

# Navigating Change: An Analysis of Elementary School Teachers' Readiness and Implementation Challenges with the Merdeka Curriculum

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## ABSTRACT

Education is a central pillar in forming the foundation of society's future, and implementing a relevant curriculum is critical in ensuring the quality of learning. As a response to increasingly complex educational challenges, the Merdeka Curriculum focuses on developing competence and character with essential material. On the other hand, the Merdeka Curriculum also offers teachers flexibility in designing and implementing learning according to student needs and local context. This research aims to explore and analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum among elementary school teachers as a reflection to provide effective feedback. The survey method is used to collect data through questionnaires that have been developed and have undergone expert validation. Questionnaires were distributed to 160 state elementary school teachers in West Bandung Regency. The questionnaire includes 7 question items about teacher readiness, level of understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, and identification of obstacles and strategies for overcoming them. The data collected was analyzed quantitatively using a descriptive statistical approach. The research results show that teachers are ready to implement the Independent Curriculum but their understanding is still limited which has an impact on the presence of challenges in its implementation. These findings have implications for the urgency of increasing teachers' understanding regarding the Independent Curriculum, skills in designing and implementing learning in accordance with the characteristics of the Independent Curriculum, including assessment. With better understanding and skills, the challenges faced will be overcome.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

As the main motor of societal change and national progress, education must inevitably be in harmony with current developments and global demands (OECD, 2018). In the 21st century, there has been a paradigmatic shift in views on education, with the focus increasingly shifting from classical and rigid educational models towards more contextual, inclusive and adaptive approaches (UNESCO, 2015). In line with this vision, Indonesia introduced the concept of the Merdeka Curriculum as a progressive step to take education in a more dynamic and responsive direction (Kemdikbud, 2021). In this context, it is essential to understand that implementing the Merdeka Curriculum requires a deep understanding of global trends in education that prioritize inclusivity, creativity, and adaptation skills to produce graduates ready to face future challenges (UNESCO, 2020).

The Merdeka Curriculum is inspired by the spirit of allowing teachers to design learning experiences that suit their needs and local context. The shift in focus from a prescriptive curriculum towards a framework that gives teachers greater independence signals a commitment to creating a more relevant, interactive, and motivating learning environment (Dunn, 2017). Focusing on developing students' critical skills, creativity and independence, this curriculum challenges teaching traditions centred on a curative curriculum (Hargreaves, 2018). A curative curriculum typically emphasizes remediation and addressing deficiencies in student learning rather than fostering a proactive and holistic educational approach.

Even though it is full of positive potential, implementing the Merdeka Curriculum does not come without challenges. The main challenge faced is the adjustment of the educational paradigm that has been established for many years among teachers. The Merdeka Curriculum concept frees teachers to design more contextual and responsive learning and has complex implications in its implementation. As the spearhead of curriculum implementation in classrooms (Hattie, 2017), teachers need to absorb and understand this new philosophy and integrate it into classroom learning practices. In international literature, adapting educational paradigms is often seen as a challenge that can be overcome through ongoing support and contextual guidance (Elmore, 2016). Understanding teacher readiness and the challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum can significantly contribute to broader educational reform and policymaking by highlighting areas needing targeted interventions and support.

Considering the central role of teachers in the success of curriculum implementation, an in-depth understanding of teacher readiness in facing this transformation is essential in assessing the effectiveness and sustainability of the curriculum (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). The essence of studying teacher readiness will open a wider window into the experiences, views and challenges teachers face in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the micro level. By approaching these findings through the lens of teachers as critical actors, this research seeks to understand complex dynamics and field realities that macro analysis may not cover. In a broader scope, this research explores the extent of teachers' readiness to adapt and implement the Merdeka Curriculum and investigates the factors that influence this process. Thus, this research is directed at identifying natural obstacles and potential solutions that can be implemented to strengthen the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. To clarify the direction of the research, the research question in this study is "To what extent are teachers prepared to implement the Independent Curriculum, the factors that influence readiness, and the challenges faced in its implementation?"

