


# Exploring Teachers Perceptions of the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Elementary Schools

Aisyah Agustin<sup>1</sup>, Amanda Kurniawaty<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1 2</sup> Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Sembilan belas November Kolaka, Sulawesi, Indonesia

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article history:</b></p> <p>Received: 28 Jun, 2025 Revised: 03 Jul, 2025 Accepted: 30 Jul, 2025</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b></p> <p>Curriculum Implementation; Elementary Education; Merdeka Curriculum; Teacher Perceptions; Teaching Challenges.</p>	<p>This study explores elementary school teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, a newly introduced educational reform in Indonesia aimed at promoting student-centered learning, flexibility, and holistic development. As frontline implementers, teachers play a pivotal role in determining the success of curriculum changes. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with elementary school teachers across various regions to gather in-depth insights into their experiences, challenges, and attitudes toward the curriculum. The findings reveal a generally positive perception of the Merdeka Curriculum's objectives, particularly its emphasis on differentiated instruction and character education. However, teachers reported significant challenges related to limited training, inadequate resources, and varying levels of institutional support. Additionally, there was a notable gap in understanding how to align assessment practices with the curriculum's flexible and student-centered principles. The study highlights the need for continuous professional development, clearer implementation guidelines, and stronger administrative support to ensure effective adoption at the classroom level. These findings provide valuable implications for policymakers and educational stakeholders seeking to enhance curriculum implementation and teacher preparedness. Ultimately, successful integration of the Merdeka Curriculum relies on addressing systemic barriers and fostering a supportive environment for teachers.</p> <p><i>This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC license.</i></p> 

**Corresponding Author:**

Aisyah Agustin,  
Faculty of Teacher Training and Education,  
Universitas Sembilan belas November Kolaka, Sulawesi, Indonesia,  
Jalan Pemuda No. 339, Sulawesi Tenggara, Indonesia.  
Email: aayahagustin@gmail.com

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's recent educational reform, the Merdeka Curriculum, represents a transformative shift aimed at nurturing more independent, creative, and contextually grounded learners in its elementary schools. Announced in 2022 by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes learner autonomy, thematic project-based learning (Project Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila), and flexible, school-based approaches that depart from rigid national syllabi. This movement responds to growing recognition of the need for education that cultivates not only knowledge but also character, critical thinking, cultural awareness, and adaptability in the face of 21st-century challenges. In this context, teachers emerge as pivotal agents of change. Their beliefs, attitudes, and lived experiences profoundly shape how curriculum policies materialize in classrooms. The Merdeka Curriculum's success rooted in its decentralized, teacher-driven ethos hinges on educators' willingness and capacity to interpret its principles meaningfully, adapt teaching practices, and engage learners in authentic inquiry. Yet, as is common in curricular transformations worldwide, the gap between policy intention and classroom practice can be wide, and teachers' voices are too often under-represented in both research and policymaking.

Exploring teachers' perceptions offers an illuminating lens into this implementation process. Past studies on curriculum reform highlight that when teachers perceive new approaches as congruent with their professional values and see them as manageable within existing constraints, they are more likely to adopt and sustain innovations. Conversely, perceived misalignment, ambiguity, or lack of support can lead to superficial compliance or even resistance. In the Indonesian context, teachers work in diverse settings—urban, semi-urban, and remote—even across primary school grade levels. The Merdeka Curriculum's flexible, thematic design offers room for contextual adaptation, but it also demands pedagogical agility, interpretative autonomy, and collaborative planning. Therefore, understanding how teachers interpret the curriculum's goals, how they adjust their teaching practices, and what support structures they consider essential is crucial.

A further motivation for this research lies in the lack of comprehensive, systematic insights into how elementary school teachers experience Merdeka's implementation across Indonesia. While emerging reports and conference proceedings offer anecdotal successes and challenges, there remains a pressing need for a structured qualitative investigation that foregrounds teacher voice. Indonesia's long-standing emphasis on centralized curriculum historically positioned teachers largely as implementers of externally devised lesson plans. The Merdeka Curriculum, by contrast, invites them to become curriculum designers and decision-makers—if they are given the tools, time, and confidence to do so. Without understanding how teachers interpret these expectations, educational stakeholders risk overlooking crucial opportunities for capacity-building, resource allocation, or policy refinement.

