



## IMPLEMENTING THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN BORDER AREAS: CHALLENGES, ADAPTATION AND THE NEED FOR POLICY INTERVENTION

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### ABSTRACT

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in border areas faces complex challenges, particularly in schools such as SMP Negeri Silawan and SMP Negeri SATAP Suspini. This study aims to describe the dynamics of teachers' adaptation to Merdeka Curriculum within the context of infrastructural limitation, socio-economic conditions and local cultural values. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations and document analysis. The results reveal that despite strong commitment from schools and teachers, key obstacles such as limited access to training, inadequate facilities and low digital literacy continue to hinder effective implementation. However, adaptive strategies such as teacher collaboration, modification of teaching materials and the integration of local cultural values into learning processes show potential to enhance curriculum relevance. These results highlight the need to strengthen teacher capacity about learning methods, improve infrastructure and provide greater flexibility in curriculum application to suit local contexts in border areas.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka Curriculum was launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology as an effort to transform the learning system into one that is more flexible, contextual and oriented towards strengthening student character. The Ministry initiated the Merdeka Belajar Program, which aims to provide students the freedom to choose how to learn (Aulia et al., 2025). The Merdeka Curriculum is a simplification of the national curriculum, emphasizing project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and flexibility in managing time and content by educational institutions (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). The nature and purpose of the Merdeka Curriculum are to enhance the quality of learning. This curriculum includes both Intra-curricular and co-curricular activities. Intra-curricular activities are conducted throughout classroom learning processes, while co-curricular activities are carried out through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects. Both activities aim to support the development of the Pancasila Student Profile. The Merdeka Curriculum is one of Indonesia's educational reform initiatives that emphasizes flexibility, differentiation, and student-centered learning. This curriculum highlights the essential content, contextual learning and character strengthening through the Pancasila Student Profile. However, in practice, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has not yet been fully optimized in all regions of the Republic of Indonesia. Implementation still faces numerous challenges. Indonesia's geographical condition as an archipelago presents significant obstacles to achieving equitable education quality (Aulia et al., 2025). Furthermore, the Merdeka Curriculum requires teachers to improve their digital literacy, which includes the ethical and responsible use of digital tools for communication and information-seeking (Sari, 2023)

Border regions have unique geographical and social characteristics, such as limited access, scarcity of human resources, and technological disparities. According to Law No. 43 of 2008, border areas are those that directly share borders with other countries. This study refers to the border area between the Republic of Indonesia and Timor-Leste, specifically Silawan Village. Life dynamics in border regions often experience development and economic disparities that affect educational access to training and resources is limited. The disparities commonly found in these border regions present unique challenges in adopting an ideal and progressive curriculum.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is currently ongoing in almost every educational unit across Indonesia, including those in border regions. The lack of knowledge about the curriculum's implementation is partly due to the distance of schools from the regency capital (Fernandez, 2024). These requirements become particularly challenging in border schools where access to training and resources is limited. To support equitable implementation, the government has launched programs such as Sekolah Penggerak and Guru Penggerak. These initiatives aim to support the curriculum's application in every school across the country. As the frontline implementers of the curriculum, teachers face the complexities of educational reform. This mismatch contributes to a gap between policy expectations and the realities of border-area schools.

Research findings indicate that teachers face significant challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum during the planning, classroom execution, and evaluation stages. These challenges include limited understanding and skills in applying creative and innovative teaching methods, school environmental conditions, facilities and infrastructure, and available human resources (Anisa Hariani, Kezia Nabila Puteri, 2023). Previous studies largely focus on classroom practices, while infrastructural and socio-economic constraints in border regions remain underexplored.

SMP Negeri Silawan is a junior high school located near the Timor-Leste border. This

school is also implementing the Independent Curriculum for grade VII. The school's location is relatively far from the regency capital and is situated near the national border checkpoint. Local economics conditions shape the availability of learning resources and teacher readiness. Additionally, the integration of patriotism and nationalism values presents challenges in implementing the curriculum. The emphasis on patriotic values presents unique challenges in border schools where exposure to cross-border influences is relatively strong. Despite these limitations, educational units in these areas can still implement the Independent Curriculum effectively. However, numerous challenges remain. Therefore, this study aims to explore the specific challenges faced by educational institutions in border regions when implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

## **2. METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design to explore the implementation dynamics of the Merdeka Curriculum in border-area schools. The objective is to describe, interpret, and understand the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by schools in implementing the curriculum within specific geographical and socio-economic contexts.