## 2. METHODS

This research aims to obtain a comprehensive and representative understanding of many teachers involved in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. For this reason, the survey method is the research method (Bryman, 2016). This method allows researchers to systematically detail individual views and experiences while enabling quantitative analysis to identify general patterns and trends in teacher

responses. Using this method, research can present quantitative and measurable data, providing a solid basis for analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The subjects of this research were 160 state elementary school teachers from 16 sub-districts in the West Bandung Regency area. Each sub-district is represented by ten teachers who were selected because the school has implemented a Merdeka curriculum. Thus, the subjects were selected using purposive sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Respondent characteristics regarding teaching experience, certification status, and employment status are described. Respondents had varying teaching experience; namely, 24% taught < 5 years, 15% taught between 5-10 years, 27% taught between 10-15 years, and 34% taught > 15 years. As many as 70% of respondents have been certified, and the rest have not. Regarding employment status, 30% have civil servant status, 44% have P3K status, and 26% have honorary status.

The main instrument of this research is a structured questionnaire, which includes seven questions related to teacher readiness, level of understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, and difficulties faced in implementing it. This instrument was developed considering the latest literature and Independent Curriculum guidelines, and has been validated by two experts, namely a curriculum expert and a learning expert in elementary schools. The compiled questionnaire grid is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Questionnaire Grid**

Number	Aspect	Options	Term of Response
1	The urgency of curriculum change	It is necessary Need Quite necessary Not necessary yet No need	Respondents are only allowed to choose one of the options given.
2	Readiness to implement curriculum changes	Very ready Ready Just ready Not ready Not ready Unprepared	Respondents are only allowed to choose one of the options given.
3	Understanding the Merdeka Curriculum	Expert Control Quite a mastery Lack of control Not mastering Very incompetent	Respondents are only allowed to choose one of the options given.
4	Difficulties in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum	The Essence of the Merdeka Curriculum Pancasila Student Profile Learning assessment Project Learning Teaching Module	Respondents are allowed to choose more than one of the options given.
5	Weaknesses of Merdeka Curriculum Training	Too general and contextual The material is not accessible to understand Not technical Coach factor	Respondents are allowed to choose more than one of the options given.
6	The Urgency of Merdeka Curriculum Training Aspects	Learning objectives Assessment instrument Intra-co-curricular learning	Respondents are only allowed to choose one of the options given.
7	The Urgency of Teacher Ability Aspects in Merdeka Curriculum Training	Teacher self-control Mastery of material Student understanding Implementation of learning	Respondents are only allowed to choose one of the options given.

Offline data mining by gathering respondents in one place. They filled out a questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. Before filling out the questionnaire, an explanation is first given about the purpose of giving the questionnaire. Apart from that, the filling technique is also explained. For approximately 60 minutes, respondents filled out a questionnaire containing seven structured questions. The collected data was analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistical methods. The analysis results illustrate teacher readiness and identify common barriers to implementing the Merdeka Curriculum while providing a basis for exploring patterns and trends that may emerge from the quantitative data collected.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

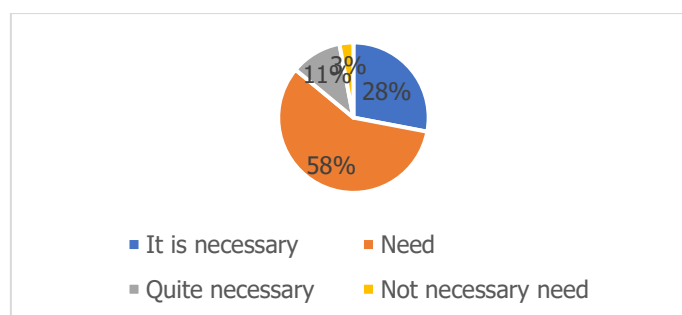
In the course of understanding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in West Bandung Regency, this research has succeeded in exploring findings that reflect the struggle and potential for transformation in the world of primary education. The teacher's voice becomes the leading guide, opening the door to a classroom full of dynamics and change. The research results are described as follows.

