

## Implementation of the kurikulum merdeka and challenges in instilling character in elementary schools

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**Abstract:** The Merdeka Curriculum addresses educational challenges in Indonesia by offering flexible learning and emphasizing character development. SD Negeri 194/VI Tambang Emas I has adopted this curriculum to enhance learning quality and align students with the Profil Pelajar Pancasila. However, challenges remain, including teacher readiness, parental involvement, and limited infrastructure. This study uses a qualitative case study approach, collecting data through observations, interviews with teachers and students, and document analysis. Data were analyzed using reduction, presentation, and conclusion techniques to understand implementation challenges and opportunities. The findings show that while the curriculum's flexibility enhances project-based learning, its effectiveness is hindered by a lack of teacher training and administrative burdens. Additionally, low parental engagement and inadequate infrastructure remain significant barriers. To ensure successful implementation, practical teacher training, stronger school-parent communication, and improved facilities are essential. Strengthening these aspects will help optimize the curriculum's benefits for students.

**Keywords:** Merdeka Curriculum; Character Education; Elementary School.

### Introduction

Curriculum changes in Indonesia's education system have always been a response to evolving social, cultural, and technological dynamics (Tiwari & Fahrudin 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum was introduced as a solution to increasingly complex learning challenges, providing schools with greater flexibility in designing learning strategies that are more adaptive and aligned with students' needs (Nafiah et al., 2023). Amid these changes, character education has become a crucial aspect that goes beyond academic achievements, aiming to develop individuals with integrity, creativity, and independence.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes two key variables: curriculum flexibility and character education. Curriculum flexibility refers to the ability of teachers and schools to design learning processes that adapt to students' needs and local contexts, while character education focuses on the formation of students' moral, ethical, and social values (Hidayatoli & Nihayah, 2025). These two aspects are interrelated, as an adaptive curriculum should facilitate character development through meaningful learning experiences.

The Merdeka Curriculum offers a more exploratory approach in instilling character values, particularly through strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile, which serves as the foundation for shaping students' character (Hakim et al., 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to create a student-centered learning environment that emphasizes not only academic knowledge but also social-emotional skills, moral development, and adaptability to real-world challenges (Suari et al., 2023). This aligns with contemporary educational trends that promote holistic learning to prepare students for the future.

Previous research has examined the effectiveness of character education in different curricula. Setiawan (2013) emphasized that character development must be integrated into daily learning activities to have a lasting impact. Similarly, research by Wibowo (2023) found that the success of project-based learning in the Merdeka Curriculum depends on teacher preparedness and resource availability. However, most studies focus on urban schools with well-established facilities, leaving a gap in understanding how the curriculum is implemented in resource-limited schools.

The Merdeka Curriculum adopts a project-based learning approach, allowing students to develop critical thinking skills, collaborate, and solve real-world problems (Rosa et al., 2024). This approach is expected to create a more interactive learning environment that remains relevant to modern needs. However, in its implementation, not all schools are adequately prepared to adopt this learning model. Factors such as teachers' readiness, resource availability, and parental involvement play a significant role in determining the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum in shaping students' character (Sari & Masruddin, 2025).

Character education has become increasingly crucial in the digital era. The rapid advancement of technology and the widespread influence of digital media often challenge children's ability to understand moral and social values (Damon, 2013). Exposure to online content can shape children's perceptions and behaviors, sometimes misaligning with cultural and ethical principles. Thus, schools must take an active role in strengthening character education through meaningful learning experiences.

Character development has become increasingly important in today's digital era. The rapid advancement of technology and the global flow of information often pose challenges for children in understanding moral and social values (Zachroh & Fahrur, 2024). The strong influence of digital media can quickly shape children's thoughts and behaviors, which may not always align with cultural and ethical values upheld by society (Buckingham, 2013). Therefore, schools play a strategic role in fostering strong character development, ensuring that character education is not just theoretical but also practiced in students' daily lives.

In the context of elementary schools, the Merdeka Curriculum has great potential to build students' character through experiential learning activities. The project-based learning model enables students to engage directly in activities that foster collaboration, empathy, and social responsibility (Syafei & Zam'an, 2024). However, ideal implementation requires thorough preparation in terms of curriculum, teaching methodologies, and school infrastructure support. Without appropriate policies, project-based learning can become a challenge for teachers in managing heterogeneous classrooms while ensuring that each student receives an optimal learning experience.