The study was conducted at SMP Negeri Silawan, located in the border area between Indonesia and Timor-Leste, specifically in Belu Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province. To support and enrich the findings, additional observations were also carried out at SMP Negeri SATAP Suspini in North Central Timor Regency. These two schools were purposively selected based on criteria such as border-area location, implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum for at least one academic year, limited infrastructure, and accessibility constraints.

The research subjects consisted of one school principal and two mathematics teachers who were directly responsible for implementing the curriculum. They were selected purposively based on their capacity to provide in-depth information regarding practical implementation and encountered challenges.

Data were collected using three primary techniques: interviews, direct observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant for 30-45 minutes, covering topics such as curriculum understanding, planning, implementation, and encountered challenges. The questions addressed understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, implementation processes, learning strategies, and challenges encountered. Direct observation was conducted to examine learning activities, the use of teaching modules, the condition of facilities and infrastructure, and student engagement in classroom and school activities. Observations were participatory, allowing researchers to witness the actual conditions inside and outside the classroom. Documentation involved reviewing the School Operational Curriculum documents, teaching modules, and materials related to the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects. The document analysis aimed to assess the extent to which the curriculum content reflected local characteristics and student needs, and its consistency with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The main instrument in this study was the researcher. However, to support data collection, interview guides, observation sheets, and documentation checklists were used. The interview guides and observation sheets were developed based on key components of the Merdeka Curriculum, including competency attainment, learning design, formative assessment, and project-based learning.

Data analysis of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana involved three key stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/ verifying (Hariawan et al., 2019). Data condensation was done by selecting information relevant to the study's focus. Data display

highlighted key issues such as curriculum understanding, school leadership, teacher involvement, infrastructural challenges, and socio-economic factors.

Data trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement in the field. This included triangulation of sources, comparing interview, observation, and document data.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Results

Silawan Junior High School is located in a border area between the Republic of Indonesia and Timor-Leste. This school has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) in its seventh-grade classes during the first year of the curriculum rollout. Fundamentally, this curriculum is characterized by: (1) project-based learning to develop soft skills and attributes aligned with the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*; (2) a focus on essential content to give students more time for foundational learning, particularly in mathematics and literacy; and (3) flexible teaching practices that enable differentiated instruction tailored to students' abilities and adjusted to local context and content (Ramadhan, 2023).

Teachers and principals reported experiencing difficulties in understanding and operationalizing the curriculum due to limited training and resource constraints. School leaders, teachers, and educational staff are tasked with understanding and operationalizing the Independent Curriculum despite the various limitations typical of border schools. A similar situation occurs at SMP Negeri SATAP Suspini, though with its own distinct dynamics in implementing the curriculum. These schools also face the broader challenge of building strong external partnerships to support the implementation process.

The results indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in both schools is still in the adjustment phase. While both schools have developed their Kurikulum Operasional Satuan Pendidikan (KOSP), these documents are largely adopted from examples provided on the official *Merdeka Mengajar* platform. No adjustments were made to the school's specific circumstances. The drafting process didn't involve parents, supervisors, or community leaders.

In addition, teachers in the seventh grade still rely heavily on teaching modules adopted from other schools by the *Merdeka Mengajar* platform. These modules, while useful, are used without significant adaptation. Teachers have limited understanding of how to formulate *Learning Objectives* and *Learning Trajectories* based on the official learning outcomes provided by the Ministry of Education. As a result, the adopted modules, including their learning objectives and sequences—are implemented as-is, with little contextual modification. Teachers stated that understanding of this curriculum was acquired independently through online sources. Teachers had never participated in structured in-house training (IHT). However, due to the absence of structured discussion forums and limited access to quality training, teacher understanding of curriculum design remains superficial. The lack of professional development opportunities, combined with low participation in online learning forums, further reinforces reliance on external sources without contextual adaptation. Teachers had difficulty accessing online platforms due to unstable internet, so

the use of Merdeka mengajar has not been optimal. Unfortunately, limited internet connectivity remains a significant barrier to teachers' access to online professional development.