#### 3.1 Teacher Readiness for Curriculum Change

The discussion regarding teacher readiness in facing curriculum changes is divided into two points, namely the urgency of curriculum changes and readiness to implement curriculum changes. Following are the findings and discussion from both rounds.

##### 3.1.1 The Urgency of Curriculum Change

Changes in the educational curriculum are a central point in facing the dynamics of the times and the demands of global development. Teachers, as the leading agents in delivering educational material, play a key role in implementing these changes in the classroom. Therefore, understanding the urgency of curriculum change is a necessity and a strategic policy to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of education in the contemporary era. In this context, involving teachers' views as direct practitioners in the educational field becomes essential because their perspectives reflect needs at the micro level and the extent to which the implementation of change can be successful in the field. The following is the teacher's response regarding the urgency of curriculum changes.



**Figure 1.** Urgency of Curriculum Change

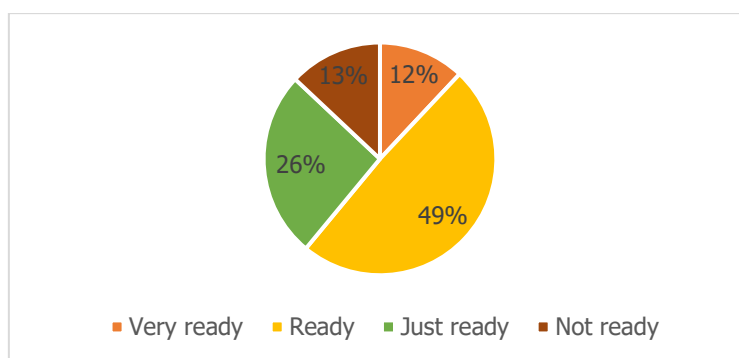
Figure 1 reveals that as many as 86% of respondents stated that changing the curriculum from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum was very necessary or necessary. This reflects educational practitioners' significant needs and hopes regarding educational system changes. Teachers are aware of the urgency of adapting the curriculum to the demands of the times and increasingly complex global challenges. As revealed, curriculum changes are essential to adapt the education system to developments in science and technology and develop student competencies relevant to society's needs (Angga, et al., 2022). This finding is consistent with the understanding that curriculum changes are needed to create more resilient graduates who are ready to face challenges in the era of globalization (Alvior, 2018). Furthermore, these results can be associated with research that shows that a curriculum

relevant to the work world's needs can increase graduates' competitiveness in the labour market (Saputra & Nuchron, 2019).

There were 11% of respondents said it was pretty necessary, and 3% said it was not necessary to provide critical notes. This indicates that curriculum adjustments must consider the diversity of learning needs and contexts in each region (Pinar et al., 2006). Therefore, it is essential to explore the reasons for this group of respondents through in-depth interviews or further studies to understand their perspectives and needs. In addition, it is essential to continue to listen to and involve various stakeholders in the curriculum change process to ensure harmony and sustainability of its implementation in the field (Fullan, 2016).

### 3.1.2 Readiness to Implement Curriculum Changes

Teacher readiness in implementing curriculum changes is an essential foundation that stretches from success to sustainability of every educational transformation. Exploring and understanding teacher preparedness levels allows the identification of potential barriers and needed solutions and illustrates the extent to which educational policies can be implemented practically. The following is the teacher's response regarding his readiness to change the curriculum.



