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Issues in the Implementation of the "Merdeka" Curriculum in Junior High Schools in Ambon City

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Abstract
This study aims to identify junior high school teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum and the challenges encountered in its implementation in Ambon City. The research was conducted in 14 junior high schools, including eight public and six private institutions, involving a total of 66 respondents—14 school principals and 52 teachers. A mixed-method approach combining quantitative descriptive and qualitative analysis was employed. The findings reveal that: (1) Teachers in Ambon's junior high schools demonstrate a relatively high level of understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, with an average score of 87.6%. (2) All junior high schools (100%) have adopted the Merdeka Curriculum and developed their respective Operational Curriculum of the Education Unit documents. Schools report an average of 10 extracurricular activities, showing a tendency toward increased student involvement. The Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) has been implemented in 92.86% of schools, with themes tailored to each school's context. (3) The curriculum's implementation has had a positive impact, enhancing teacher performance, creativity, and overall learning quality. (4) However, several challenges persist, including 17.14% of schools not yet implementing the P5 program; teachers' limited ability to design integrated strategies for developing literacy and numeracy; suboptimal use of information and communication technology; and difficulties in creating assessment instruments that effectively balance comprehension, application, and reasoning. The study highlights the need for ongoing training and support to ensure effective and sustainable implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in junior high schools.

Keywords: *implementation issues, merdeka curriculum, junior high schools*

Introduction

Curriculum reform is a common occurrence across various regions and any types of institutions (Hicks, 2018). The demand for curriculum reform arises due to gaps between objectives and actions within the curriculum (Mälkki & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012), as well as the need to adapt to the ever-changing market demands, especially in the era of rapid technological advancement (Law, 2022). Curriculum reform is driven not only by the need

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to ensure that students acquire the skills and attitudes necessary for the 21st century but also by the potential impact of specific curriculum implementations on student learning outcomes (Boser et al., 2015; Steiner, 2017). On another hand, curriculum reform is necessary to update content in accordance with evolving social, cultural, and economic contexts. It also serves as a response to specific challenges, such as poor learning outcomes, high dropout rates, high levels of student or teacher stress, or a lack of skills required for the labor market (Gouëdard et al., 2020). The reasons to reform the reform is to address broader challenges faced by a country, market environments, and educational stakeholders who demand changes (Mendy & Madiope, 2020).

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia is one of the strategic steps in reforming the national education system, aiming to improve learning quality and accommodate the diverse needs of students. According to the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, various national and international studies have shown that Indonesia has been experiencing a learning crisis for a significant period. These studies indicate that many Indonesian children struggle to comprehend simple readings or apply basic mathematical concepts. The findings also highlight significant educational disparities across regions and social groups in Indonesia. This situation was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. To address these crises and challenges, a systemic transformation is needed, which is through curriculum reform. The curriculum determines the learning materials and influences the pace and teaching methods used by teachers to meet students' needs. Therefore, Kemdikbudristek developed the Merdeka Curriculum as a crucial initiative to recover from the long-standing learning crisis.

According to Zahir et al., (2022), the Merdeka Curriculum is designed to provide students with the freedom to choose and pursue a learning process that aligns with their interests and talents. This in line with what (Tomasouw et al., 2024) stated that the curriculum is inherently dynamic, shaped by evolving paradigms and educational needs over time. This adaptability aims to enhance the quality of education and develop globally competitive human resources for future generations.

Curriculum reform brings some challenges in its implementation, as it requires changes in multiple aspects that may challenge existing beliefs and subjective realities in individual and organizational contexts. Factors such as high costs, uncertain outcomes, and risk aversion among stakeholders also create additional barriers to initiating and realizing curriculum changes. Furthermore, the reformation often demands significant investment in teacher training and capacity development, the introduction of new teaching and learning approaches, and new material resources (Gouëdard et al., 2020).

In several regions of Indonesia, challenges have also been encountered in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Susanti et al., (2023) found that many teachers lack a clear understanding of how to implement the curriculum effectively. Similarly, Murwanti (2023) found that teachers struggle with comprehending learning achievements and formulating learning objectives. Mutia & Admawati (2024) identified several issues teachers face in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, including difficulties in applying differentiated learning strategies, designing and conducting assessments, developing teaching modules, and planning and implementing the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). According to Windayanti et al., (2023), the Merdeka Curriculum features diverse intraculricular learning experiences, allowing for more optimized content delivery so that students have adequate time to deepen their understanding and strengthen

their competencies. Teachers are given greater flexibility in selecting teaching tools, enabling learning to be tailored to students' needs and interests.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in schools in Maluku Province also deals with various challenges. Several junior high schools in Ambon City, specifically, have adopted the Merdeka Curriculum under the Independent Learning (Mandiri Belajar) and Independent Change (Mandiri Berubah) options. However, many challenges remain for both teachers and schools in implementing this curriculum. Teachers are expected to be more creative and innovative in designing learning processes, yet they also encounter obstacles such as limited technological proficiency and difficulties in designing effective learning media. In this context, research on the challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in junior high schools in Ambon City, including teachers' level of understanding, becomes crucial.