The schools also continue to face significant infrastructural limitations. Classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and digital technologies remain inadequate, conditions that starkly contrast with the expectations of the Merdeka Curriculum, which promotes innovative, interactive, and project-based learning. The curriculum would be far more effective if supported by improved facilities, especially digital tools (Ferbrian et al., 2024). Similar infrastructure challenges were observed at SMP Negeri SATAP Suspini, where classroom shortages persist. Some classrooms and the teachers' room are made of semi-permanent materials, and the laboratory is repurposed as a classroom due to space constraints. This can be seen in the following figure



**Figure 1.** Condition of Unit Infrastructure

Limited socioeconomic conditions also pose a barrier to the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum. A key obstacle to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum from an economic perspective is the parents' occupation as farmers. Family financial constraints cause students to be absent from the learning process and then take jobs around border posts. These economic limitations force school-aged children to help their parents to support family incomes, including skipping school to trade or help transport goods from Timor-Leste. As a result, parents couldn't actively support school programs. Schools also found it very difficult to develop the innovative programs envisioned by Merdeka Curriculum. Yet, parental involvement has been shown to positively influence students' motivation and academic achievement (Nurwidayanti et al., 2024). This economic vulnerability leads students to live with grandparents, which affects their discipline and character development. The high poverty rate forces many students in border areas to divide their time between school and supporting their family's economy. Children are often asked to work in the fields and take care of their younger siblings. In addition, the low level of digital literacy among parents leads to limited support at home.

The P5 Project is a core component of the Merdeka Curriculum that emphasizes values outlined in the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (Aulia et al., 2025). The P5 (Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila) is an interdisciplinary learning model that encourages students to observe

and reflect on local problems while promoting competencies aligned with the Pancasila Profile (Melati et al., 2024). In most border schools, the P5 project theme often centers around local wisdom. Schools often choose themes related to entrepreneurship by utilizing agricultural products from students' homes, illustrated in figure 2 below. The teacher stated that limited materials and time were the main obstacles.



**Figure 2.** Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila

Cultural challenges also influence the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The dominant use of the mother tongue (Dawan or Tetun), both at school and at home, presents a significant challenge in the learning process. Many students struggle to understand instructions in the Indonesian language, especially in exact subjects such as mathematics or science. Indonesian, which serves as the language of instruction, is not yet fully mastered by students, thus hindering their comprehension of subject matter. Within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum—which emphasizes active and reflective student engagement—this language barrier weakens meaningful participation in learning. The use of the mother tongue may also contribute to the slow progress in literacy indicators, particularly in the National Assessment (Asesmen Nasional), “*Some Students have difficulty understanding instruction in Indonesian*” said Mathematics teacher. The use of local languages is a social factor that constrains the implementation of the curriculum. Students often use their mother tongue both inside and outside the classroom, with its usage becoming even more dominant in the home environment. According to the principal, this linguistic challenge is a significant barrier in realizing the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Based on interviews with the principal of SMP Negeri Silawan, the school is not yet fully prepared to implement the Merdeka Curriculum. Furthermore, not all teachers have participated in workshops or training related to its implementation. The principal emphasized that school readiness should consider human resources, facilities, and infrastructure. The lack of adequate facilities, including the absence of a proper laboratory, has become a major obstacle. This concern was echoed by the principal of SMP Negeri SATAP SUSPINI, who stated that limited infrastructure remains a barrier to effective curriculum implementation. Classrooms are still insufficient in number, and some are constructed from semi-permanent materials rather than concrete. These conditions are illustrated in the following figure 3



**Figure 3.** Classroom Conditions

Limited infrastructure and accessibility are among the main issues in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in border areas. Schools in these regions are generally located far from the regency or provincial capitals, SMP Negeri SATAP SUSPINI just had one permanent classroom, one permanent laboratory that functions as a classroom, and the library didn't operate. These conditions hinder the implementation of flexible and innovative learning processes, which are core principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. The lack of adequate facilities and technological support has resulted in teachers being unfamiliar with integrating technology into their teaching. In fact, areas like Motaain already have relatively good internet access. However, geographic isolation still affects the distribution of textbooks and limits the participation of teachers, principals, and students in professional development activities.

