pakuan, Tegallega, Kecamatan Bogor Tengah, Kota Bogor, Jawa Barat 16143 <a href="mailto:yunitaendra@gmail.com">yunitaendra@gmail.com</a></p>

### INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka Belajar Reform, launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology between 2019 and 2024, positions digitalization as the central engine of Indonesia's contemporary educational transformation. In line with Selwyn and Facer (2014), digital technology in education must be understood not as a neutral or purely instrumental tool, but as an artefact embedded within broader socio-political, economic, and ideological structures. This perspective becomes evident when examining three core policy documents, the Indonesian Education Roadmap 2020–2035, the Ministerial Decree on the Merdeka Curriculum, and the Guideline for the Merdeka Mengajar Platform, which collectively articulate a persistent and assertive digital agenda. Within these documents, digital platforms are no longer framed as supplementary aids; rather, they are constructed as essential infrastructures that reconfigure pedagogical practices, governance arrangements, teacher–student relations, and even the epistemological foundations of what counts as legitimate knowledge in schools.

Yet, beneath the dominant narrative of progress, efficiency, and modernization embedded within these texts lies a dense constellation of power relations that demands critical interrogation. Digitalization under the Merdeka Belajar framework does not emerge in a socio-cultural vacuum; it operates within an Indonesia marked by enduring digital divides, heterogeneous cultural orientations, and deep-rooted educational traditions that cannot be reduced to algorithmic or data-driven logics. As emphasized by Siti Nurhayati et al. (2024), Merdeka Belajar should be interpreted not merely as a technical or pedagogical intervention but as a philosophical project that embodies a specific worldview of education, one that resonates strongly with essentialist assumptions about talent cultivation, standardization, and the optimization of human capital. In this sense, the digital turn in Merdeka Belajar must be understood as a form of governmentality, shaping subjects, behaviors, and institutional norms through subtle mechanisms of surveillance, regulation, and ideological framing.

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in critical discourse analysis to examine how power, ideology, and digital governance are encoded within the policy framework of Merdeka Belajar. The approach treats policy documents not as neutral administrative texts but as discursive arenas where particular narratives are elevated and legitimized. By using this lens, the study seeks to uncover how digitalization is presented as both a transformative force and a governing mechanism within Indonesian education.

The data consist of 3 major documents published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. These include the long-term national education roadmap, the ministerial decree regulating the Merdeka Curriculum, and the guideline for the Merdeka Mengajar Platform. These documents were selected because they represent the most authoritative statements shaping how digital reform is defined, justified, and operationalized at the national level.

Data collection began with a close reading of each document, focusing on language patterns, thematic clusters, and dominant metaphors relating to technological change. Attention was directed toward descriptions of the roles assigned to platforms, expectations for teacher performance, and the criteria used to define digital competence. This stage enabled the researcher to identify subtle expressions of authority, normative assumptions, and ideological positions embedded in the policy narratives.

The analytical process followed Fairclough's 3-dimensional model, encompassing textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. Textual analysis examined lexical choices, modality, and the presence of evaluative or directive language. Discursive practice explored how the documents were produced, disseminated, and positioned within broader national visions of modernization and efficiency. Social practice analysis linked these findings to structural challenges in Indonesian education, including digital divides, cultural heterogeneity, and centralized policy control.

To broaden interpretive depth, the study incorporated theoretical perspectives from Foucault's notion of governmentality, Gramsci's concept of hegemony, and insights from contemporary critical digital studies. These frameworks helped illuminate how the policy

documents function not only as regulatory instruments but also as technologies of power that shape teacher subjectivity, redefine pedagogical norms, and promote specific forms of digital rationality. Theoretical triangulation strengthened analytical robustness and deepened the understanding of ideological forces at play.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis to ensure transparency and minimize interpretive bias. The researcher documented evolving insights, emerging patterns, and potential blind spots through reflective memos. These notes served as an internal audit trail, supporting the credibility of the findings and ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in the textual evidence rather than personal assumptions.