Additionally, assessing character education outcomes remains a challenge. Unlike academic performance, which can be measured using standardized tests, character development requires qualitative evaluations. Schools need comprehensive assessment tools to effectively measure students' character growth and provide meaningful feedback to educators (Stronge, 2018).

Aside from teachers' readiness, parental involvement in character education also presents a challenge. Not all parents have a sufficient understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum and how they can actively support their children's character development. In many cases, parents still lean towards a conventional learning approach that prioritizes academic achievements over character building (Setiawan, 2013). Therefore, strong collaboration between schools and families is essential to ensure that character values taught in schools are consistently reinforced at home.

One of the major obstacles in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum is the lack of adequate supporting facilities, particularly in schools with limited resources (Yusa et al., 2023). Project-based learning often requires proper equipment and supportive learning environments, such as laboratories, creative spaces, or access to digital technology (Yahsin et al., 2024). Schools with limited facilities may struggle to implement the curriculum effectively, leading to unequal character education outcomes across different regions.

Therefore, education policymakers must ensure equitable access to learning resources so that all schools, regardless of their financial and infrastructural conditions, can effectively implement the Merdeka Curriculum and achieve its intended objectives (Wang et al., 2023). Furthermore, evaluation policies within the Merdeka Curriculum remain a topic of debate in measuring its effectiveness in character development. Unlike academic evaluations, which can be assessed through tests and numerical grades, character education evaluation is more qualitative and subjective. This presents a challenge for schools in establishing objective parameters to assess the success of character education under the Merdeka Curriculum. A comprehensive evaluation system is needed to clearly measure students' character development and provide constructive feedback for educators (Wibowo, 2023).

In practice, many schools still struggle to implement teaching methods aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. Some teachers find it challenging to adapt to more flexible and exploratory teaching methods, particularly those accustomed to structured learning approaches. Therefore, teacher training and mentoring have become urgent needs to ensure a smooth transition to the Merdeka Curriculum.

At SD Negeri 194/VI Tambang Emas I, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has shown progress in creating more interactive and experience-based learning. However, challenges related to teacher readiness, limited facilities, and students' adaptability to independent learning methods remain issues that need to be addressed. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating the challenges and opportunities in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SD Negeri 194/VI Tambang Emas I, a school with limited infrastructure. The research novelty lies in its focus on how curriculum flexibility can support character education in a real-world setting, especially in schools that do not have access to extensive learning resources. The findings from this research are expected to serve as a reference for policymakers in designing more effective strategies to optimize the curriculum's implementation.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study method conducted at SD Negeri 194/VI Tambang Emas I. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented in shaping students' character and the challenges encountered during its execution. Data were collected through direct observations in the school environment, in-depth interviews with teachers and students, and document analysis related to the policies and implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the school.

The data collection techniques used in this study include participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation of project-based learning activities. Observations were conducted to directly examine the learning process, teacher-student interactions, and the extent to which character education is integrated into daily activities. Interviews with teachers and students aimed to capture their perspectives on the challenges and opportunities arising from the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Document analysis focused on learning modules, evaluation records, and school policies related to the curriculum's application.

**Tabel 1.** Research Instrument for the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

Research Focus	Indicators	Data Collection Techniques	Data Sources
<b>Curriculum Implementation</b>	Teacher adaptation to Merdeka Curriculum	Observation, Interview	Teachers
	Student engagement in project-based learning	Observation, Interview	Students
<b>Character Education</b>	Integration of Pancasila Student Profile values	Observation, Document Analysis	Teachers, School Policies
	Challenges in character formation	Interview	Teachers, Students
<b>Challenges &amp; Opportunities</b>	Teacher readiness	Interview	Teachers
	Parental involvement	Interview	Parents
	Infrastructure support	Observation, Document Analysis	School Facilities, Policies

The data analysis process consisted of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved filtering relevant and significant information to address the research problem (Zahar, 2024). The reduced data were then presented in a narrative descriptive format to provide a clearer picture of the research findings. Conclusions were drawn inductively, based on emerging patterns identified through observations, interviews, and document analysis. Through this method, the study aims to provide a comprehensive insight into the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in shaping elementary school students' character.