### **3.2. Discussion**

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemdikbudristek) explains that the Merdeka Curriculum focuses on essential content and the holistic development of students' competencies. The Merdeak Curricullum aims to promote essential, meaningful learning and holistic student development through contextual and project-based approaches. However, the findings indicate that its implementation face significant challenges in learning planning, instructional practices, and assessment, particularly due to teachers' limited readiness and the need for adaptation to a relatively new curriculum. These challenges are further intensified in border-areas schools where resources and educational support are limited.

Accessibility constraints also affect the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Silawan State Junior High School (SMP Negeri Silawan), particularly concerning teacher participation. Educational issues in regions far from the capital tend to be more complex (Maulido et al., 2024). Teachers in the school only attend in-house training held within the school itself. In other words, their knowledge of Merdeka Curriculum implementation is solely based on internal school activities. Teachers lack motivation to join activities or in-house training held in other schools due to inadequate internet connectivity and the long distance between schools. Furthermore, although teachers are encouraged to actively use the Merdeka Mengajar *Platform* to enhance their knowledge, the school principal reported that only a fraction of the teachers are actively engaged with the platform. According to the principal, one of the main obstacles is the poor internet connectivity in this border region. As a result, only a few teachers are active on the platform, and they do not participate in sharing best practices or attending online activities offered by the platform. This issue is

reinforced by a mathematics teacher's opinion, who stated that the subject's teaching module was simply adopted from the platform without meaningful modifications or consideration of the specific characteristics and conditions of the school and its students.

Due to the lack of training attended by teachers, both teachers and school principals become less competent in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers struggle to design creative and project-based learning that aligns with the curriculum's demands. Additionally, another issue arises from the inactivity of learning communities within and between schools, for example, the limited activity of subject teacher forums (MGMP) (Sabon et al., 2018).

Moreover, there are very few junior high schools around the border area, resulting in the absence of inter-school learning communities. These communities are vital platforms for collaboration, especially in the context of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum (Fernandez & Paulus, 2024) and sharing best practices. The existence of such communities can help overcome the lack of government socialization or limited teacher participation in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. In secondary schools, this inter-school community is known as the *Musyawah Guru Mata Pelajaran* (MGMP). The learning community on the Merdeka Mengajar Platform is an online community that allows educators to carry out collaborative activities without being limited by geographic location or distance (Giyanto et al., 2023).

Learning communities are fundamentally aimed at educating their members to foster the improvement of teachers' and educators' competencies. Essentially the presence of learning communities plays a highly strategic role in supporting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly amid limitation in resources, access to information, school locations and formal training support from the Ministry. These communities also provide opportunities for teachers not only to participate as learners but also to serve as facilitators, mentors or resource persons.

However, the reality in schools located in border areas is that these learning communities are not functioning effectively. The scheduled regular meetings often do not take place as planned. This is due to various conflicting activities among teachers such as family events. Moreover, there is a lack of awareness regarding the importance of learning communities. For intra-school learning communities to run effectively, strong leadership from the principal and the learning community coordinator is essential.

Inter-school learning communities can expand collaborative networks. Through the MGMP forum, schools can design joint learning plans, develop context-based assessment and formulate solutions to shared challenges. However, in reality, inter-school learning communities in border areas have not developed well. The challenges faced by these communities in border regions include the relatively small number of schools and the difficult access to those schools.

The challenges faced by learning communities do not only come from within schools but also stem from limited government support. Both local and central governments need to provide special support for learning communities in border areas, such as by assigning facilitators or supervisors. In reality, there is a shortage of school supervisors. One school supervisor may be responsible for up to 50 schools, which results in suboptimal quality of supervision and guidance. As a consequence, even intra-school learning communities struggle to develop effectively.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires the active involvement of parents and community groups. However, many parents still don't understand Merdeka Curriculum. They have yet to understand the importance of project-based learning or differentiated instruction. Most parents prefer conventional methods of education, emphasizing memorization and obedience to teachers. The situation arises due to the lack of

socialization and dissemination regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. As a result, miscommunication often occurs between schools and parents, as well as with certain community groups. In the implementation of Project Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5), parental and community involvement at the village level remains minimal.