The introduction of this curriculum also opens questions about equity and inclusivity in implementation. Elementary schools in rural and urban areas differ significantly in access to resources, professional development opportunities, digital infrastructure, and community involvement. Teachers in well-resourced urban schools may interpret and implement thematic, project-based learning strategies more readily than their counterparts in remote or under-resourced contexts. These disparities highlight the importance of examining how perceptions vary across different socio-geographic school settings, and how support mechanisms could be tailored accordingly. Theoretically, this study draws from implementation science and instructional change frameworks, which emphasize that policy uptake is mediated by factors at multiple levels: individual (teachers' beliefs and self-efficacy), organizational (school leadership, collaboration, norms), and systemic (professional development infrastructure, policy clarity, resource availability). Teachers' perceptions are not merely reflections of personal preferences; they are shaped by the environments in which they work, the system's readiness for change, and the alignment between policy messaging and classroom realities.

Moreover, constructivist learning theories suggest that teachers, much like students, construct understanding of curricular innovations through active sense-making. This process involves interpreting policy documents, professional development messages, peer conversations, and enactment experiences. As teachers try implementing projects, thematic units, and student-centered assessments, they negotiate meaning: Does "project-based learning" empower them and their students? Does "profil pelajar Pancasila" resonate with their sense of civic duty and moral formation? Do they feel confident designing interdisciplinary modules? Through these interpretative acts, they shape, adapt, and even redefine the curricular initiative in practice. In light of these conceptual and contextual foundations, this study seeks to address several interrelated aims. First, it aims to capture the essence of teachers' perceptions—their values, expectations, hopes, and concerns regarding the Merdeka Curriculum. Second, it explores how teachers enact and adapt the curriculum: what strategies they use, how they interpret thematic projects, how they assess student learning, and how they manage autonomy. Third, it investigates the barriers and facilitators they identify: for instance, the availability of instructional materials, professional learning communities, leadership support, time allocation, assessment guidelines, and digital readiness. Lastly, it probes whether and how teachers perceive the curriculum's impact on their students' engagement, skill development, and holistic growth.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, phenomenological design, facilitating deep, context-sensitive insight rather than broad generalizability. Data collection involves in-depth semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis (such as lesson plans and school-level implementation notes) across a diverse sample of elementary schools. Sampling is purposive, aiming to include teachers from different geographic, socio-economic, and institutional backgrounds—urban schools with relatively high resource access, rural schools facing infrastructural constraints, and those transitioning to digital or blended methods. Through thematic coding and cross-case analysis, the

study seeks both emergent themes and nuanced contextual contrasts. Furthermore, this research contributes to the broader field of curriculum implementation studies in decentralizing educational systems. Indonesia is among the world's largest and most diverse nation-states, with wide variation in school contexts. Insights from teacher perceptions in this setting contribute to global understanding of how flexible, teacher-centered curriculum reforms unfold in multi-tiered systems. These findings can inform cross-national discussions on effective strategies for curriculum autonomy, capacity-building, equity, and teacher agency.

This approach aligns with the notion that teacher perception is not monolithic; it varies by individual background, school culture, community expectations, and whether teachers have had access to capacity-building efforts. For instance, teachers who have received sustained, hands-on training in designing thematic learning modules may feel more empowered than those exposed only to top-down policy rollouts. Similarly, elementary teachers who work closely with supportive principals or form collaborative professional learning groups may navigate Merdeka's flexibility more confidently than those working in isolation. The importance of this research extends beyond scholarly interest. By articulating teachers' lived experiences with the Merdeka Curriculum, the study offers concrete insights for policymakers, who can calibrate guidance documents, training programs, and assessment frameworks more effectively. It informs professional development providers, who can tailor workshops to address authentic teacher concerns—such as designing interdisciplinary projects, differentiating instruction, or assessing through holistic rubrics. It also speaks to school administrators, who can strengthen support structures—like easing time constraints, fostering peer collaboration, or curating teaching resources. Ultimately, at the classroom level, understanding what teachers perceive as meaningful and manageable can help tailor supports that enhance student learning outcomes aligned with Merdeka's vision.

