

Navigating the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Basic Education: A Case Study of Elementary Schools in Banten Province

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ABSTRACT

The *Merdeka* Curriculum represents a major reform in Indonesian education aimed at promoting flexibility, student-centered learning, and character development through the Pancasila Student Profile. This study investigates how the *Merdeka* Curriculum is implemented in elementary schools in Banten Province, focusing on teachers' interpretations, pedagogical practices, contextual challenges, and stakeholder involvement. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with principals, teachers, parents, and students, classroom observations, focus group discussions, and document analysis across selected urban and rural schools. The findings reveal that teachers generally perceive curriculum flexibility positively; however, their ability to enact it varies according to professional development opportunities, resource availability, and institutional support. Project-based learning, particularly through the Project for Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile, was found to enhance student engagement and contextual relevance, although its integration into daily instruction remains constrained by time management and curriculum alignment issues. Differentiated instruction was recognized as important but unevenly implemented, especially in resource-limited schools. The study also highlights persistent challenges related to unequal access to training, infrastructure disparities, and limited parental involvement, while identifying school leadership and community collaboration as key enabling factors. These findings suggest that successful implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum requires not only curriculum autonomy but also sustained professional development, equitable resource distribution, and strengthened collaboration among schools, families, and communities. The study contributes empirical insights into context-sensitive curriculum implementation and offers implications for policy, practice, and future research.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Basic education constitutes a critical stage in shaping students' intellectual capacity, social awareness, and moral character, serving as the foundation for lifelong learning. In response to rapid global changes, technological advancement, and evolving societal demands, educational systems worldwide have increasingly emphasized learner-centered approaches, flexibility, and the development of 21st-century skills. In Indonesia, these global trends have informed major curriculum reforms, culminating in the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum, which aims to transform teaching and learning practices by granting greater autonomy to schools and teachers while emphasizing holistic student development (Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024; Sarson et al., 2024).

The Merdeka Curriculum represents a significant departure from rigid, content-heavy curricula toward a more flexible framework that prioritizes essential competencies, differentiated instruction, and contextual learning. Central to this curriculum is the integration of character education through the Pancasila Student Profile, which seeks to cultivate students who are faithful, independent, critical, creative, collaborative, and socially responsible. This vision is operationalized through project-based learning, particularly the Project for Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile (P5), which encourages interdisciplinary learning grounded in students' real-life experiences and local contexts (Mahmudah, 2023; Gabuardi, 2021).

Although the Merdeka Curriculum is conceptually aligned with contemporary educational paradigms, its implementation presents complex challenges, especially at the level of basic education. Curriculum reform is not merely a policy shift but a process that requires teachers to reinterpret curricular goals, redesign learning activities, and adopt new pedagogical roles. Several studies have indicated that teachers often experience difficulties in translating curriculum flexibility into concrete classroom practices due to limited professional development, uncertainty in assessment strategies, and insufficient instructional resources (Latifa et al., 2023; Syofyan et al., 2024). These challenges suggest that successful implementation depends largely on teachers' understanding, readiness, and capacity to adapt to pedagogical change.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of curriculum implementation is strongly influenced by contextual factors, including school location, infrastructure, leadership support, and socio-cultural environments. Provinces with diverse geographical and socio-economic characteristics, such as Banten Province, present uneven conditions for curriculum enactment. While schools in urban areas tend to benefit from better access to training programs, digital technology, and professional learning networks, schools in rural and semi-rural areas often face limitations in facilities, instructional materials, and external support (Aditama et al., 2024). These disparities raise concerns about equity in curriculum implementation and the risk of widening educational gaps between regions.

In addition to teacher-related and structural factors, stakeholder involvement plays a crucial role in determining the success of educational reform. The Merdeka Curriculum explicitly emphasizes collaboration among schools, families, and local communities to enhance the relevance and sustainability of learning. However, empirical studies have shown that parental involvement in curriculum innovation remains inconsistent, particularly in project-based learning contexts that require support beyond the classroom (Wang et al., 2023; Nugraha et al., 2023). Parents' limited understanding of curriculum changes may reduce their capacity to support students' learning, thereby constraining the intended impact of the curriculum.

