



## Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Junior High Schools in Aceh Besar Regency

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### **Abstract**

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum faces various challenges, especially when implemented in areas with different geographical conditions and infrastructure. This study aims to identify the implementation and characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum in schools in rural and urban areas. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using interview techniques. The findings reveal (1) at Junior High School 1 Simpang Tiga (rural), curriculum implementation remains suboptimal due to limited facilities and infrastructure, as well as low student understanding. However, teachers' strategies are already student-centered. Meanwhile, at Junior High School 1 Darul Imarah (urban), implementation is better due to the school's readiness, as well as teachers' and students' understanding that supports project-based learning, collaboration, and digital creativity. (2) The characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum at Junior High School 1 Simpang Tiga include simple project-based learning, adapted to students' economic conditions, focusing on basic knowledge and skills. Meanwhile, at Junior High School 1 Darul Imarah, project-based learning utilizes technology such as Microsoft Excel and graphic design, with diverse competency assessments. These findings emphasize the importance of adapting the curriculum to the characteristics of the school's location. Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Junior High Schools in Aceh Besar Regency

**Keywords:** *Implementation; Independent and Middle School Curriculum*

### **Introduction**

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia is a strategic step by the government in carrying out educational reform, with the aim of creating a learning environment that is more inclusive, adaptive, flexible, and oriented towards student needs in line with 21st-century achievements, giving teachers and students the freedom to develop the learning process according to their respective potentials and needs. Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Regulation No. 56 of 2022 has launched the new Merdeka Curriculum, previously known as the prototype curriculum. The Merdeka Curriculum pilot program has been implemented in 2,500 schools. In the 2022/2023 academic year, kindergarten, elementary school, Junior High School, and senior high school levels have begun using the Merdeka Curriculum (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology 2022).

According to data from the Curriculum and Learning Center (Kemendikbudristek 2022), currently nearly 70% of educational institutions across Indonesia have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum through the School of Change program, vocational high schools of excellence, and the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum through independent pathways, while approximately 30% of schools have not yet adopted the Merdeka Curriculum. Under Article 40(2) of Law No. 20 of 2003, educational staff are obligated to create an educational environment that is meaningful, enjoyable, creative, dynamic, and dialogic.

In the context of curriculum change, the strategic role of teachers as facilitators of learning and curriculum adaptation becomes increasingly complex when faced with the reality of diverse regional conditions in Indonesia. The challenges faced by Islamic Education teachers in integrating religious values with local contexts and responding to curriculum changes are multiplied when the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented in regions with distinct characteristics, particularly rural areas characterized by limited educational infrastructure, minimal access to technology, and diverse socio-economic conditions of the community. This requires teachers not only to master pedagogical aspects and religious content but also to possess high adaptive skills in modifying teaching approaches according to the conditions and available resources in their respective school environments, ensuring that holistic and contextual educational goals remain achievable amid existing geographical and socio-economic disparities (Khakleri, 2024).

The educational curriculum plays a crucial role in shaping the direction and quality of a country's education. Etymologically, the term "curriculum" originates from the Latin words 'curir' (runner) and "cure" (place of running), reflecting a dynamic and continuous learning journey. As the primary guide in the teaching-learning process, the curriculum not only encompasses subject matter but also teaching methods, assessment, and overall educational objectives, including students' learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom to influence their holistic personal development. Given the complexity and far-reaching impact of curriculum changes, their implementation requires a systematic approach, as outlined in Kurt Lewin's Change Management Theory, cited by Cummings et al., (2016) where major changes in the education system, such as the implementation of a new curriculum, require careful planning, strong support from various parties, and gradual implementation stages to ensure the success of sustainable educational transformation (Damayanti et al., 2024).

In the context of the independent curriculum in rural areas, structural barriers such as infrastructure limitations, technological limitations, lack of human resources such as teacher training, insufficient awareness and support, and technological limitations are among the most significant challenges. Empirical studies conducted in rural areas of Sumba Island show that elementary school teachers face multidimensional challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, ranging from difficulties in accessing digital learning materials, a lack of adequate supporting facilities such as laboratories and libraries, to limited opportunities for continuous professional development to understand the new paradigm in a more flexible and student-centered learning approach. The remote geographical conditions also complicate the distribution of educational resources and coordination with the central government, while the socio-economic conditions of the community, which generally depend on the traditional agricultural sector, create their own challenges in building an educational ecosystem that supports the optimal implementation of this innovative curriculum (Tanggur, 2023)

A study conducted by Irvani et al., (2020) shows that the training provided to teachers is still very limited, especially in remote areas, resulting in many teachers being unprepared to implement learning strategies that meet curriculum requirements and impacting the quality of learning, which is not optimal. This issue is not limited to general pedagogical aspects but also encompasses specific subjects like mathematics, which faces implementation challenges at all levels of educational institutions and educational levels as a result of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, both in urban and rural

areas. As stated by Dewantara, (2020) this situation demands high creativity from teachers amid various challenges, particularly in rural areas with limited resources.