This study aims to analyze the challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in junior high schools in Ambon City and identify effective solutions to overcome these obstacles. The study begins by assessing teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum concept and its implementation. This research is not only essential for improving the quality of education in junior high schools in Ambon City, but it also holds broader relevance in evaluating national education policies. Identifying and addressing the challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in junior high schools in Ambon City can serve as a recommendation for improving and enhancing curriculum implementation in educational institutions within the city.

Method

Research Design

This study uses mixed methods to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in junior high schools in Ambon City. The qualitative approach is through in-depth interviews conducted with principals, teachers, and educational staff at junior high schools in Ambon City. Manalu et al., (2022) said that, Qualitative methodology is considered an artistic approach because the research process is less structured and is characterized as an interpretative method, as the data generated tends to be related to the interpretation of data collected in the field The aim is to find out the challenges faced in implementing the Merdeka curriculum. The quantitative approach is through a survey that includes data on the level of teacher understanding and readiness, as well as the impact of curriculum implementation on students collected using a questionnaire. This survey is designed to reach a large number of respondents, so that it can provide an overview of the existing problems.

Data Collection

The study was conducted at 14 junior high schools in Ambon City which were used as research samples, consisting of eight public junior high schools and six private junior high schools. The respondents in this study consisted of teachers and the school principal or vice principal for Curriculum Affairs. In each school, 3-4 teachers were selected to fill out the questionnaire. The determination of teachers as respondents was carried out by the principal by considering the teachers who were at the school when the study was taking place. The total respondents in this study were 66 people, consisting of 14 principals and 52 teachers.

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Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a combined method (descriptive quantitative and qualitative). The data from the questionnaire and documentation study were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Furthermore, the interview data were analyzed using the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. To ensure the validity of the data, data triangulation was carried out using source triangulation and method triangulation. Additionaly, Tomasouw et al., (2025), showed that the research emphasizes the importance of triangulation to enhance the validity of the findings. This involves cross-verifying data from multiple sources, such as interviews, questionnaires, and classroom observations, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the assessment practices in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Results

1. Teacher Understanding and Readiness

Teacher understanding and readiness of the Merdeka curriculum are one of the important factors supporting the successful of Merdeka curriculum implementation. The results of the questionnaire showed that the level of teacher understanding was relatively very good, with a score of 87.6, as presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The Level of Teacher Understanding

No	Aspect	Percentage					Final score
		SD	D	N	A	SA	
1.	Understand the Merdeka curriculum well	0	0	19.2	32.69	48.08	82.21
2.	Understand the learning outcomes that students must achieve related to the subjects I teach?	0	0	9.62	28.85	61.54	87.98
3.	Understand how to formulate learning objectives from learning outcomes in the subjects I teach?	0	0	7.69	38.46	53.85	86.54
4.	The school organized socialization or workshops on the Merdeka curriculum	0	0	7.69	15.38	76.92	92.31
5.	I utilize the Merdeka teaching platform (Platform Merdeka Mengajar; PMM) continuously to improve competency	0	0	7.69	28.85	63.46	88.94
	Mean	0	0	10.38	28.85	60.76	87.6

*Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neutral (N), Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA)

2. Operational Curriculum of the Education Unit (Kurikulum Operasional Satuan Pendidikan; KOSP) Documents

The results of the study showed that 100% of the sample junior high schools had the KOSP. The process of preparing the KOSP document also involved teachers and school committees as presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. The Process of Preparing the KOSP Document

No.	Aspect	f	%
1.	The school owned the KOSP documents	14	100
2.	The school involved teachers in preparing the KOSP documents	14	100

3.	The school involved the school committees in preparing the KOSP documents	14	100

3. Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (Proyek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila; P5)

The results of the study showed that most junior high schools in Ambon City had implemented the P5 project. However, there are still 17.14 junior high schools that have not implemented P5, as presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Implementation of the P5 Project

No.	Aspect	f	%
1.	The school owned P5 project documents	13	92,86
2.	The school implemented P5 project	13	92,86

4. Learning

The questionnaire's findings demonstrated that the majority of instructors could effectively create lesson plans using Teaching Modules and Learning Objective Flows (Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran; ATP). Nevertheless, some teachers struggle with creating ATP and Teaching Modules. Table 4 below shows the situation for learning planning and execution.

