

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The Merdeka Curriculum represents Indonesia's most significant educational reform in the past decade, promoting student-centered learning through curricular flexibility and the development of competencies aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile. This study aims to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SD Darut Thalabab, identify the factors supporting and constraining its implementation, and examine its impact on classroom learning. A qualitative case study approach was employed, with data collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with the school principal, a classroom teacher, and a student, as well as document analysis. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, while source and method triangulation ensured the credibility of the findings. The results indicate that the curriculum has promoted flexible learning planning, differentiated instruction, authentic assessment, and project-based learning through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), leading to increased student participation, collaboration, learning independence, creativity, and critical thinking. However, implementation remains constrained by teachers' limited experience in differentiated instruction, limited instructional resources, and the need for continuous professional development. The study concludes that the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum depends on teacher competence, supportive school leadership, adequate educational resources, and sustained institutional support to create meaningful and student-centered learning in elementary schools.

Keywords: *Curriculum Implementation, Differentiated Instruction, Elementary Education, Merdeka Curriculum, Student-Centered Learning*

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental pillar in developing quality human resources with global competitiveness (Yusuf et al., 2024). In the era of technological disruption and increasingly rapid social change, the education system is required to continuously adapt in order to produce learners who not only master knowledge (Sarfika et al., 2023), but also possess critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills known as 21st century skills (Ha et al., 2021; Puspitacandri et al., 2020; Zou et al., 2025). This paradigm shift demands a fundamental transformation in curriculum, pedagogy, and educational assessment systems. Indonesia has undergone various curriculum changes in an effort to improve the quality of national education. Starting from the Competency-Based Curriculum (KBK) 2004, School-Based Curriculum (KTSP) 2006, to Curriculum 2013 (K-13) which emphasizes thematic-integrative learning and a scientific approach (Ananda & Hudaidah, 2021). However, various evaluations show that Curriculum 2013 still faces challenges in its implementation, particularly related to overly heavy content load, limited teacher flexibility in designing learning, and the gap between policy and practice in the field.

Conceptually, the Merdeka Curriculum provides freedom for teachers to design learning that suits the characteristics of students (Mustoip, 2023). Teachers are given flexibility in determining methods, strategies, media, and learning assessments (Dewi & Sumarni, 2024). This approach is expected to create more meaningful learning and be able to

optimally develop students' potential. The phenomenon of Merdeka Curriculum implementation in elementary schools shows a shift in learning paradigm from teacher-centered to student-centered learning (Al Ayyubi et al., 2024; Sari et al., 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2023). Students are no longer positioned as objects of learning, but as active subjects in the learning process. Project-based learning and differentiated learning are the main characteristics of this curriculum implementation (Hays & Reinders, 2020).

Based on literature facts, various studies show that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has a positive impact on the learning process. Research by Karliani & Triyani (2021) found that the Merdeka Curriculum is able to increase students' active participation. Research by Fanani et al. 2(020) also explains that the implementation of differentiated learning and P5 can strengthen students' character and creativity. However, other studies show that there are still various obstacles, such as limited teacher understanding, facility constraints, and minimal training.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary school learning, identify supporting and inhibiting factors of implementation, and describe its impact on the learning process. This research is expected to contribute to the development of education policy, especially in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools. The hypothesis argument in this study is based on the assumption that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum can improve the quality of learning in elementary schools through differentiated learning, project-based learning, and strengthening students' character. The better the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, the higher the quality of the learning process taking place in schools.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), to explore the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in an

elementary school setting. A case study design was selected because it enables an in-depth investigation of curriculum implementation within its real-life context, providing a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and educational practices. The research was conducted at SD Darut Thalabah, located at Jl. KH. Ghazali No. 92, Sumber Kalong, Wonosari District, Bondowoso Regency, East Java, Indonesia. The unit of analysis consisted of four key components of Merdeka Curriculum implementation: (1) learning planning, (2) learning implementation, (3) learning assessment, and (4) the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5).

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The study involved three participants: one school principal, one homeroom teacher, and one elementary school student. The school principal provided information regarding curriculum policy and school management, the teacher described instructional planning and classroom implementation, and the student shared learning experiences and perceptions of the curriculum. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Classroom observations focused on teaching and learning activities, classroom interactions, and the application of differentiated instruction. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal, teacher, and student to explore their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Documentary evidence, including teaching modules, lesson plans, assessment instruments, student learning portfolios, and school policy documents, was analyzed to support and verify the findings obtained from observations and interviews.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles & Huberman (1994) which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data analysis was conducted iteratively throughout the research process to identify patterns, relationships, and

emerging themes. The credibility and trustworthiness of the findings were enhanced through source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking. Triangulation was achieved by comparing data obtained from observations, interviews, and documents, while member checking was conducted by confirming the interview findings with the participants to ensure the accuracy of interpretation.