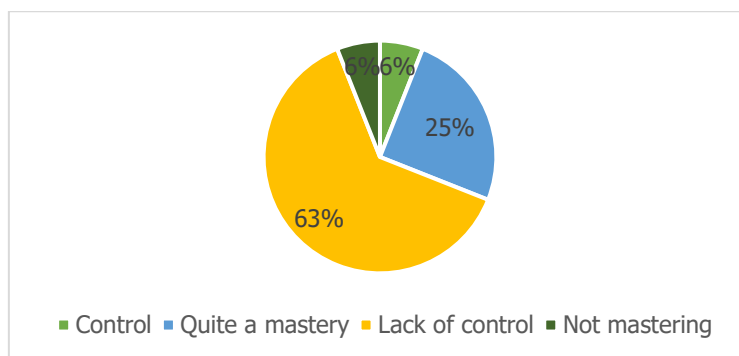
**Figure 2.** Teacher Readiness in Implementing Curriculum Changes

Referring to Figure 2, it can be seen that 61% of respondents stated that they were ready (12% very prepared and 49% ready) to implement the Merdeka Curriculum. This reflects the positive attitude of most teachers towards curriculum changes. The optimistic view of most teachers towards implementing the Merdeka Curriculum can be interpreted as a response to the need for a curriculum that is more relevant and responsive to the dynamics of society and the development of science. This finding could be because the respondents had participated in socialization about the Independent Curriculum, although it was still shallow. Teacher readiness is the primary key to successful curriculum change, and this positive attitude can strengthen teachers' professional capacity in facing new challenges (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

However, 39% said they were less prepared (26% quite ready and 13% less prepared), which shows that challenges still need to be overcome to ensure teacher readiness. This aligns with research showing that lack of training and support can hinder teacher readiness (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Therefore, there is a need for adequate training and mentoring strategies to strengthen their readiness. Furthermore, continuing teacher education ensures their readiness to face curriculum changes. Therefore, improving teacher readiness can involve sustainable education and training policies (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

### 3.2 Understanding The Merdeka Curriculum

Teachers' understanding is at the heart of educational change. Their level of understanding not only influences the effectiveness of implementation but also provides direction towards achieving responsive and adaptive curriculum goals. Thus, investigating teachers' level of understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum is an essential step in approaching the success of educational transformation. The following is the teacher's response regarding the level of understanding of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.



**Figure 3.** Level of Teacher Understanding in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

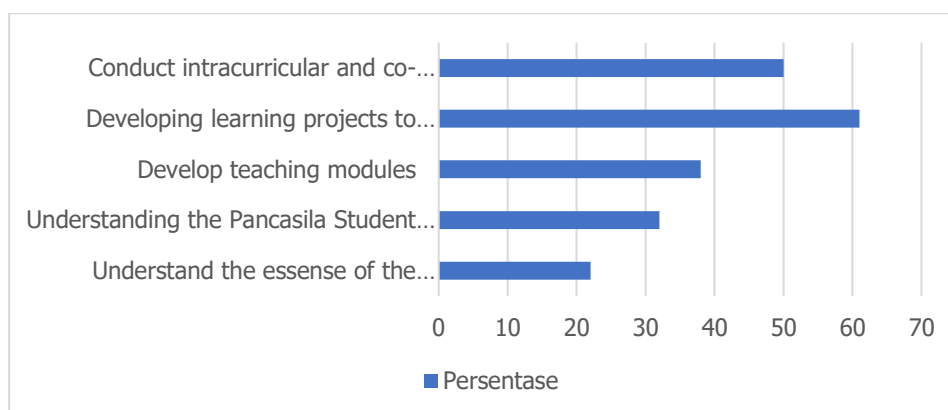
Referring to Figure 3, most teachers (69%) stated that they had a sufficient level of understanding or lack of mastery in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum components, with only 6% stating that they had mastered and 6% stating that they had not. This analysis provides an overview of the challenges teachers face in understanding and implementing key aspects of the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers' understanding of the components of the Merdeka Curriculum reflects the complexity and depth of changes expected by the education system. The concepts of "teaching modules," "projects to strengthen the Pancasila Student profile," and assessment strategies contained in the Merdeka Curriculum may be new and require time to be integrated effectively. This aligns with the opinion that highlights the importance of teacher training in understanding and implementing the new curriculum (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Thus, appropriate training and professional development programs are essential to carry out. On the other hand, support and guidance in helping teachers understand and implement the new curriculum are also. By detailing the role of teaching modules, the project will strengthen the Pancasila Learner profile and assessment strategies, and teachers can gain a deeper understanding.