Existing research on the Merdeka Curriculum has provided valuable insights into policy intentions and general implementation challenges. However, much of the literature remains descriptive and tends to focus on single stakeholders or relatively well-resourced educational settings. There is limited qualitative evidence that captures the dynamic interaction between teachers' pedagogical practices, contextual constraints, and stakeholder engagement within diverse school environments, particularly at the elementary school level. Moreover, few studies have documented how schools develop adaptive strategies or locally grounded solutions to address implementation challenges, despite the curriculum's emphasis on contextualization and autonomy.

Given these limitations, there is a need for in-depth qualitative research that examines how the Merdeka Curriculum is interpreted and enacted in everyday educational practice. Understanding how teachers conceptualize curriculum flexibility, design project-based learning activities, and navigate constraints in different school contexts is essential for informing more responsive curriculum policies and professional development initiatives. Additionally, exploring the perspectives of school leaders, students, and parents can provide a more comprehensive understanding of curriculum implementation as a collective and context-dependent process.

This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools in Banten Province through a qualitative case study approach. By examining teachers' understanding, pedagogical strategies, and the challenges they encounter, as well as the role of parental and community involvement, this research aims to contribute nuanced empirical insights into how national curriculum reform is realized at the local level. Ultimately, the findings are expected to inform policymakers, educators, and stakeholders about context-sensitive strategies that can support more equitable and effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in basic education.

This study is guided by several interrelated research questions that seek to capture the complexity of Merdeka Curriculum implementation in elementary schools in Banten Province. Specifically, the research examines how elementary school teachers understand and interpret the core principles of the Merdeka Curriculum in their daily teaching practices, and how these interpretations influence the design and enactment of project-based learning, particularly in relation to the Pancasila Student Profile. In addition, the study explores the pedagogical strategies employed by teachers to accommodate diverse student needs within the flexible curriculum framework. The research further investigates the contextual challenges faced by schools in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, with particular attention to differences between urban and rural settings. Finally, the study seeks to understand the roles of school leadership, parents, and local communities in supporting or constraining curriculum implementation, as well as to identify context-specific solutions and good practices developed by schools to address these challenges.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach to explore the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools in Banten Province. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the research aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' interpretations, pedagogical practices, contextual challenges, and stakeholder involvement in curriculum implementation, rather than to measure outcomes quantitatively. The case study design enabled the researchers to examine the phenomenon within its real-life context and to capture the complexity of curriculum enactment across different school settings.

The research was conducted in several elementary schools in Banten Province that had implemented the Merdeka Curriculum for at least one academic year. Schools were purposively selected to represent diverse contextual characteristics, including urban and rural locations, as well as public and private school status. This variation was intended to capture differences in resource availability, institutional support, and community engagement, which are central to the research questions concerning contextual challenges and implementation dynamics.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation of key stakeholders involved in curriculum implementation. The participants included school principals, classroom teachers, students, and parents or guardians. School principals were involved to provide insights into leadership support and school-level policy decisions, while teachers were the primary participants for understanding curriculum interpretation and pedagogical strategies. Students were included to capture perceptions of learning experiences under the Merdeka Curriculum, and parents were involved to explore levels of understanding, support, and engagement in curriculum-related activities. The number of

participants was determined based on data saturation, with data collection continuing until no new significant themes emerged.