However, no curriculum reform is without tension. The Merdeka Curriculum's novelty can prompt uncertainty among teachers. Questions often arise: How much thematic integration is feasible? Are there performance expectations from supervisors or parents that conflict with project-based learning? How should student outcomes be documented and shared? Is there a rollback to conventional assessments if results seem less predictable? These tensions matter greatly: they can lead to hybrid implementation (where teachers selectively adopt elements they feel comfortable with) or even implementation fatigue if teachers feel unsupported. By foregrounding teachers' perceptions, this study gives voice to these lived dilemmas and adaptations highlighting not only the successes, but also the adaptive tensions that may require institutional responsiveness.

For instance, if teachers express confusion about assessment practices, policymakers may need to revise or clarify guidelines. If rural teachers cite lack of materials or connectivity, resource distribution must be addressed. If some teachers feel overwhelmed by the simultaneous demands of thematic integration and character education, staggered or scaffolded rollout approaches may be advisable. Importantly, the Merdeka Curriculum resonates with international trends toward competency-based and learner-centered education. As countries worldwide experiment with similar reforms emphasizing cross-disciplinary themes, character development, civic competencies, and student-led inquiry the Indonesian experience offers valuable lessons on process, pitfalls, and adaption. Teachers' stories how they translate abstract competencies into daily lesson prompts, how they manage group work and project evaluations, how they bring local culture and context into thematic units can illuminate universal principles of effective curriculum enactment.

In summary, this introduction sets the stage by contextualizing the Merdeka Curriculum as a significant shift in Indonesian elementary education—highlighting its learner-centered, flexible, and character-building ambitions. It underlines the critical importance of teacher perceptions in curriculum enactment and the potential gap between policy design and classroom reality. It then establishes the research significance—for educators, policymakers, and international scholarship—arguing that systematic exploration of teacher voices is essential. The introduction underscores the complexity of the terrain: diverse school contexts, capacity differences, theoretical frameworks around policy implementation and constructivist sense-making, and the layers of equity, autonomy, and support. It then outlines the scope, aims, and methodological orientation of the study—qualitative, phenomenological, and comparative across varied elementary school settings—emphasizing that capturing rich, contextualized teacher narratives can lead to actionable insights for more effective and equitable curriculum implementation.

Through this inquiry, the study endeavors to honor teachers as knowledgeable professionals, illuminate pathways for more meaningful and sustainable implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, and contribute to broader understanding of educational change in decentralized contexts. The journey begins with listening: exploring what teachers see, feel, struggle with, and aspire to, as the curriculum unfolds in the daily practice of teaching and learning.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to explore elementary school teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia. A phenomenological approach was adopted to gain a deep understanding of teachers' lived experiences, beliefs, and interpretations as they navigated the new curriculum in their classroom settings. The research was conducted in multiple elementary schools across urban, suburban, and rural areas to capture diverse contextual factors influencing implementation. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a representative mix in terms of teaching experience, school location, and professional development exposure related to the Merdeka Curriculum. Data collection methods included in-depth semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans and teaching materials. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and via video conferencing, depending on participants' availability and geographical location. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Classroom observations focused on instructional practices, student engagement, and the integration of project-based learning components central to the Merdeka Curriculum. Field notes were taken to complement interview data and provide contextual depth. The collected data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using a constant comparative method. Initial codes were developed inductively, then grouped into broader themes related to teachers' understanding, implementation strategies, challenges, and support needs. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, data triangulation was employed by comparing findings across interviews, observations, and documents. Member checking was conducted with selected participants to validate emerging interpretations. Ethical considerations were rigorously observed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. This methodological approach enabled a rich, contextualized understanding of how teachers perceive and experience the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, offering insights into both systemic challenges and opportunities for future policy and professional development support.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Results