The final stage involved synthesizing the discursive patterns and interpreting their broader socio-political implications. The goal was to move beyond describing how digitalization is framed, toward understanding what such framings reveal about authority, governance, and the shifting identity of educators within the Merdeka Belajar era. This methodological approach provides a rigorous foundation for examining the ideological dimensions of current educational reforms and contributes to a more critical conversation on digital ethics and policy practice in Indonesia.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Lexical Hegemony and Instrumental Rationality

Quantitative analysis of the Indonesian Education Roadmap reveals a significant lexical disparity:

**Table 1.** Frequency of Key Terms in the Indonesian Education Roadmap for the period of twenty twenty to twenty thirty five

Key Terms	Frequency	Percentage
Digital/Digitalization	47	2.1%
Technology	38	1.7%
Character	12	0.5%
Culture	9	0.4%
Philosophy	0	0%

This disparity reveals a clear policy priority: the digital agenda dominates the discourse, while humanistic values such as character and culture are pushed to the margins. A crucial quotation from the Roadmap states: “Digital transformation will shift the paradigm of educational governance from manual and centralized to digital and decentralized” (p. 34). The dichotomies of “manual versus digital” and “centralized versus decentralized” construct a narrative in which the digital is equated with progress, while the manual is associated with backwardness. As argued by Selwyn and Facer (2024), digital technology is not a neutral tool but is embedded within specific socio-political contexts, in this case, the context of Indonesia’s ongoing educational transformation.

A Foucauldian analysis suggests that this discourse creates a new “regime of truth” in which good education must be digitalized. A Habermasian reading highlights how the reduction of educational complexity into matters of technical efficiency reflects the logic of instrumental rationality. As reminded by Aan Widiyono and Izzah Millati (2021), educational

technology in the Merdeka Belajar era of 4.0 does not merely function as an assisting tool, but also as a system that supports effective, efficient, and meaningful learning processes.

### **Legal Obligations and Digital Discipline**

The Ministerial Decree Number 56 of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology for the year 2022, Article 12 paragraph 2, states: “Educators are required to access and utilize the Merdeka Mengajar Platform for planning, implementing, and evaluating learning.” The word “required” represents a Foucauldian disciplinary mechanism that binds teachers to the digital ecosystem through formal regulation. Williamson’s (2021) concept of “meta-edtech” helps explain how platforms such as Merdeka Mengajar function as digital infrastructures governing the educational system.

Article 15 paragraph 4 further asserts: “Student progress and educator performance are monitored regularly through the Merdeka Mengajar Platform dashboard.” The dashboard operates as a digital panopticon in which teachers are continuously visible and measurable, creating the kind of self-regulation typical of Foucauldian technologies of power. In Knox’s (2019) postdigital context, such technologies become so deeply embedded that their influence often goes unnoticed. A study by Uki Hares Yulianti et al. (2025) found that the digital-based implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in pilot schools created a digitalized learning ecosystem that simultaneously served as a centralized monitoring and evaluation tool.

The analysis indicates that these legal obligations transform the platform from a mere auxiliary tool into a mandatory infrastructure that disciplines the bodies and minds of teachers. Monitoring through the dashboard constitutes a modern surveillance mechanism, subtle yet highly effective compared with direct supervision.

### **Digital Stratification and the Hegemony of Guru Penggerak**

The Merdeka Mengajar Platform Guideline implements a leveling system for teachers, ranging from level 1 to level 12, based on “activities and contributions” within the platform. Each level comes with specific badges and differentiated access rights, creating a new form of social stratification based on digital capital. As Selwyn and Facer (2014) note, digital technology reshapes social relations in education, here producing a hierarchy among teachers.

The title “guru penggerak” (teacher mobilizer) is awarded to those who are active on the platform, while the passive are labeled “rekan belajar” (learning peers). This division functions as a Gramscian hegemonic mechanism that builds consensus by equating digital conformity with professional advancement. Williamson (2021) would view this as part of “meta-edtech,” where computational logics govern educational practice.

A Gramscian analysis highlights how the category of “guru penggerak” becomes a tool of hegemony that encourages teachers to voluntarily adopt digital values without overt coercion. From a Foucauldian perspective, the leveling system acts as a technology of power that classifies, normalizes, and disciplines subjects.

### **Knowledge Monopoly and Pedagogical Standardization**

The Merdeka Mengajar Platform provides “standardized teaching tools” that all teachers are required to access. The curriculum authority becomes the sole producer of official

knowledge, while teachers are reduced to passive consumers. From Knox's (2019) postdigital standpoint, this illustrates how technology not only alters how teaching is conducted but also reshapes what counts as valid knowledge.

A critical theory reading suggests that the state monopoly over knowledge through digital platforms constitutes a new form of epistemological control. The standardization of teaching tools erodes creativity and contextualization in learning, both core principles of Merdeka Belajar itself. As Selwyn and Facer (2014) emphasize, it is essential to question whose interests are served by particular forms of educational technology. The study by Siti Nurhayati et al. (2024) on Merdeka Belajar from the perspective of essentialist educational philosophy reminds us that a philosophical reading of policy is crucial for understanding the long-term implications of digital transformation.