The complexity of these issues indicates that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires a more comprehensive and sustainable approach, especially in terms of teacher capacity development through structured and ongoing training programs. Limited access to training in remote areas not only affects teachers' technical competencies but also their ability to adapt innovative teaching methods to local characteristics and student needs. Therefore, a special strategy is needed in the form of remote mentoring programs, the use of digital technology for teacher learning, and the formation of learning communities among teachers who can share experiences and best practices in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in a rural context.

Aceh Besar Regency, as one of the districts in Aceh Province, has diverse regional characteristics, including accessibility, educational facilities and infrastructure, and the level of community welfare. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation, differences between urban and rural areas have the potential to affect the effectiveness of this policy, as evidenced by the fact that schools in rural areas often face limitations in terms of access to learning resources, adequate teaching staff, and sufficient technological support compared to schools in urban areas. As a result, there is a gap in the implementation of the curriculum, where schools in urban areas tend to adapt more quickly to changes, as data shows that around 60% of schools in urban areas have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum more effectively, while in rural areas, only around 40% of schools have been able to implement it to its full potential.

This gap is reinforced by data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2023, which shows that only 27.98% of rural residents aged 15 years and above have completed secondary education, while in urban areas this figure reaches 49.16%, reflecting disparities in access to quality education. To address this challenge, strategic steps are needed, including mentoring from pilot schools to transfer knowledge on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, active involvement of local governments in improving infrastructure and internet connectivity, and increasing the number of qualified and competent teachers in remote areas to support equitable education quality across the entire Aceh Besar Regency (Afendi et al., 2024).

The urgency of this research lies in the need to identify the characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum in both schools. This research is relevant because it can provide an empirical picture of the extent to which the Merdeka Curriculum can be optimally implemented in areas with different characteristics. Additionally, the results of this research are expected to provide input for policymakers in formulating more adaptive strategies to ensure that all students, both in urban and rural areas, receive maximum benefits from the implemented education policies. The scope of this study will focus on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Junior High School 1 Simpang Tiga and Junior High School 1 Darul Imarah in Aceh Besar Regency to gain a more specific understanding of the challenges and opportunities in the local context.

## **Method**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive research type. The research was conducted at two schools in Aceh Besar, specifically at Junior High School 1 Simpang Tiga and Junior High School 1 Darul Imarah. Data collection techniques through in-depth interviews aimed to explore in depth the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum at Junior High School 1 Simpang Tiga and Junior High School 1 Aceh Besar Regency. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on understanding the phenomena occurring in the field holistically, such as the challenges faced by both schools in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, and how teachers, students, and schools interact with

the new Merdeka Curriculum. The data obtained from the interviews will be analyzed using qualitative data analysis techniques, which include the following steps: (1) Data Reduction This process involves filtering and summarizing relevant information from the interviews and discarding data that does not align with the research objectives. (2) The reduced data is then presented in a narrative or descriptive format that outlines the key findings related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at both schools. (3) Drawing Conclusions Based on the analysis of the data presented, the researcher will draw conclusions regarding the implementation, characteristics, challenges, obstacles, and solutions found in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at Junior High School 1 Simpang Tiga and Junior High School 1 Darul Imarah. These conclusions will provide recommendations for improving the quality of curriculum implementation at both schools.

## **Result and Discussion**

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Junior High School 1 Simpang Tiga still faces a number of obstacles, particularly related to limited facilities and infrastructure and a lack of understanding among students of the curriculum concept. Nevertheless, the learning strategies applied by teachers have shown positive support through a student-centered approach. In contrast, Junior High School Darul Imarah 1 has successfully implemented the Merdeka Curriculum quite well. This school demonstrates readiness in terms of infrastructure, as well as a good understanding of the curriculum by both teachers and students. The learning strategies employed also reflect the core principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, as outlined by Damiaati et al., (2024) emphasizing the importance of independence, collaboration, and the development of students' digital creativity.

The differences in implementation conditions between the two schools highlight the complexity of the challenges faced in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the Junior High School level. Junior High School 1 Simpang Tiga requires more intensive support in terms of providing adequate learning facilities, such as computer laboratories, digital libraries, and stable internet access to support technology-based learning, as confirmed by research findings indicating that the lack of adequate facilities is one of the main obstacles in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Additionally, digital literacy programs and in-depth socialization about the philosophy of the Merdeka Curriculum need to be conducted continuously for students so that they can understand the paradigm shift in learning from teacher-centered to student-centered learning (Ikhtiarra et al., 2022).

In the process of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, a sufficient understanding of the concepts and basic principles of this curriculum is essential for its optimal implementation.