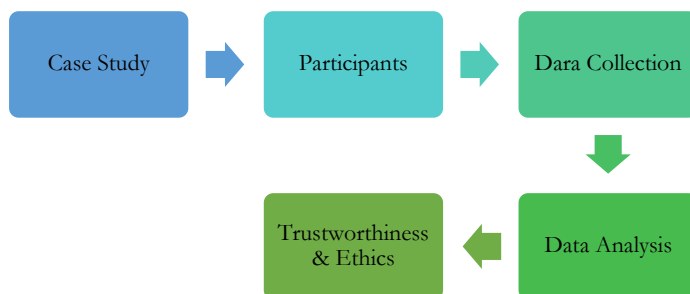


Figure. 1 Research Produce

This study adhered to established ethical principles for educational research. Prior to data collection, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the principal of SD Darut Thalabah. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate after receiving an explanation of the research objectives, procedures, and their rights as participants. Written informed consent was obtained from the school principal and teacher, while informed consent from the student's parent or legal guardian and the student's verbal assent were secured before the interview. Participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential and that the collected data would be used solely for academic purposes. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

The findings of this study were derived from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with the school principal, one homeroom teacher, and one student, as well as

document analysis conducted at SD Darut Thalabah. Data analysis generated four interrelated themes that describe the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum: (1) learning planning, (2) learning implementation, (3) learning assessment and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), and (4) challenges in curriculum implementation.

Learning Planning

Data obtained from interviews and document analysis indicate that learning planning under the Merdeka Curriculum has shifted from content-oriented planning toward competency-oriented learning. The school principal explained that teachers are encouraged to independently develop teaching modules that align with the Learning Outcomes (CP) while considering students' learning characteristics and classroom conditions. This institutional support has provided teachers with greater autonomy in organizing meaningful learning activities.

Analysis of the teacher's teaching modules, lesson plans, and learning documents showed that instructional planning incorporated various learning activities, including classroom discussions, collaborative assignments, and contextual learning experiences. Rather than emphasizing the completion of curriculum content, the lesson plans prioritized students' conceptual understanding, active participation, and competency development.

Classroom observations further confirmed the consistency between planning documents and instructional practice. The observed lesson began with activities designed to identify students' prior knowledge, followed by collaborative learning tasks that encouraged participation from all students. These findings demonstrate that instructional planning has been translated into classroom practice through learning experiences that emphasize student engagement and active learning.

The convergence of interview, observation, and documentation data suggests that learning planning at SD Darut Thalabah reflects the flexibility promoted by the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers are no longer restricted to

standardized instructional procedures but are able to adjust learning activities according to students' academic needs and classroom dynamics.

Learning Implementation

Observation data revealed that classroom learning was predominantly student-centered. During the observed lesson, the teacher facilitated discussion-based learning rather than relying on one-way instruction. Students actively participated in asking questions, exchanging ideas with peers, completing collaborative tasks, and presenting their work before the class. The teacher's role shifted from being the primary source of knowledge to becoming a facilitator who guided students throughout the learning process.

Interview data supported these observations. The classroom teacher explained that differentiated instruction was implemented by adapting learning activities according to students' learning readiness and classroom participation. Students who required additional guidance received more intensive support, while those demonstrating higher levels of understanding were encouraged to complete more challenging learning tasks.

The student interviewed described learning under the Merdeka Curriculum as more enjoyable because classroom activities frequently involved discussions, teamwork, and opportunities to express opinions. According to the student's account, these learning experiences increased confidence, encouraged active participation, and made lessons easier to understand.

These findings indicate that differentiated instruction was not implemented merely as a curriculum requirement but had become part of everyday classroom practice. The integration of observation and interview data demonstrates that student-centered learning has contributed to creating a more interactive classroom atmosphere in which students actively construct knowledge through participation and collaboration.

Learning Assessment and the Implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5)

Findings from interviews and document analysis indicate that assessment practices have become more comprehensive than conventional paper-based examinations. The classroom teacher explained that assessment was conducted continuously throughout the learning process by considering students' participation, assignment completion, project performance, and classroom behavior.

Analysis of assessment documents confirmed that teachers employed multiple forms of assessment, including observation records, project evaluations, performance assessments, and students' learning portfolios. These assessment practices enabled teachers to monitor students' academic progress while simultaneously evaluating character development, collaboration, responsibility, and communication skills.

The implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) was also evident in both interviews and school documentation. The school principal explained that P5 activities were integrated into school programs through collaborative projects designed to strengthen students' responsibility, creativity, cooperation, and environmental awareness. Documentation demonstrated that students participated in project-based activities requiring teamwork, problem-solving, and practical application of classroom knowledge.

The interviewed student confirmed active participation in these project activities and perceived them as different from conventional classroom lessons because they involved direct practice and collaboration with classmates. Observation findings also showed that students demonstrated enthusiasm during collaborative activities and were able to communicate ideas more confidently when completing project assignments.

Overall, these findings indicate that assessment under the Merdeka Curriculum extends beyond measuring cognitive achievement by incorporating students' attitudes, skills, collaboration, and character development. Furthermore, the implementation of P5 has strengthened the connection between classroom learning and authentic learning experiences.

Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

Although the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has produced positive changes in teaching and learning practices, interviews identified several challenges that continue to influence its effectiveness.

The classroom teacher acknowledged that designing differentiated learning activities remains challenging because students demonstrate diverse levels of academic readiness and learning needs. Preparing multiple instructional strategies requires additional planning time and instructional creativity. Furthermore, limited teaching resources and learning media occasionally restrict the variety of learning activities that can be implemented effectively.

The school principal similarly identified continuous teacher professional development as an important requirement for sustaining curriculum implementation. According to the principal, teachers need ongoing opportunities to improve their understanding of differentiated instruction, authentic assessment, and project-based learning. School leadership therefore plays an important role in facilitating professional learning and encouraging collaboration among teachers.

Observation data also indicated that implementing differentiated learning requires intensive classroom management because the teacher simultaneously supports students with different learning abilities within a single classroom setting. Despite these challenges, the teacher consistently attempted to provide learning support appropriate to students' individual needs.

Taken together, the evidence from interviews, observations, and documentation demonstrates that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SD Darut Thalabah has successfully promoted more flexible learning, increased student participation, and strengthened character education through P5 activities. However, the findings also suggest that the sustainability of curriculum implementation depends on continuous teacher professional development, adequate instructional resources, and strong school leadership that supports innovation in classroom practice.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SD Darut Thalabah represents a gradual transformation from a teacher-centered instructional model toward a student-centered learning environment. Evidence obtained through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis indicates that this transformation extends beyond changes in curriculum documents and instructional administration. Instead, it reflects a pedagogical shift in which teachers redesign learning experiences, students assume more active roles in knowledge construction, and school leadership provides institutional support for curriculum innovation. This finding suggests that curriculum reform is not merely a policy intervention but a process of changing instructional culture within schools.

The first significant finding concerns learning planning. Unlike previous curriculum practices that primarily emphasized content completion, lesson planning under the Merdeka Curriculum focused on developing essential competencies through contextual and flexible learning experiences. The teacher demonstrated autonomy in designing teaching modules that considered students' readiness, classroom conditions, and expected learning outcomes. This flexibility indicates a redistribution of professional responsibility from centralized curriculum prescriptions toward teacher decision-making. Such a shift reflects the fundamental philosophy of the Merdeka Curriculum, which positions teachers not as curriculum implementers alone but as curriculum designers capable of adapting learning to diverse educational contexts. Similar observations were reported by Alam (2020), who argue that curriculum flexibility encourages contextualized learning. However, this study extends previous findings by demonstrating how curriculum autonomy is translated into concrete classroom planning through locally developed teaching modules and instructional adaptation within a single elementary school context.

The second finding reveals that classroom implementation has undergone substantial pedagogical

transformation. Classroom observations showed that instructional interaction became increasingly dialogic, collaborative, and participatory. Rather than functioning as the sole source of information, the teacher facilitated discussion, guided inquiry, and encouraged collaborative problem-solving (Purnamasari et al., 2025). Students actively contributed ideas, asked questions, and participated in classroom discussions, indicating greater ownership of their learning process.

From a constructivist perspective, these findings demonstrate that knowledge construction occurs through interaction between learners, teachers, and learning environments rather than through passive information transfer. The observed learning activities illustrate principles of social constructivism, where understanding develops through dialogue, collaboration, and authentic learning experiences. Furthermore, differentiated instruction was implemented not merely as a technical strategy but as an instructional philosophy acknowledging that students possess different levels of readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This finding reinforces Amalia et al. (2026) and (Ikromi et al., 2025) proposition that effective differentiation requires continuous instructional adjustment based on students' individual learning needs. More importantly, the present study indicates that differentiated instruction can be successfully initiated even in schools with limited resources, provided that teachers demonstrate sufficient pedagogical flexibility and commitment.