Data were collected through multiple qualitative methods to address each research question comprehensively. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with principals, teachers, and parents. The interview protocols were designed to explore participants' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, experiences in implementing project-based learning, perceived challenges, and forms of support or resistance encountered. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility to probe emerging issues while maintaining alignment with the research objectives. Second, classroom observations were carried out to examine how teachers enacted the Merdeka Curriculum in practice, particularly in relation to project-based learning, differentiation strategies, and the integration of the Pancasila Student Profile. Observations focused on teacher–student interactions, learning activities, and the use of instructional resources. Third, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with teachers and school leaders to facilitate collective reflection on shared challenges, collaborative practices, and locally developed solutions. FGDs were particularly useful for identifying good practices and adaptive strategies that emerged through peer collaboration. Finally, document analysis was conducted on curriculum-related materials, including lesson plans, project designs, teacher reflection journals, and school reports, to triangulate interview and observation data.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach informed by the interactive model of Miles and Huberman. The analysis process involved three main stages. First, data reduction was conducted by transcribing interviews and FGDs verbatim and organizing observation notes and documents. Initial coding was then applied to identify meaningful units related to teachers' curriculum understanding, pedagogical practices, contextual challenges, and stakeholder roles. Second, data display involved organizing codes into categories and themes using matrices and narrative summaries to facilitate comparison across participants and school contexts. Third, conclusion drawing and verification were conducted by identifying patterns, relationships, and explanatory themes that directly addressed the research questions. Throughout the analysis process, constant comparison was employed to refine themes and ensure consistency across data sources.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. Triangulation was achieved by combining data from interviews, observations, FGDs, and document analysis, as well as from multiple participant groups. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with selected participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations. In addition, peer debriefing was undertaken among the research team to reduce individual bias and strengthen analytical rigor. An audit trail documenting research decisions, coding processes, and theme development was maintained to ensure transparency and dependability.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and permission was secured from school authorities. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their involvement and their right to withdraw at any stage. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by using pseudonyms for schools and participants and by securely storing all research data.

By employing a qualitative case study design with multiple data sources and rigorous analytical procedures, this study provides a comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of how the Merdeka Curriculum is interpreted and implemented in elementary schools in Banten Province. The methodological design is explicitly aligned with the research questions, enabling the study to capture both the challenges and adaptive practices that shape curriculum implementation in diverse educational contexts.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from thematic analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observations, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Five major themes emerged,

illustrating how the Merdeka Curriculum is interpreted, enacted, and negotiated in elementary schools in Banten Province.

3.1 Diverse Interpretations of Curriculum Flexibility

Teachers generally perceived the Merdeka Curriculum as offering greater autonomy in teaching and learning. Many described curriculum flexibility as the freedom to adapt content and methods to students' needs. However, interpretations of this flexibility varied depending on teachers' experience and access to training.

Teachers who had participated in structured professional development programs expressed confidence in exercising pedagogical autonomy. As one teacher explained:

"The Merdeka Curriculum gives us space to adjust learning based on students' conditions. I no longer feel pressured to finish content, but to ensure students really understand and participate" (Teacher 3, Urban Public School).

In contrast, several senior teachers perceived curriculum flexibility as ambiguous and demanding. They expressed uncertainty about the limits of autonomy and accountability:

"We are told to be flexible, but sometimes it is not clear how far we can modify the lesson. I am afraid of making mistakes because there is no clear example". (Teacher 7, Rural Public School).

These findings indicate that while curriculum flexibility is conceptually understood, its practical interpretation remains uneven, largely influenced by teachers' professional learning experiences.

3.2 Project-Based Learning and the Pancasila Student Profile in Practice

The Project for Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) was widely recognized as a key feature of the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers reported that P5 projects enabled students to learn collaboratively and connect lessons to real-life contexts. One teacher described how local culture was integrated into project activities:

"We designed a project about traditional Banten arts. Students interviewed local artists and presented their findings. They were very enthusiastic because it was related to their daily lives". (Teacher 2, Semi-Rural School).

Classroom observations confirmed that students were more engaged during project-based activities, particularly when tasks involved group work and hands-on exploration. However, teachers also highlighted challenges in integrating projects into regular instructional schedules:

"The project is meaningful, but managing time is difficult. Sometimes we have to sacrifice subject lessons because the project takes longer than planned". (Teacher 5, Rural School).

This theme suggests that while P5 projects enhance engagement and contextual learning, teachers continue to struggle with curriculum integration and time allocation.

3.3 Pedagogical Adaptation and Differentiated Instruction

Teachers acknowledged the importance of accommodating diverse student abilities under the Merdeka Curriculum. Several reported using differentiation strategies such as adjusting task difficulty and grouping students based on learning needs. A teacher from an inclusive school noted:

"In one class, students' abilities are very different. I try to give simpler tasks to students who need support and more challenging ones to others". (Teacher 1, Inclusive Urban School).

However, the extent of pedagogical adaptation varied significantly. Teachers in resource-limited schools often felt constrained in implementing differentiation effectively:

"We want to apply differentiated learning, but with limited materials and large class sizes, it is very challenging". (Teacher 9, Rural School).

These findings indicate that differentiated instruction is recognized in principle but inconsistently implemented due to contextual constraints.