The issue of limited dissemination of the Merdeka Curriculums a complex problem. One contributing factor is the remote location of schools, far from the regency capital. In addition, the level of teacher and educator participation in learning communities on the Merdeka Mengajar Platform remains low. This is further compounded by the limited number of school supervisors in the regency.

Furthermore, the curriculum change has also faced resistance from traditional community groups in the border areas. The lack of understanding among parents or traditional leaders about the Merdeka Curriculum has led to limited support, despite the important roles these stakeholders play in the curriculum's implementation. Due to inadequate socialization efforts, many parents still adhere to outdated or conventional views of education.

Security conditions in the border areas significantly affect the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Community and family conflicts disrupt student attendance, weaken learning motivation, and hinder character development, thereby creating an unstable learning environment. In border regions, security dynamics related to cross-border proximity and internal social conflicts further exacerbate these challenges. As a result, the flexibility and autonomy promoted by the Merdeka Curriculum can't be fully realized in schools operating under insecure conditions, limiting the effectiveness of character-based and holistic learning.

Infrastructural limitations also influence curriculum implementation. The absence of laboratories, libraries, and limited internet access make it difficult for schools to conduct digital and project-based learning. This situation contradicts the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes innovative, exploratory, and collaborative learning.

In addition, the lack of relevant training and limited access to discussion forums or professional learning communities has led to low teacher confidence and inadequate competence in implementing the curriculum. Teachers tend to revert to traditional, text-based, teacher-centered methods, without adapting teaching materials to local contexts or student learning needs. This often results from the direct adoption of teaching modules from other schools without modification.

Socio-cultural aspects also become key determinants in the dynamics of learning. The widespread use of local languages, which are not the language of instruction in schools, poses barriers to classroom communication. Furthermore, economic pressures within families compel many students to divide their time between studying and helping with family work, thereby reducing their motivation to learn and attend school regularly.

Despite these various problems, the challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in border areas are not solely related to innovative policies from schools or the government but are also rooted in issues within the schools and their surrounding environments. There is a noticeable spirit and commitment from some teachers and school leaders to adapt to these changes. While learning innovation is necessary, limited resources pose a significant barrier. This suggests that the success of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation is not only determined by policy design but also by the supporting ecosystem around it.

Several measures can be taken to support and address the challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in border areas. These include improving infrastructure and accessibility, strengthening teacher capacity, reinforcing learning communities, promoting curriculum awareness among parents and local communities, increasing training in

technology integration, and building collaborations between border schools and security personnel, or even partnerships with schools in Timor Leste.

Therefore, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in border areas requires a more contextual and affirmative approach. The government must provide continuous training, strengthen educational infrastructure, and encourage community involvement in the educational process. Only through a holistic, locally-responsive approach can educational transformation truly be realized in an inclusive and equitable manner.

The implementation of intra-curricular and co-curricular activities under the Merdeka Curriculum in border areas faces significant challenges that affect learning quality. Although the curriculum promotes flexible, contextual, and student-centered learning, its implementation remains largely conventional due to limited teacher training, inadequate supervision, and teaching materials that are poorly aligned with the social, cultural, and economic realities of border communities. In addition, co-curricular activities are constrained by limited facilities, funding shortage, geographic isolation, and security issues, which restrict students' opportunities for character development and holistic learning. Consequently, the intended autonomy and contextual relevance of the Merdeka Curriculum have not been fully realized in border-area schools, widening the quality gap with schools in more accessible areas.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri Silawan and SMP Negeri SATAP Suspini still encounters several significant challenges, in line with the research objective to examine the readiness and contextual barriers in border-area schools. The key constraints identified include limited infrastructure, insufficient teacher competence, and readiness, and socio-economic as well as cultural factors that hinder curriculum optimization.

Despite these challenges, the study finds indications of teacher commitment and willingness to adapt, serving as a supportive factor for gradual curriculum implementation. This indicates that with adequate support from the government through training programs, provision of facilities, and policies that are sensitive to local contexts—the Merdeka Curriculum can be implemented more effectively and meaningfully, even in geographically and socially disadvantaged areas such as border regions.

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