#### Teachers Understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum

The findings of this study reveal varied levels of understanding among teachers regarding the Merdeka Curriculum, reflecting a spectrum of familiarity and confidence in its implementation. Most participating teachers demonstrated a basic conceptual understanding of the curriculum's core principles, particularly the emphasis on student-centered learning, differentiated instruction, and the development of Profil Pelajar Pancasila. Teachers generally understood that the Merdeka Curriculum allows greater flexibility in designing lesson plans and encourages autonomy in adjusting learning to meet students' needs. However, the depth of understanding varied significantly between those who had received structured training or participated in official workshops and those who had relied solely on school-based dissemination or independent learning. Several teachers expressed enthusiasm about the philosophy behind the Merdeka Curriculum, acknowledging its potential to shift classroom dynamics from teacher-led to student-active learning environments. Yet, many also admitted uncertainty in translating these ideals into practical application. For example, while teachers could identify key documents such as Capaian Pembelajaran (CP) and Tujuan Pembelajaran (TP), few felt fully confident in developing Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran (ATP) or designing authentic assessments aligned with the new standards.

A recurring challenge identified was the lack of consistent professional development. Teachers noted that training was either too short, too theoretical, or insufficiently tailored to the realities of classroom practice. Additionally, some educators were unsure about how to implement the differentiated learning approach, especially in classrooms with large student populations and limited resources. This aligns with findings from earlier studies that highlight the critical role of ongoing support and mentoring in successful curriculum implementation. Despite these challenges, teachers showed a willingness to adapt and grow. Many reported engaging in peer discussions, accessing digital platforms like Merdeka Mengajar, and experimenting with new teaching strategies. This proactive attitude reflects

a foundational understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum's goals, even if technical aspects remain unclear. In conclusion, the results indicate that while teachers are generally aware of the Merdeka Curriculum's purpose and values, there is a clear need for deeper, practice-oriented professional development to ensure effective implementation. Strengthening teacher support systems, providing hands-on training, and fostering professional learning communities will be essential to bridging the gap between understanding and practice in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum.

### **Perceptions of the Objectives and Benefits of the Merdeka Curriculum**

The findings of this study indicate that teachers generally perceive the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum positively, recognizing its intention to shift Indonesian education toward a more student-centered, flexible, and competency-based approach. Most participants acknowledged that the curriculum aims to foster independent, creative, and critical learners through a more personalized learning process. Teachers also noted the curriculum's alignment with the development of Profil Pelajar Pancasila, which emphasizes well-rounded student competencies, such as global citizenship, collaboration, and spirituality. Many teachers expressed that one of the most significant perceived goals of the Merdeka Curriculum is to liberate teachers from rigid and overly centralized teaching structures, allowing them to tailor lessons based on students' readiness, interests, and local context. This flexibility was seen as a refreshing change from previous curricula, which often emphasized uniformity and content coverage over meaningful learning. Teachers appreciated being given more autonomy to determine learning objectives and materials through documents such as Capaian Pembelajaran (CP) and Tujuan Pembelajaran (TP).

Regarding perceived benefits, a large majority of the respondents highlighted that the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to increase student engagement, as it encourages more active learning strategies such as project-based learning, inquiry-based instruction, and real-world problem solving. Teachers observed that students responded more enthusiastically when given space to express their opinions, work in groups, and participate in practical learning activities. Additionally, some teachers reported a positive shift in classroom dynamics, where students appeared more motivated and responsible for their own learning. However, the discussion also revealed that despite the positive perceptions of the curriculum's goals and intended benefits, several implementation barriers remain. Teachers cited the lack of adequate training, insufficient resources, and limited time for preparation as ongoing challenges that hinder the full realization of the curriculum's potential. These obstacles affected the extent to which teachers could internalize and operationalize the curriculum's goals in day-to-day teaching. In summary, the study shows that while teachers hold positive perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum's goals and benefits, especially regarding its emphasis on student-centered and contextual learning, there is a gap between perception and practical application. To bridge this gap, sustained professional development, school-level support, and clearer instructional guidance are necessary to ensure that the curriculum's promising vision translates into effective classroom practices.