### 3.3 Challenges in Curriculum Implementation

The discussion regarding the challenges in implementing the Independent Curriculum is explained in four points, namely the difficulties encountered in implementing the Independent Curriculum, weaknesses in the training curriculum, and important aspects to be provided in the training curriculum.

#### 3.3.1 Difficulties in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

Welcoming the change towards the Merdeka Curriculum, understanding and overcoming various difficulties in its implementation is an inevitable step. These difficulties involve complex challenges related to understanding concepts, developing teaching modules, P5 projects, and assessments. The following is the teacher's response regarding the difficulties they experienced in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.



**Figure 4.** Difficulties in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

Based on Figure 4, teachers' difficulties in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum can be identified. In the first place, the difficulty experienced by teachers is developing learning projects to strengthen the Pancasila Student Profile. This was allegedly because teachers were not used to implementing project learning before. Project learning is believed to increase student involvement in learning (Thomas, Mergendoller, & Michaelson, 2000).

The second difficulty is that conducting learning assessments effectively reflects the challenge of measuring student understanding and achievement. The causes of difficulties in conducting assessments include a lack of technical skills in designing valid assessment instruments. The scope includes developing valid questions, developing rubrics, and selecting appropriate assessment methods (Brookhart, 2013). The next cause is difficulty in interpreting and using assessment data. After carrying out an assessment, teachers may have difficulty analyzing the assessment data and taking appropriate action. This can involve difficulty in providing meaningful feedback to students or identifying areas of learning that need improvement (Chappuis, 2015). Lastly, there is limited time to carry out a comprehensive assessment. This limitation could result from a busy schedule, making the assessment shorter or less in-depth (Stiggins, 2002).

In third place is the difficulty in developing teaching modules. This indicates the challenge in designing appropriate, relevant and effective teaching materials. Some aspects of difficulty that may be identified include a lack of instructional design skills, limited resources, and a lack of in-depth understanding of student needs. Related to instructional design include difficulties in developing clear learning objectives, designing exciting activities, and arranging learning materials in a way students can understand (Morrison et al., 2012). Limited resources, including time and access to learning materials, can hinder the development of rich and varied teaching modules. Teachers may face difficulties integrating multimedia elements or practical experiences that require more time and resources (Reiser & Dempsey, 2018). Insufficient understanding of students' characteristics and needs can hinder teachers in developing relevant teaching modules. Identifying students' learning styles and their level of understanding and compiling material that can stimulate student interest can be challenging (Tomlinson, Moon, & Imbeau, 2015). To overcome this difficulty, efforts are needed to develop teachers' instructional design skills. Training and professional development can help teachers understand instructional design principles, use educational technology, and develop teaching modules that support student learning processes (Gustafson & Branch, 2002).