The data from the questionnaire also show that two teachers (3.85%) composed their own ATP and Teaching Modules, while the remaining 50 teachers (96.15%) develop ATP by modifying ATP and Teaching Modules created by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemdikbudristek) team or accessed it from the internet.

From the analysis of their lesson plan, interviews, and questionnaires, several issues faced by teachers in formulating learning objectives were identified as follows: (a) Difficulty in aligning learning objectives with the applicable curriculum, (b) difficulty in determining appropriate learning models, (c) lack of in-depth understanding of all components of the teaching module. Some issues the teachers encountered in designing the learning objectives flow were: (a) Difficulty in translating learning outcomes into learning objectives, (b) difficulty in translating learning outcomes to avoid overlapping across grade levels, (c) the need for socialization and mentoring for teachers, (d) limited supplementary books, (e) difficulty in determining the sequence of learning.

Issues in developing teaching modules were: (a) lack of supporting references, (b) difficulty in obtaining references and linking them to the learning environment. Issues in identifying student characteristics were: (a) lack of communication between teachers and parents regarding children's learning progress, (b) difficulty in determining appropriate assessment tools, (c) concern about making inaccurate judgments. Issues in designing and implementing active and student-centered learning were (a) difficulty in managing the classroom, (b) limited time in the teaching and learning process, (c) inefficient group division. Issues in implementing differentiated learning were: (a) difficulty in deeply understanding each student's characteristics, (b) difficulty in identifying appropriate materials and methods, (c) requiring more time to design different materials. Issues in implementing information and communication technology-based learning were (a) limited availability of projectors (infocus) in schools, (b) limited internet access, (c) difficulty in adapting to existing learning applications, (d) unstable electricity supply.

Issues in implementing the P5 projects were: (a) limited available time/inefficient time management, (b) limited resources to support these activities. Issues in developing students' reading literacy were: (a) some teachers do not understand that developing reading literacy is the responsibility of all teachers, not just Indonesian language teachers, (b) teachers have limited understanding of integrating reading literacy into mathematics,

science, social studies, and other subjects, (c) teachers have limited understanding of integrating reading literacy into the assessment of learning processes and outcomes.

Issues in developing students' numeracy skills were (a) some teachers do not understand that developing numeracy skills is the responsibility of all teachers, not just mathematics teachers, (b) teachers have limited understanding of integrating numeracy skills across different subjects, (c) teachers have limited understanding of integrating numeracy skills into the assessment of learning processes and outcomes across subjects, (d) non-mathematics teachers have limited mastery of basic mathematical concepts, such as arithmetic, geometry, etc.

5. Facilities and Infrastructure

The study showed that teachers' opinions on the availability of facilities and infrastructure indicate that the availability of supporting infrastructure for the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is relatively good, with an average score of 79.65. However, the availability of internet access to support internet-based learning remains an issue in some schools. This results on teachers' responses regarding the availability of facilities and infrastructure are presented in the following table.

Table 5. Teachers' Responses on Facilities and Infrastructure Supporting Merdeka Curriculum

No	Aspect	Percentage					Final Score
		SD	D	N	A	SA	
1.	The school has an adequate library to support learning and assessment activities	0	0	23.1	30.77	46.15	80.77
2.	The school has an adequate laboratory to support learning and assessment activities	0	0	25	32.69	42.31	79.33
3.	The school has adequate learning facilities to support learning and assessment activities	0	0	19.2	42.31	38.46	79.81
4.	The school has an internet network with adequate bandwidth capacity to support learning and assessment activities	0	3.85	13.5	30.77	51.92	82.69
5.	Teachers and students can utilize the internet network in the classroom for learning activities	1.92	13.5	11.5	40.38	32.69	72.12
6.	The school has adequate textbooks and reference books to support learning and assessment activities	0	0	15.4	36.54	48.08	83.17
	Mean	0.32	2.88	17.95	35.58	43.27	79.65

*Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neutral (N), Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA)

6. Assessment and Evaluation System

The results of the questionnaire showed that teachers designed and implemented assessments and evaluations relatively very well, with a score of 87.58, as presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Planning and Implementation of Assessment and Evaluation