3.4 Structural and Contextual Challenges in Implementation

Participants consistently identified structural barriers that hindered effective curriculum implementation. Limited access to professional development was frequently cited, especially among teachers in rural schools:

"Training is usually conducted in the city, and not all teachers can attend. Sometimes we only receive information second-hand". (Teacher 6, Rural Public School).

Infrastructure limitations further affected instructional practices. Teachers described difficulties in implementing project-based learning due to inadequate facilities:

"Project-based learning requires tools and materials. In our school, we have to be very creative because resources are minimal". (Teacher 4, Rural School).

Time constraints were also highlighted as a significant challenge, as teachers balanced instructional planning with administrative tasks.

3.5 Stakeholder Roles and Local Adaptive Practices

School leadership emerged as a key enabling factor in curriculum implementation. Principals who actively supported teacher collaboration fostered a more positive implementation environment:

"I encourage teachers to discuss and share their experiences. We learn together because this curriculum is new for all of us". (Principal 1, Urban Public School).

Parental involvement, however, remained limited. Parents often expressed uncertainty about curriculum changes:

"Sometimes I do not understand the project assignments. I want to help my child, but I am not sure what the teacher expects". (Parent 2, Rural School).

In response, some schools developed adaptive strategies by involving local communities. One teacher explained:

"We invited community leaders to support student projects. This helped parents understand the learning process and made students more motivated". (Teacher 8, Semi-Rural School).

These adaptive practices demonstrate how schools leveraged local resources to address implementation challenges and enhance curriculum relevance.

Discussion

This study examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools in Banten Province by focusing on teachers' interpretations, pedagogical practices, contextual challenges, and stakeholder involvement. The findings indicate that curriculum implementation is not a linear process but a socially constructed and context-dependent practice shaped by professional capacity, institutional support, and local conditions. These results are consistent with theories of curriculum enactment, which emphasize that teachers act as key interpreters of policy rather than passive implementers (Fullan, 2016).

One of the central findings concerns teachers' varied interpretations of curriculum flexibility. Although the Merdeka Curriculum positions flexibility as a core principle, teachers' ability to enact this flexibility depended largely on their professional learning experiences. Teachers who had participated in sustained professional development demonstrated greater confidence in adapting learning goals, instructional strategies, and assessments. This finding supports previous research showing that teacher autonomy is effective only when accompanied by strong pedagogical capacity and continuous learning opportunities (Saleem et al., 2021; Syofyan et al., 2024). From the perspective of curriculum change theory, this reflects Fullan's (2016) argument that meaningful reform requires changes in teachers' beliefs and practices, not merely policy directives.

Conversely, teachers who lacked access to training perceived curriculum flexibility as ambiguous and risky. This finding aligns with earlier studies indicating that unclear guidance during curriculum reform often leads to uncertainty and superficial compliance rather than innovation (Latifa et al., 2023; Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024). In this sense, the Merdeka Curriculum illustrates what has been described as "bounded autonomy," where teachers are formally granted freedom but remain constrained by accountability pressures and limited instructional support. These results suggest that curriculum flexibility must be operationalized through clear pedagogical exemplars and mentoring systems to reduce implementation disparities.

The findings related to project-based learning and the Project for Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) further illuminate the opportunities and limitations of curriculum reform. Consistent with constructivist learning theory, project-based learning was found to enhance student engagement, collaboration, and contextual understanding, particularly when projects were grounded in local culture and everyday experiences. This supports existing research demonstrating that authentic, context-based projects can foster deeper learning and 21st-century competencies such as creativity, communication, and collaboration (Gabuardi, 2021; Mahmudah, 2023).

At the same time, teachers reported challenges in integrating P5 projects into daily instructional routines. Projects were often implemented as add-on activities rather than embedded within subject learning, reflecting structural tensions between innovative pedagogy and traditional curriculum organization. Similar challenges have been reported in previous studies on project-based learning, which highlight issues related to time allocation, curriculum alignment, and assessment demands (Noski, 2022; Nugraha et al., 2023). These findings suggest that without structural adjustments to curriculum scheduling and assessment frameworks, project-based learning risks remaining peripheral rather than transformative.