### **Teachers' Perceptions of Implementation Challenges**

The findings of this study reveal that teachers face a variety of challenges in implementing new educational policies and curriculum reforms, with most participants expressing a mixture of concern and cautious optimism. Across the data collected, several consistent themes emerged, highlighting the complex realities educators face on the ground. The most frequently cited challenge was the lack of adequate training and professional development. While many teachers support the vision behind new educational initiatives, they reported limited opportunities to build the skills and knowledge necessary for successful implementation. Workshops were often described as "too short," "too theoretical," or "not aligned with actual classroom conditions." Another significant challenge identified by participants was time management and workload. Teachers noted that planning lessons under new frameworks—such as competency-based or student-centered models requires additional preparation time, which is difficult to balance with administrative duties, grading, and extracurricular responsibilities. As a result, some teachers admitted resorting to old teaching methods despite being aware of the shift in pedagogical approach, simply due to time constraints.

Furthermore, the study found that access to resources remains uneven, particularly in public schools located in rural or underfunded areas. Teachers reported difficulties accessing updated teaching materials, digital tools, and reliable internet connectivity, which hinders their ability to implement modern instructional strategies. This challenge is compounded by the varying levels of student readiness, as not all students have the same foundational knowledge or support systems at home. Teachers expressed frustration that they were expected to deliver individualized instruction without sufficient institutional support or manageable class sizes. In addition, some teachers pointed to a lack of

clear guidelines and ongoing support from education authorities. Policy changes were often introduced quickly, with minimal follow-up or structured monitoring. This created confusion and uncertainty, especially among more senior teachers who are less familiar with newer pedagogical frameworks. Despite these obstacles, many teachers showed resilience and adaptability, relying on peer collaboration, self-directed learning, and professional communities to navigate the challenges. In conclusion, while teachers generally support educational reforms in principle, they perceive multiple implementation challenges that hinder their ability to enact these changes effectively. Addressing these issues through sustained professional development, access to resources, realistic policy timelines, and institutional support will be essential to ensure that reforms translate into meaningful changes in teaching and learning.

### Discussions

The findings illuminate both the promise and the complexity of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian elementary schools. Teachers' largely positive attitudes toward its learner-centered, values-integrated approach underscore the curriculum's potential to invigorate classroom practice and nurture holistic development. Their appreciation of thematic, project-based learning resonates with global trends in 21st-century education, suggesting that if well-supported, Merdeka can serve as a catalyst for deeper, more meaningful student engagement. Yet, the unevenness across contexts underscores systemic challenges. Urban teachers' capacity to innovate stands in contrast to rural teachers' constrained reality, highlighting the inequities in resource distribution, infrastructure, and access to digital platforms. This disparity aligns with broader patterns in curriculum reform literature: without equitable resource provisioning, ambitious pedagogical reforms risk exacerbating rather than narrowing educational gaps.

Assessment emerged as a particularly thorny issue. The persistence of traditional assessment formats—despite teachers' interest in holistic evaluation—reflects the inertia of accountability systems, stakeholder expectations, and workload pressures. This suggests that for Merdeka's assessment-oriented vision to take root, systemic alignment is essential: policymakers need to provide clear, practical rubrics, revise reporting formats, and communicate new expectations to supervisors and parents. These moves would reduce tension between aspiration and feasibility and support teachers in adopting more authentic evaluative practices. The importance of professional development resonates strongly. The disparity between the efficacy of hands-on, cohort-based training versus one-time lectures highlights how PD design matters. Curriculum reform literature consistently emphasizes the need for ongoing, collaborative, and context-sensitive teacher learning. Teachers' calls for peer support, exemplars, and localized resources suggest that a distributed, community-based PD model could help sustain curricular innovation more effectively than centralized, episodic workshops.

Leadership and collaboration within schools also proved pivotal. The presence of supportive principals and professional communities correlated with higher confidence, experimentation, and morale among teachers. This is consistent with organizational theories of educational change, which emphasize that school culture and institutional support structures mediate how reforms are enacted on the ground. When leadership enables autonomy and allocates time for joint planning, teachers move from isolated implementers toward collaborative curriculum designers and innovators. Student outcomes, while preliminary and anecdotal, offered encouraging signs. Teachers observed improvements in engagement, communication, and socioemotional domains—aligning with Merdeka's holistic aims. However, the challenge of documenting these gains speaks to the need for new evaluative paradigms that can capture soft skills and dispositions, not merely academic achievement. Without these, teachers may feel compelled to revert to conventional methods that prioritize easily measurable outputs.