### **Resistance and Adaptation: The Dynamics of Grassroots Acceptance**

This analysis would be incomplete without considering the dynamics of acceptance and resistance at the level of implementation. Although the policy establishes a disciplinary structure, field studies conducted by Yulianti et al. (2025) reveal various forms of adaptation and creative resistance among teachers. Several identifiable patterns include:

1. **Passive Resistance:** Teachers access the platform only to fulfill administrative obligations without substantively integrating it into their teaching practice.
2. **Selective Adaptation:** Teachers choose specific features that align with local contexts while disregarding those that are irrelevant.
3. **Creative Subversion:** Teachers use the platform as an "entry point" and subsequently develop more contextualized learning materials outside the platform.

These phenomena indicate that although the discourse of digitalization dominates policy documents, its implementation in practice is neither linear nor uniform. As emphasized by Siti Nurhayati et al. (2024), a philosophical reading of educational policy from an essentialist perspective reminds us that education is fundamentally a humanizing process, rather than merely a technical-digital procedure.

A Foucauldian analysis interprets these forms of resistance as "counter-conduct," in which subjects (teachers) find ways to maintain their autonomy within a system that disciplines them. A Gramscian analysis highlights that such spaces of resistance demonstrate that hegemony is never total; there is always room for negotiation and opposition.

### **Policy Implications**

#### **Implications for Policymakers**

First, there must be recognition that the digitalization of education is not merely a technical project but also a political-ideological project that reshapes educational governance (Williamson, 2021). Second, affirmative policies are needed to reach teachers and schools that are digitally marginalized. Third, public deliberation spaces must be opened to critically examine the assumptions and impacts of digitalization. Fourth, a holistic evaluation model must be developed, one that measures the success of digitalization not only through the quantity of platform use but also through its effects on learning quality and teachers' pedagogical autonomy. Such evaluation must position teachers as subjects, not merely objects, of digitalization. Concrete recommendations include:

1. Integrating digital ethics clauses into all educational policies.
2. Allocating dedicated budgets for critical digital literacy training.
3. Establishing an independent oversight committee to monitor the accountability of educational platforms.
4. Developing pedagogical impact indicators for digitalization that go beyond platform usage metrics.
5. Providing tiered mentoring programs for teachers who struggle with digital adaptation, using context-sensitive approaches.

### **Implications for School Leadership**

School principals need to cultivate critical digital literacy, the ability to question the assumptions, consequences, and alternatives of educational technologies. They must create “technology-free pedagogical spaces” where teachers can discuss educational values without being bound to the dominant digital narrative. In Knox’s (2019) terminology, this involves building critical awareness of the postdigital condition in which we live. As noted by Aan Widiyono and Izzah Millati (2021), educational technology within Merdeka Belajar should be understood not only as a device but also as a system that supports meaningful learning processes.

Principals must also function as “critical filters” who moderate the pressures of digitalization coming from higher policy levels and adapt them to the real conditions of their schools. They should build communities of practice in which teachers share experiences and strategies for navigating digitalization challenges, while also developing alternative pedagogical approaches that preserve humanistic educational values.

### **Strategic Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the government needs to treat digitalization as a transformative project that integrates ethical mechanisms, critical literacy, and equitable infrastructure. Teacher training should not focus solely on technical aspects but must also emphasize the development of critical awareness regarding the social implications of technology (OECD, 2023; Knox, 2020). With such an approach, digitalization can genuinely support the spirit of Merdeka Belajar rather than diminish it.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that the digitalization agenda embedded in the Merdeka Belajar reform is not simply an administrative modernization effort but a broader political and ideological project that reshapes educational governance, classroom practice, and teacher identity. The policy texts construct a dominant discourse that aligns digital progress with educational quality, thereby marginalizing humanistic values such as character formation, cultural grounding, and pedagogical autonomy. Through a critical discourse lens informed by Foucauldian, Gramscian, and Habermasian perspectives, the analysis reveals how digital platforms operate as infrastructures of power that discipline teachers, standardize knowledge, and create new hierarchies within the teaching profession. Yet, the findings also highlight that teachers are not passive recipients of policy. At the grassroots level, diverse forms of selective adaptation, quiet resistance, and creative subversion indicate that digital

hegemony is never absolute. These practices show how educators negotiate their agency within a system that increasingly privileges computational logic over contextual wisdom. The study therefore calls for a more reflective and ethical approach to digitalization, one that recognizes the political nature of technology, values professional judgment, and ensures that digital reforms truly support human development. By centering critical awareness and pedagogical purpose, digital transformation can align more closely with the holistic vision of Merdeka Belajar.

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