Therefore, understanding from both teachers and students is very important (Lestari et al., 2023). Based on the research results, teachers at Junior High School 1 Simpang Tiga and Junior High School 1 Darul Imarah have understood the implementation mechanisms and advantages of the Merdeka Curriculum in the context of teaching at their respective schools. However, most students at Junior High School 1 Simpang Tiga still do not fully understand the Merdeka Curriculum, so they have difficulty understanding the objectives of the learning process. On the other hand, students at Junior High School Darul Imarah 1 show varying levels of understanding; some already understand the curriculum, while others only know the term Merdeka Curriculum without a deep understanding.

According to Darling-Hammond's theory of Justice in Education, a fair education system not only treats all students equally, but also ensures that every student has equal access to the educational resources they need to succeed. In this context, equality does not mean uniformity, but rather providing support according to the needs of each school or student. According to Fadillah et al., (2025) many schools in rural areas experience resource constraints, making it difficult to adapt the curriculum to local conditions, which causes a gap between curriculum expectations and reality in the field. The

characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum refer to the main features or characteristics of this curriculum that distinguish it from previous curricula.

According to Putri & Arsanti, (2022) the Merdeka Curriculum is designed to provide flexibility for educational units and teachers in developing learning according to the needs of students and the conditions of each school. The flexibility provided in the Merdeka Curriculum covers several important dimensions, namely flexibility in determining the allocation of learning time for each subject based on the needs and characteristics of students, freedom in selecting and developing teaching materials that are relevant to the local context and culture, and autonomy in applying the most effective learning methods and strategies in accordance with the conditions and resources available at the school. This approach enables more optimal learning differentiation, where teachers can adjust the level of difficulty, delivery style, and type of learning activities based on each student's abilities, interests, and readiness to learn. Additionally, this flexibility is reflected in the development of operational curricula for educational institutions, which provide schools with the space to design unique learning programs aligned with the school's vision and mission, community characteristics, and the potential of the surrounding environment. However, the implementation of this flexibility requires teachers to have competent skills in learning planning, a deep understanding of student characteristics, and the ability to innovate pedagogically while remaining oriented toward achieving national educational goals and developing the Pancasila learner profile.

According to Ardiansyah et al., (2023) many schools in rural areas experience resource constraints, making it difficult to adapt the curriculum to local conditions, which leads to a gap between curriculum expectations and reality in the field. The characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum refer to the main features or characteristics of this curriculum that distinguish it from previous curricula. The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to provide flexibility for educational institutions and teachers in developing learning activities according to the needs of students and the conditions of each school.

This flexibility covers several fundamental aspects, namely a simpler curriculum structure with a focus on essential material that allows for in-depth learning, the application of project-based learning that integrates various subjects, and the granting of autonomy to teachers to determine the most appropriate learning methods and strategies for the characteristics of the students in their class. Additionally, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes the development of the Pancasila learner profile, which encompasses six main dimensions: having faith and reverence for God the Almighty and noble character, global diversity, cooperation, independence, critical thinking, and creativity. However, the implementation of these characteristics faces significant challenges in rural areas, where limited technological infrastructure, minimal access to digital learning resources, and a lack of ongoing teacher training are obstacles to realizing the flexibility of the curriculum, which should be the main strength of this education system.

The characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum at Junior High School 1 Simpang Tiga involve simpler project-based learning tailored to students' economic conditions, with competencies measured focusing on knowledge and skills aligned with students' abilities. Meanwhile, project-based learning at Junior High School Darul Imarah 1 leverages technology more extensively, utilizing Microsoft Excel, graphic design, and exhibitions of students' work. Various competencies measured align with students' creativity and potential. This finding emphasizes the importance of adapting the Merdeka Curriculum to the characteristics of the school's region to ensure its implementation is effective, targeted, and equitable.

In implementing project-based learning, teachers at Junior High School 1 Simpang Tiga adopt a simpler approach to make the material easier for students to understand. Project activities are conducted using tools and materials available in the surrounding environment, such as repurposing used items to create handicrafts, and involving students in cooperative work and group activities. This approach is tailored to the conditions and abilities of the students so that learning remains meaningful despite limited facilities. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum must also be flexible, meaning it must be

adapted to the school environment. Rural and urban schools have differences in their implementation, not only that, but also in terms of the school environment, human resources, and economic conditions (Nafi'ah et al., 2018).

In a competency-based curriculum, learning is focused on measurable and objectively evaluable outcomes, which requires clear competency standards and specific achievement indicators for each subject. This approach emphasizes the importance of outcome-based learning, where the learning process is systematically designed to ensure that students not only acquire theoretical knowledge but are also able to apply that knowledge in practical contexts and real-world situations. The evaluation system in competency-based learning uses a variety of comprehensive assessment instruments, ranging from written tests, performance observations, portfolios, to project assessments that enable teachers to measure students' competency achievements holistically and continuously.