## Results and Discussion

This research reveals several key findings regarding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SD Negeri 194/VI Tambang Emas I, particularly in relation to character development among students. The first finding indicates that the flexibility of the Independent Curriculum allows teachers to adjust teaching methods according to students' characteristics. The project-based learning approach promoted by this curriculum provides students with opportunities to be more active and independent in exploring the material. However, in practice, the level of teacher readiness in implementing this learning model varies, leading to inconsistencies in implementation across different classes.

The flexibility of the Independent Curriculum enables teachers to adapt teaching methods to students' characteristics, aiming to enhance learning effectiveness. In its application, this approach allows students to explore material more deeply, thereby improving their creativity and analytical skills. However, differences in teacher readiness affect the successful implementation of this flexibility. Teachers accustomed to conventional teaching methods often struggle to adapt to the new system.

Each key finding is described with supporting explanations, providing a clear overview of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SD Negeri 194/VI Tambang Emas I. The findings are categorized based on critical themes, including teacher readiness, student engagement, and infrastructure support. This structured approach ensures clarity and coherence in presenting the research results.

The flexibility of the project-based learning method requires teachers to quickly adapt in designing instructional materials (Hidaya et al., 2024). Students with different levels of understanding require varied approaches to ensure inclusive and effective learning. Unfortunately, many teachers still rely on traditional teaching patterns and have not fully grasped how to optimally implement project-based methods. Therefore, competency enhancement through continuous training and technical guidance is necessary.

The findings indicate that the flexibility of project-based learning positively impacts student engagement and independent learning. However, challenges remain in teacher readiness and limited infrastructure support. Many teachers express concerns about the lack of structured guidelines, making it difficult to balance curriculum flexibility with achieving learning objectives. Additionally, students who are less familiar with independent learning require additional support to maximize the benefits of this approach.

The impact of this flexibility on students also varies. Students with independent learning skills adapt more easily to this system, while those requiring intensive guidance may struggle. Consequently, the role of teachers in guiding students facing difficulties in project-based learning becomes crucial to ensure that no student is left behind in the learning process (Rachmah et al., 2024). Besides teacher readiness, school support in providing resources is also a crucial aspect of successfully implementing flexible learning. Without adequate facilities, implementing project-based learning becomes challenging. Therefore, schools must allocate a larger budget to provide facilities that support the optimal implementation of the Independent Curriculum.

The results of this study highlight the connection between the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum and teacher preparedness, as well as the availability of supporting resources. In adaptive learning theory, educator readiness plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of the curriculum. This study further reveals that inadequate training and professional development opportunities hinder teachers from fully utilizing project-based learning approaches. A more structured professional development framework is needed to address this gap

As a solution, school policies should focus on equipping teachers with relevant skills and providing adequate teaching aids. With a combination of teacher preparedness and infrastructure support, flexible learning can be implemented more effectively, yielding optimal results for students.

Some teachers still struggle to apply more flexible and exploratory teaching methods. This aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of continuous professional development in enhancing teacher competency. Teachers who receive consistent training and support tend to exhibit higher adaptability in implementing project-based learning, reinforcing the necessity of ongoing mentorship and collaboration. The results of this study are consistent with previous research highlighting challenges in implementing project-based curricula, particularly in terms of teacher readiness and resource limitations. The findings echo studies by Rosa et al. (2024) and Wibowo (2023), which emphasize that while project-based learning promotes creativity and critical thinking, its success heavily depends on the availability of supporting infrastructure and teacher expertise

However, this study also finds that in schools with stronger policy support, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum tends to be more effective. This suggests that school leadership plays a critical role in ensuring the success of this curriculum. Effective school leadership fosters a culture of innovation, encouraging teachers to experiment with new teaching methodologies while receiving the necessary support and resources.

The second finding is that the character values in the Pancasila Student Profile have begun to be internalized into the learning process. Values such as cooperation, independence, and critical thinking are introduced through various classroom activities and learning projects. However, this implementation still faces challenges in maintaining consistency and monitoring students' character development. Some teachers noted that not all students have the same level of readiness in understanding and applying character values in daily life.