Taken together, these findings suggest a multi-level approach to strengthening Merdeka implementation. At the policy level, clearer guidelines on assessment, resource provision, and reporting expectations are necessary. Decentralized support systems—regional resource hubs, digital repositories, and localized exemplars—could help teachers adapt the curriculum to diverse contexts. At the school level, investing in leadership capacity and peer collaboration is critical. Creating time for teacher teams to co-plan, reflect, and share curricular materials would reinforce agency and collective efficacy. At the professional learning level, models like communities of practice, mentoring systems, and school-based inquiry cycles can extend support beyond one-off workshops and create sustainable innovation cultures. Crucially, equity must remain central to strategy. If rural schools remain underserved in materials, training, and digital access, the curriculum risks deepening educational divides. Targeted investments—such as mobile resource kits, localized training cohorts, and

partnerships with NGOs or universities—may help bridge gaps. Policymakers should monitor implementation disparities and allocate supports accordingly to ensure Merdeka's transformative potential is broadly realized.

Moreover, efforts to align assessment paradigms are vital. Developing clear, manageable rubrics for project-based and character-oriented assessment would help teachers translate Merdeka's values into pedagogical practice. Parent and supervisor orientations—perhaps through community workshops or school-level briefings could shift expectations around what counts as meaningful learning, reducing pressure to default to traditional quizzes and grades. Finally, capturing and amplifying teacher success stories can serve both motivational and practical ends. Case studies of effective thematic units, collaborative planning models, or creative assessment tools can provide inspiration and guidance to others. Moreover, teacher recognition through school awards, peer showcases, or online platforms can legitimize innovation and build a sense of collective momentum. In sum, the findings affirm that while teachers see the Merdeka Curriculum as aligned with modern educational values, the translation from vision to faithful, equitable enactment faces multiple bottlenecks. Addressing these requires coordinated action across policy, school leadership, professional development, and resource equity. When such supports converge, teachers are not simply curriculum implementers, but empowered agents co-creating a relevant, values-driven, and inclusive education for Indonesian children.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study has explored elementary school teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia, revealing a nuanced landscape of optimism, challenges, and critical reflections. Overall, teachers expressed a generally positive attitude toward the curriculum's core philosophy, which emphasizes student autonomy, differentiated learning, and the development of holistic competencies aligned with the Pancasila values. Many educators appreciated the opportunity to move away from rigid instructional models toward more flexible and creative approaches that prioritize student engagement, critical thinking, and project-based learning. However, the findings also underscore several systemic and contextual challenges. Teachers reported varying degrees of preparedness and confidence in implementing the curriculum, often shaped by their access to professional development, school leadership support, infrastructure, and teaching resources. While those in well-supported environments demonstrated higher levels of engagement and innovation, educators in under-resourced or rural areas faced difficulties in translating the curriculum's ideals into practical strategies. A lack of clear guidelines, limited time for collaboration, and administrative burdens further hindered effective implementation. Assessment practices remain a particular area of concern. Teachers struggled to reconcile the curriculum's call for authentic, formative, and character-based assessments with existing expectations for standardized, academic-focused evaluations. This disconnect reveals the need for alignment between curriculum design, assessment frameworks, and reporting mechanisms. The study also highlights the importance of sustained and practice-oriented professional development. Teachers emphasized the value of ongoing support, access to concrete examples of implementation, and opportunities to collaborate with peers. School leadership and institutional culture emerged as crucial enablers in fostering innovation and reducing resistance to change. In conclusion, while the Merdeka Curriculum holds transformative potential for elementary education in Indonesia, its success depends on the extent to which systemic supports, equity of access, and cultural readiness are addressed. A whole-system approach is necessary one that aligns policy, professional development, assessment, and community engagement. Empowering teachers not only as implementers but as co-designers of the curriculum is essential in realizing its vision. Only by addressing these multilayered dynamics can the Merdeka Curriculum truly foster meaningful, inclusive, and future-oriented learning for all Indonesian children.

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