According to Saputri, (2018) this approach requires a change in the role of teachers from merely conveying information to becoming facilitators who guide students in achieving the established competencies, where teachers must have the ability to design a learning environment that supports students' independent exploration and discovery of knowledge. Teachers must ensure that every student has the opportunity to understand and apply the skills that have been taught, as stated by Suryaningrum, (2023) which requires teachers to have the competence to differentiate learning according to the diversity of characteristics, abilities, and learning styles of students. This transformation of roles also requires teachers to develop the ability to provide scaffolding or gradual support that can be reduced as students' learning independence increases, as well as the ability to reflect and continuously evaluate the effectiveness of the learning strategies applied.

In line with the constructivist approach developed by Piaget and Vygotsky, competency-based learning encourages students to construct their own knowledge through experience and reflection, as explained by Tamrin et al., (2011) who emphasize that knowledge cannot be transferred directly from teacher to student but must be actively constructed by students through interaction with the learning environment and concrete experiences. Vygotsky's social constructivism theory makes an important contribution to the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which serves as the basis for teachers to provide appropriate assistance or guidance according to students' cognitive development levels, while Piaget's cognitive constructivism theory emphasizes the importance of assimilation and accommodation processes in the formation of new cognitive schemas. The implementation of the constructivist approach in competency-based learning creates an active, interactive, and meaningful learning environment, where students are not merely passive recipients of information but active constructors of knowledge who are able to connect new experiences with previously acquired knowledge (Suryana et al., 2022)

In several studies, it was found that competency-based learning can increase students' motivation and independence in learning. According to Murniatum, (2022) this approach allows students to feel more in control of their learning process, thus increasing their sense of responsibility for learning. This also has a positive impact on long-term learning outcomes, as students better understand and internalize the material learned. Competency-based learning in the Merdeka Curriculum adopts a holistic approach that focuses not only on achieving academic grades, but also on developing 21st century skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity.

This approach allows students to learn according to their own rhythm and learning style, thus creating an inclusive and adaptive learning environment. In addition, the formative assessment system implemented in competency-based learning provides continuous feedback to students on their learning progress, which in turn helps students to self-reflect and self-improve. The implementation of competency-based learning also encourages teachers to act as facilitators and mentors, rather than the main source of information, thus creating a more interactive and participatory classroom dynamic.

However, the success of this approach depends on the readiness of teachers in designing student-centered learning, the ability of schools to provide a learning environment that supports exploration and experimentation, and the support of an evaluation system that not only measures the end result but also the learning process that students go through.

According to (Na'imah et al., 2025) this curriculum allows teachers to determine the most effective teaching methods according to classroom conditions and student characteristics. This flexibility also makes it easier to adapt learning materials, both in urban and rural areas where infrastructure and access to technology can be very different. Therefore, it is necessary to adjust to these conditions, this is in line with Yang & Sono, (2025) Social Ecology System (SES) includes complex interactions between human society and its natural environment. SES highlights the interactions between social elements, including culture and governance, and ecological components, such as biodiversity and natural resources.

## Conclusions

This study reveals that the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum at Junior High School 1 Simpang Tiga and Junior High School 1 Darul Imarah is not uniform, but is strongly influenced by the contextual characteristics of each school. The main objective of this study, which is to find out the differences in the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in the two schools, has been achieved by showing that the factors of facility availability, school leadership, students' socio-economic background, and teacher competence and creativity greatly determine the effectiveness of curriculum implementation. This finding expands the understanding that Merdeka Curriculum cannot be implemented uniformly without considering the readiness and real conditions of education units. This study advances studies in the field of education policy implementation, especially the Merdeka Curriculum, by highlighting the importance of a contextual approach based on school characteristics. A one-size-fits-all approach proved less relevant for areas with limited infrastructure, as experienced by Junior High School 1 Simpang Tiga. In contrast, the success of Junior High School 1 Darul Imarah demonstrates the importance of comprehensive education ecosystem support, including facilities, teacher training and adaptive principal leadership.

Scientifically, the results of this study can serve as justification for policy makers to develop a more flexible and local needs-based Merdeka Curriculum implementation strategy. This research also opens up opportunities for the application of a curriculum policy differentiation approach that considers geographic areas, technological readiness, and student characteristics. For future research, it is recommended to conduct a longitudinal study to see the development of Merdeka Curriculum implementation over time, as well as expand coverage to other schools in various regions with similar or different characteristics. Low-tech pedagogy experiments and local contextualized learning methods also need to be developed as innovative solutions for schools in remote or rural areas. This research is an initial foundation that encourages the development of a more adaptive and equitable approach to curriculum implementation.

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