Integrating character education into the Independent Curriculum is an effort to create students who excel not only academically but also possess strong moral values. By emphasizing the Pancasila Student Profile, this curriculum aims to shape students who are faithful, devoted, independent, and responsible (Istiningsih & Dharma, 2021). However, in practice, not all schools successfully integrate character values optimally into every learning activity.

A major challenge in implementing character education is the inconsistency of application in each class. Some teachers have successfully internalized character values through project-based learning, while others struggle to link academic material with moral aspects. Therefore, an evaluation system is needed to ensure that character education is



applied evenly throughout the school environment (Mulyasa, 2022). A conducive school environment also plays an important role in shaping students' character. Schools that instill a culture of discipline, cooperation, and honesty tend to be more successful in embedding character values. Conversely, if the school environment does not support these values, they will not be deeply ingrained in students.

Additionally, parental involvement in reinforcing character education at home is a crucial supporting factor. If the values taught at school are not reinforced within the family environment, their impact on students' character development will be less effective (Wahyuningsih, 2017). Therefore, strong synergy between schools and parents is essential in building students' character sustainably.

To ensure the effectiveness of character education in the Independent Curriculum, schools can adopt a more comprehensive evaluation system. This evaluation can be conducted through teacher observations, student self-reflection, and feedback from parents. With a more systematic evaluation approach, character education can be monitored and developed in alignment with the goals of the Independent Curriculum.

The third finding highlights the readiness of educators in implementing a more exploratory learning model. Teachers are required to be more creative in designing learning activities to align with the Independent Curriculum's concepts. Although some teachers have started adapting, many still require further training to optimize project-based learning strategies and differentiated instruction. The lack of continuous training is a major factor hindering teacher preparedness in facing this curriculum shift.

Teacher readiness is a key determinant in the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum (Rofi'ah et al., 2024), especially in applying a more exploratory learning model. Teachers are expected to tailor teaching methods to individual student needs and effectively utilize project-based approaches. However, this study found that not all teachers have adequate readiness, either in terms of conceptual understanding or technical skills in designing lessons that align with the principles of the Independent Curriculum.

The lack of systematic training is a primary obstacle to teacher readiness. Although government and school training programs exist, most teachers feel that the training provided is still theoretical and lacks practical application. Teachers need direct guidance in designing and implementing project-based learning in their classrooms. Moreover, continuous mentoring is necessary to help them adjust their teaching strategies to accommodate diverse student needs.

Beyond pedagogical skills, teachers' mental readiness is also a challenge in implementing this curriculum. The shift from structured to more flexible and exploratory learning methods requires teachers to be more adaptive. Those accustomed to conventional approaches often struggle to manage more dynamic and interactive classrooms. Therefore, in addition to technical training, psychological support and mentoring for teachers are crucial to help them confidently implement the curriculum.

Another factor affecting teacher readiness is the high administrative workload (Rosyada et al., 2024). In the current education system, teachers are responsible not only for teaching but also for various administrative tasks, which often take up their time for developing more

innovative learning strategies (Sili, 2021). To address this issue, policies should prioritize reducing administrative burdens and providing more time for teachers to focus on instructional development.

As a solution, schools and the government need to adopt a more systematic approach to improving teacher readiness. This includes more practical training, periodic mentoring, and policies that support teacher welfare in fulfilling their roles. By enhancing teacher readiness, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum can be more effective and yield optimal benefits for students. Compared to other studies that focus on well-equipped schools, this research provides new insights into the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in resource-limited environments. Schools with limited access to technological tools face greater challenges in ensuring that project-based learning remains effective. These findings highlight the need for targeted policy interventions to bridge the gap in educational resources across different regions.

## Conclusion

The implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka at SD Negeri 194/VI Tambang Emas I provides flexibility in learning and supports students' character development. However, challenges persist in teacher readiness, parental involvement, and infrastructure and resource limitations. The lack of practical training for teachers and the high administrative burden hinder the optimization of project-based learning. Additionally, parents' limited understanding of independent learning concepts also affects the successful implementation of this curriculum. To overcome these obstacles, more practical teacher training, a reduction in administrative burdens, and a more systematic evaluation of character education are necessary. Schools must also enhance communication with parents to encourage their more active role in supporting children's learning at home. Furthermore, the government needs to ensure the availability of adequate infrastructure and resources so that the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka can be more effective and evenly distributed across various schools.

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