Another important finding relates to differentiated instruction and pedagogical adaptation. Teachers recognized the importance of addressing diverse student needs, in line with the Merdeka Curriculum's learner-centered orientation. However, the extent to which differentiation was implemented varied across contexts. Teachers in better-resourced schools demonstrated more sophisticated differentiation strategies, while those in resource-limited settings faced significant constraints. This finding echoes prior research indicating that differentiated instruction is highly

dependent on teacher expertise, instructional resources, and institutional support (Irwan et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023).

From an inclusive education perspective, curriculum flexibility alone is insufficient to ensure equitable learning opportunities. As argued by Tomlinson (2014), differentiation requires intentional planning, ongoing assessment, and access to diverse learning materials. The present findings reinforce this argument by showing that structural inequalities between schools shape teachers' capacity to enact differentiated practices. Consequently, curriculum reform policies must address systemic resource disparities to prevent the reproduction of educational inequities.

Contextual challenges, particularly disparities between urban and rural schools, emerged as a significant theme. Teachers in rural areas reported limited access to professional development, digital infrastructure, and instructional materials. This finding aligns with previous studies highlighting regional inequalities in Indonesian education and their impact on curriculum implementation (Aditama et al., 2024; Zikriati & Arani, 2024). From the perspective of decentralization theory, school autonomy can enhance contextual relevance but may also exacerbate inequality when local capacity is uneven (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2022).

The results suggest that the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on autonomy should be accompanied by differentiated policy support that recognizes varying school capacities. Without targeted interventions, schools with limited resources may struggle to realize the intended benefits of curriculum flexibility, thereby widening existing gaps between regions.

Stakeholder involvement emerged as both a challenge and an opportunity in curriculum implementation. School leadership played a critical enabling role, with principals who fostered collaborative cultures facilitating teacher experimentation and shared learning. This finding is consistent with distributed leadership theory, which emphasizes leadership as a collective practice that supports organizational learning and innovation (Harris, 2013). Prior studies similarly highlight the importance of instructional leadership in sustaining curriculum reform (Sarson et al., 2024).

In contrast, parental involvement remained limited, largely due to parents' lack of understanding of curriculum changes and project-based learning. This finding aligns with earlier research showing that low parental engagement can constrain the effectiveness of innovative pedagogies (Nugraha et al., 2023). However, the study also identified community collaboration as a promising adaptive strategy. Schools that engaged local community members were able to enhance curriculum relevance and student motivation, supporting theories of place-based and community-based education (Gabuardi, 2021).

Overall, the findings underscore that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is shaped by the interaction between policy design, professional capacity, and contextual conditions. By situating these findings within existing theory and research, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of curriculum reform as a dynamic and negotiated process. The results suggest that sustainable implementation requires not only flexible curriculum frameworks but also coherent professional development, equitable resource distribution, and meaningful stakeholder engagement.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools in Banten Province is a complex, context-dependent process shaped by teachers' interpretive work, institutional capacity, and stakeholder engagement. While the curriculum's emphasis on flexibility, project-based learning, and character development through the Pancasila Student Profile offers significant potential to enhance student engagement and contextual relevance, its realization remains uneven across school settings. Teachers' capacity to enact curriculum flexibility is strongly influenced by access to sustained professional development, clarity of pedagogical guidance, and the availability of instructional resources, with notable disparities between urban and rural schools. These

findings imply that, at the policy level, curriculum autonomy should be accompanied by differentiated support mechanisms, including equitable teacher training programs and targeted resource allocation for under-resourced schools, to prevent the widening of educational inequalities. At the level of practice, schools should strengthen collaborative professional cultures, integrate project-based learning more coherently into daily instruction, and expand communication with parents and local communities to enhance shared understanding and support for curriculum innovation. Principals play a critical role in fostering such collaborative environments and enabling adaptive practices. From a research perspective, the findings highlight the need for future studies that examine longitudinal patterns of curriculum implementation, explore student learning outcomes under the Merdeka Curriculum, and investigate comparative implementation across regions with varying socio-economic conditions. By addressing these dimensions, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how curriculum reform can be sustained and scaled effectively within diverse educational contexts.

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Conflicts of Interest: Hopefully this research can be useful and become a reference regarding the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Basic Education for education offices, school principals, teachers, parents, education practitioners and stakeholders.

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