No	Aspect	Percentage					Final Score
		SD	D	N	A	SA	
1.	Designing and implementing diagnostic assessments	0	5.77	9.62	26.92	57.69	84.13
2.	Conducting assessments objectively and fairly	0	0	5.77	25	69.23	90.87

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3.	Conducting holistic learning achievement measurements, including attitudes, knowledge, and skills	0	0	1.92	32.69	65.38	90.87
4.	Developing assessments that accommodate the development of students' reading literacy	0	0	15.4	30.77	53.85	84.62
5.	Developing assessments that accommodate the development of students' numeracy	0	1.92	7.69	40.38	50	84.62
6.	Utilizing assessment results to improve learning	0	0	1.92	34.62	63.46	90.38
	Mean	0	1.28	7.05	31.73	59.94	87.58

*Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neutral (N), Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA)

Table 6 also indicates that some teachers face difficulties in conducting diagnostic assessments and assessments that accommodate the development of students' numeracy skills. From the analysis of lesson planning documents, interviews, and questionnaire, several issues were identified regarding teachers' challenges in implementing diagnostic assessments, as follows: a) Teachers have inadequate understanding of diagnostic assessment; b) Difficulty in designing appropriate assessments; c) Difficulty in finding suitable examples; d) Confusion in identifying problems and their application.

Additionally, the analysis identified issues teachers face in designing and conducting process and outcome assessments, as follows: a) Difficulty in developing assessment questions; b) Some teachers have not yet considered the proportion of cognitive aspects and difficulty levels in the test instruments they create.

7. Impact of the Merdeka Curriculum Implementation

The results of the questionnaire showed that most teachers stated that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum had a positive impact on students, with a final score of 83.31. However, around 5.77% of teachers stated that the Merdeka Curriculum did not have a positive impact on reading literacy. Likewise, 5.77% of teachers stated that the Merdeka Curriculum did not have a positive impact on the development of student numeracy, as presented in Table 7 below.

Table 7. Impact of the Merdeka Curriculum Implementation on Students

No	Aspect	Percentage					Final Score
		SD	D	N	A	SA	
1.	The Merdeka curriculum has a positive impact on teacher performance and creativity	0	3.85	5.77	25	65.38	87.98
2.	The Merdeka curriculum has a positive impact on improving the quality of the learning process	0	7.69	1.92	30.77	59.62	85.58
3.	The Merdeka curriculum has a positive impact on students' learning environment	0	5.77	9.62	38.46	46.15	81.25
4.	The Merdeka curriculum has a positive impact on the development of students' character	0	3.85	9.62	44.23	42.31	81.25
5.	The Merdeka curriculum has a positive impact on increasing students' reading literacy	0	5.77	7.69	34.62	51.92	83.17
6.	The Merdeka curriculum has a positive impact on increasing student numeracy	3.85	1.92	9.62	38.46	46.15	80.29

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7.	The Merdeka curriculum has a positive impact on increasing student achievement (academically and non-academically).	0	1.92	17.3	25	55.77	83.65
	Mean	0.55	4.40	8.79	33.79	52.47	83.31

*Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neutral (N), Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA)

The results of this study indicate that teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum is relatively high, with a score of 87.6. This understanding includes (1) comprehension of the Merdeka Curriculum concept, (2) understanding of learning outcomes, and (3) the ability to formulate learning objectives based on learning outcomes. This high level of understanding is influenced by policies from the government, local government, and educational institutions. Socialization and training programs conducted by the Teacher Mobilization Center (Balai Guru Penggerak; BGP) and the Ambon City Education Office (Dinas Pendidikan Kota Ambon) have involved many schools in Ambon.

Discussion

Additionally, socialization and workshops on the Merdeka Curriculum have been carried out at the school level, both through dissemination programs and specially designed school programs. Furthermore, teachers have also utilized the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM) as a self-learning tool to enhance their understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum. Survey results on the use of PMM show a score of 88.94, which can be interpreted as very high.

This level of understanding significantly contributes to teachers' readiness in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. All of the schools included in this study have adopted the Merdeka Curriculum. However, from the interview we found that some school principals acknowledge that the curriculum implementation is not yet fully optimal as expected.