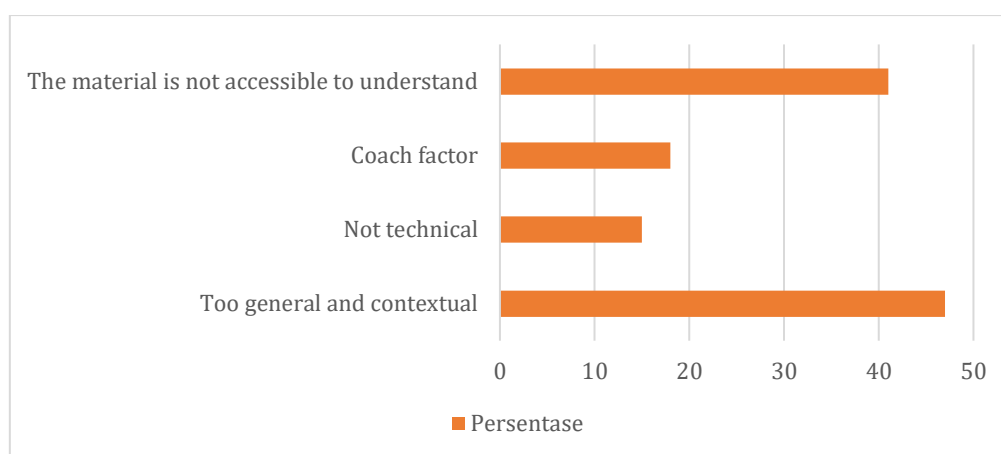
The next difficulty is understanding the profile of Pancasila Students. Identification of the causes of this difficulty includes a lack of in-depth understanding of the values of Pancasila. This includes a lack of knowledge about the fundamental values of Pancasila, such as cooperation, social justice, democracy, and others. Another cause is the difficulty in integrating these values with learning. For this reason, teachers need creativity and the ability to integrate Pancasila values into classroom activities and build learning experiences that reflect these values (Azra & Sudarmanto, 2007). Lastly,

there is a need to improve character-oriented teaching strategies. Teachers need to develop character-oriented teaching strategies that can help students understand and internalize the values of Pancasila. This includes using case studies, ethical discussions, and learning projects related to Pancasila values (Nucci, 2008). Overcoming this requires improving education and coaching, understanding Pancasila values, and developing character teaching strategies. Adequate support and resources can help teachers integrate Pancasila values more effectively into the curriculum and learning activities (Mulyasa, 2013).

The final difficulty is understanding the nature of the Merdeka Curriculum. These findings illustrate the challenges in absorbing the new curriculum paradigm's philosophy, goals, and basic principles. Teachers must increase their curriculum literacy and deepen their understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum to implement it effectively. It involves literature study, participation in training, and collaboration with colleagues to exchange experience and knowledge (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). In order to overcome this, it is necessary to develop teacher capacity through training, coaching and comprehensive system support. The education system also needs to provide resources and an environment that supports the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012).

### 3.3.2 Weaknesses of Merdeka Curriculum Training

Exploring and analyzing weaknesses in Merdeka Curriculum training is vital to improving and developing more effective and relevant training for educators. Thus, understanding these weaknesses is a strategic step in ensuring the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the formation of a new educational paradigm in Indonesia. The following is the teacher's response regarding the weaknesses of the Merdeka Curriculum training.



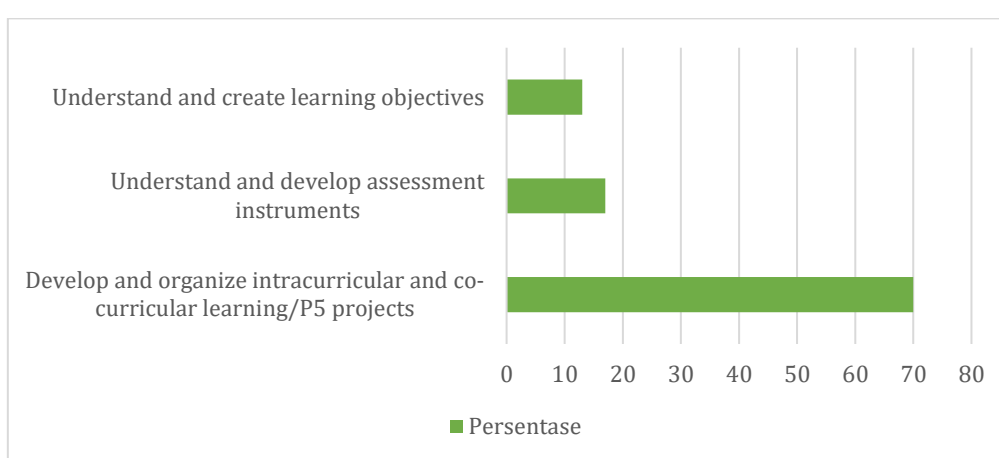
**Figure 5.** Weaknesses of Merdeka Curriculum Training