Another important contribution of this study concerns assessment practices and the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). The findings indicate that assessment has shifted from measuring learning outcomes exclusively toward supporting the learning process itself. Continuous classroom observation, performance assessment, project evaluation, and student portfolios enabled teachers to monitor not only cognitive achievement but also communication skills, collaboration, responsibility, creativity, and problem-solving abilities (Rahim et al., 2026). This reflects a transition from assessment of learning toward assessment for learning, where assessment functions as an integral component

of instructional improvement rather than solely as an accountability mechanism.

Similarly, the implementation of P5 illustrates how curriculum policy can be translated into authentic learning experiences. Students engaged in collaborative projects requiring them to solve practical problems, communicate ideas, and work collectively toward shared objectives. These experiences align with experiential learning theory, which emphasizes that meaningful understanding develops through direct engagement with authentic tasks. Consequently, P5 should not be viewed merely as an additional curricular component but as a pedagogical strategy integrating cognitive, social, and character development. The present findings therefore support previous studies by Yusri et al. (2023) while extending their implications to the Indonesian elementary school context, where project-based learning contributes simultaneously to character education and twenty-first-century competency development.

Despite these encouraging developments, the findings also reveal that curriculum implementation remains constrained by several structural and professional challenges. The classroom teacher reported difficulties in designing differentiated instruction for students with heterogeneous academic readiness, while observations indicated that limited instructional resources restricted the diversity of learning activities that could be implemented. These findings suggest that the success of curriculum reform depends not only on teacher willingness to innovate but also on institutional capacity to sustain pedagogical change. Similar challenges have been identified by Fathonah et al. (2025) and Pancawardana et al. (2023), who argue that educational reform frequently encounters implementation gaps because teachers require continuous professional support to internalize new instructional paradigms.

The study further demonstrates the strategic importance of instructional leadership in facilitating curriculum implementation. The school principal's role extended beyond administrative supervision by creating conditions that encouraged teacher autonomy, collaborative planning, and

professional reflection. This finding indicates that school leadership functions as an enabling mechanism that connects curriculum policy with classroom practice. Rather than directly determining instructional quality, leadership influences curriculum implementation by fostering a supportive organizational culture in which teachers feel encouraged to experiment with innovative pedagogical approaches. Consequently, successful curriculum implementation emerges from the interaction between leadership support and teacher professionalism rather than from curriculum policy alone.

Although this study is limited to a qualitative case study involving one elementary school, its findings provide valuable insights into how educational reform is enacted at the classroom level. Instead of evaluating curriculum implementation solely through policy indicators, this study demonstrates the importance of examining teachers' pedagogical practices, students' learning experiences, and school leadership simultaneously. This holistic perspective contributes to the growing literature on curriculum implementation by illustrating that educational reform is a multidimensional process shaped by contextual, pedagogical, and organizational factors.

Overall, the findings suggest that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum should be understood as a process of pedagogical transformation rather than curriculum replacement. Curriculum flexibility, differentiated instruction, authentic assessment, project-based learning, and supportive school leadership interact to create learning environments that encourage students to become active participants in constructing knowledge. Therefore, the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum depends less on the curriculum document itself than on schools' capacity to develop teacher competence, strengthen instructional leadership, and cultivate a collaborative learning culture capable of sustaining continuous educational improvement.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SD Darut Thalabah by analyzing learning planning, classroom implementation, learning assessment, and the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). The findings indicate that the curriculum has been successfully implemented through flexible learning planning, student-centered instructional practices, authentic assessment, and project-based learning activities. These approaches have promoted greater student participation, collaboration, learning independence, and character development while enabling teachers to adapt instruction to students' diverse learning needs.

The study also identified several factors influencing curriculum implementation. Supportive school leadership, teacher commitment, and curriculum flexibility facilitated the implementation process. However, several challenges remain, including teachers' difficulties in designing differentiated instruction, limited instructional facilities and learning resources, and the need for continuous professional development in authentic assessment and project-based learning. These findings suggest that the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum depends not only on curriculum policy but also on the interaction between teacher competence, institutional support, and adequate educational resources.

This study has several limitations. As a qualitative case study conducted in a single elementary school involving only one school principal, one classroom teacher, and one student, the findings cannot be generalized to other educational contexts. In addition, the study reflects participants' experiences during a specific period of curriculum implementation and therefore may not capture changes occurring over a longer timeframe. Future research is recommended to involve multiple schools from different geographical and socio-economic contexts using larger participant groups to provide a broader understanding of Merdeka Curriculum implementation. Comparative case studies, mixed-methods research, or

longitudinal studies are also needed to examine how curriculum implementation evolves over time and to evaluate its long-term effects on students' academic achievement, character development, and twenty-first-century competencies. Such studies would provide stronger empirical evidence to support the continuous improvement of curriculum policy and classroom practice in Indonesian elementary education.

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