Starting from Figure 5, it is evident that the primary weakness of the Merdeka Curriculum training, as identified by teachers, is its overly general and conceptual nature. These shortcomings highlight the necessity for training programs to be more closely aligned with the practical needs of teachers in the classroom. Training that is too broad and abstract may fail to assist teachers in effectively implementing the Merdeka Curriculum (Guskey, 2002). Additionally, teachers believe that the Merdeka Curriculum material is difficult to comprehend. This criticism points to the importance of presenting material that is clear and easy to understand. Effective training must tailor its content to meet teachers' needs and support comprehensive understanding (Guskey & Yoon, 2009). Another significant issue is the coaches' insufficient understanding of the curriculum. This points to the need for improved training for trainers, ensuring they have a deep understanding of the Merdeka

Curriculum to effectively convey the material and support teachers (Fullan, 2007). The final weakness identified is the lack of technical aspects in the training provided. This underscores the importance of including practical skills necessary for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, such as designing project-based learning activities or evaluating student performance (Garet et al., 2001). In conclusion, addressing these weaknesses in the Merdeka Curriculum training is crucial for enhancing teachers' ability to implement the curriculum effectively and improving educational outcomes.

### 3.3.3 The Urgency of Merdeka Curriculum Training Aspects

Exploration of the urgency of curriculum training aims to explore more profound and contextual training needs. A better understanding of this urgency has implications for training design that empowers teachers to respond to the challenges and opportunities that arise in the Merdeka Curriculum era. The following is the teacher's response regarding urgent aspects of training.

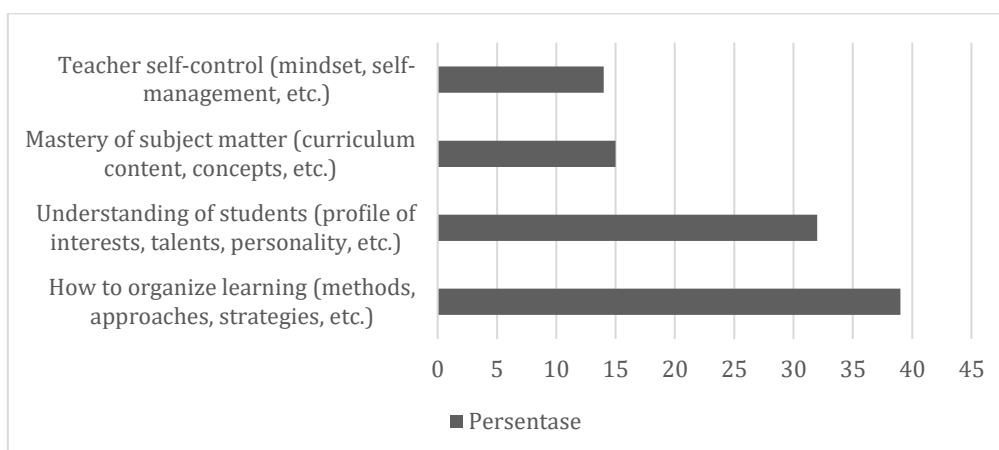


**Figure 6.** Urgency Aspects in Merdeka Curriculum Training

Figure 6 shows the priority and urgency of certain aspects of the Merdeka Curriculum training. The development and implementation of extracurricular and co-curricular learning are in the first place. The successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is very dependent on the teacher's ability to develop and organize learning that includes intracurricular and co-curricular aspects. This aligns with the view that learning occurs in the classroom and involves activities outside the classroom that support character and skill development (Hattie, 2017). Another critical aspect of Merdeka Curriculum training is understanding and developing appropriate assessment instruments. This shows that teachers realize that good assessment instruments are needed to measure student achievement holistically, including cognitive and character aspects (Popham, 2005). Lastly, understanding and designing clear and measurable learning objectives is the foundation for planning effective learning. As revealed, good learning objectives help teachers design activities supporting achieving these objectives (McTighe & Wiggins, 2012).

### 3.3.4 Urgency Aspects of Teacher Ability in Implementing Learning in Merdeka Curriculum Training

In the context of curriculum training, the urgency of aspects of teacher ability in learning cannot be underestimated. The teacher's ability is an important foundation in creating an effective and meaningful learning experience for students. The following is the teacher's response regarding aspects of the teacher's ability to carry out urgent learning.



**Figure 7.** Urgency Aspects of Teacher Ability in Implementing Learning in Merdeka Curriculum Training

Figure 7 provides valuable insight into the focus of training required by teachers. Difficulties in organizing learning reflect the complexity of challenges in the classroom, such as selecting effective methods, adapting to student needs, and implementing relevant strategies. This is in line with the opinion that confirms that the effectiveness of learning is greatly influenced by teachers' teaching methods (Hattie, 2017). Training that focuses on improving skills in organizing learning can positively impact student achievement. In second place is students' understanding, covering broad aspects, including the profile of students' interests, talents, personalities and development. This revealed that understanding the diversity of students' intelligence and interests is essential (Gardner, 2006). Training that strengthens students' understanding can help teachers respond better to students' individual needs. Third is mastery of the subject matter. This becomes urgent because mastery of subject matter influences meaningful teaching for students (Shulman, 1986). Therefore, training that focuses on increasing understanding of curriculum concepts can improve the quality of teacher teaching. Lastly is teacher self-control by the analytical opinion that mindset influences performance and learning (Dweck, 2006). Training that helps teachers manage mindset and self-management can support a positive atmosphere in the classroom.

Referring to all research findings, there are significant implications for the specific training related to the Independent Curriculum, which is urgently needed. Beyond increasing understanding, the training should focus on the primary aspects that teachers require to effectively conduct classroom learning. It is also crucial to implement continuous training programs to ensure that a broad understanding evolves into a comprehensive one. Further research could be enhanced by employing data collection methods that gather more in-depth information, such as in-depth interviews. Additionally, increasing the sample size to include respondents from an entire province or country, if feasible, would provide more complete and diverse data.

By adopting a more expansive and detailed approach to data collection, future studies could better capture the nuanced challenges and successes of the Independent Curriculum. This would offer a richer, more varied perspective, thereby informing more effective training programs. Moreover, involving a larger and more varied sample could help identify specific regional or cultural factors that impact the implementation of the curriculum, leading to more tailored and effective training solutions.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The analysis results from a survey conducted on 160 elementary school teachers in West Bandung Regency regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum highlight several crucial aspects. The research results confirm that most teachers feel that curriculum changes are urgent and necessary. Unfortunately, despite the recognition of this urgency, teachers are not adequately prepared to

implement these changes and have a poor understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum. Most teachers lack the skills to develop learning projects that strengthen the profile of Pancasila Students (P5), carry out assessments, or even fully understand P5 and the essence of the Merdeka Curriculum, which remains a significant challenge.

Teachers consider the existing training to be too general, difficult to understand, and led by trainers whose competence is irrelevant and not technical. They hope that future training will focus on developing the implementation of intra- and co-curricular learning, especially concerning P5 projects. This aligns with the teachers' desire for more in-depth training on organizing learning and enhancing students' understanding of the learning objectives in the Merdeka Curriculum compared to other materials. The implications of these findings are very relevant in the context of curriculum development in Indonesia and strengthen the argument for improving the quality of teacher training so that they can respond effectively to the demands and changes in the ongoing education system.

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