The Merdeka Curriculum has been implemented in all junior high schools in Ambon City. The implementation process began with socialization and curriculum workshops and was carried out gradually, starting with Sekolah Penggerak (pilot schools). The dissemination process in non-pilot schools has effectively prepared and encouraged other junior high schools to adopt the Merdeka Curriculum gradually, starting from Grade VII. During the implementation phase, all junior high schools (100%) have developed KOSP, which serve as guidelines for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The KOSP also outlines material organization, including (1) intracurricular activities, (2) Strengthening P5 Projects (P5), and (3) extracurricular activities.

One notable finding is the increase in extracurricular activities. Under the 2013 Curriculum, junior high schools in Ambon City typically offered 7-8 extracurricular activities, primarily focusing on non-academic programs. This study found a significant increase, with an average of 10 extracurricular activities, covering both academic and non-academic areas. For instance, SMP Cendekia Ambon offers 10 extracurricular activities: (1) Scouts, (2) Mathematics Club, (3) Science Club, (4) English Club, (5) Dance Arts, (6) Music Arts, (7) Journalism, (8) Flag-Raising Troop (Paskibra), (9) Soccer, and (10) Basketball. Similarly, SMP Negeri 15 Ambon offers 11 extracurricular activities: (1) Scouts, (2) Traditional Music Arts, (3) Volleyball, (4) Basketball, (5) Athletics, (6) Table Tennis, (7) Futsal, (8) Karate, (9) Informatics, (10) Mathematics Club, and (11) Science Club.

Regarding the implementation of P5 projects, not all junior high schools have adopted it. The study shows that approximately 92.86% of junior high schools have implemented P5 projects. Interviews with school principals who have not yet adopted P5 indicate that as of

2024, they have not implemented it due to a lack of understanding regarding the planning and implementation mechanisms of P5. However, dissemination processes have been carried out, and they plan to implement P5 in 2025.

The responses from teachers in the questionnaire indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has brought various impacts on both teachers and students, including: a) Teachers are required to design engaging, innovative, and effective learning experiences. Additionally, they must implement differentiated instruction to accommodate students' varying characteristics. This contributes to teachers' performance and creativity. b) The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning, considering various student characteristics such as learning capacity, IQ, motivation, and learning styles. This enhances the quality of the learning process. c) Project-based learning (PBL) in the Merdeka Curriculum encourages students to actively engage in exploration, data collection, report writing, and presentations, which helps improve the student learning environment. d) The implementation of P5 and the development of learning leadership contribute to students' character development. e) Cross-subject literacy and numeracy-based learning have a positive impact on students' literacy and numeracy skills, although the improvement has not been significant. f) Both intracurricular and extracurricular activities in the Merdeka Curriculum contribute to students' academic and non-academic achievements.

Based on the study findings, several challenges related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum have been identified. These challenges can be categorized as follows:

a. Planning Challenges

1. Although the KOSP includes descriptions of P5 activities, 17.14% of junior high schools have not yet developed P5 programs. This is due to schools' limited understanding of P5 concepts, planning, and implementation. However, dissemination efforts have been made, and these schools plan to implement P5 in the 2025/2026 academic year.
2. The study indicates that teachers have been able to design Learning Objectives Flow (ATP) and Teaching Modules. However, document reviews reveal several weaknesses, including: (a) insufficient integration of reading literacy in most teaching modules, (b) numeracy integration is also lacking, (c) the use of information and communication technology has not been optimized in lesson planning.

b. Curriculum Implementation Challenges

1. 17.14% of junior high schools have not implemented P5, citing a lack of understanding and inability to design P5 programs.
2. According to teachers, the learning process is generally running well. However, some issues have been identified (a) Teachers struggle to integrate literacy across subjects due to limited understanding, (b) Teachers also face challenges in incorporating numeracy across subjects for the same reason, (c) Limited internet bandwidth hinders effective internet-based learning, (d) Not all teachers fully understand differentiated learning, leading to limited implementation.

c. Assessment and Evaluation Challenges

The results of this study also indicated that teachers' assessment and evaluation practices are relatively strong, scoring 87.58. However, document reviews of teaching modules and assessment instruments reveal several issues: (1) teachers struggle to develop assessment instruments that promote students' reading literacy, (2) teachers also struggle to create

assessment tools that enhance students' numeracy skills, (3) test instruments do not yet follow a balanced ratio of comprehension: application: reasoning, which should be 2: 5: 3.

Although the findings provide a comprehensive overview of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Ambon City, they should be interpreted with caution. Since this study was limited to junior high schools in one municipality, the findings may not fully represent implementation practices in other regions with different educational contexts and resources. Future studies involving broader geographical coverage and comparative analyses across provinces would provide a more comprehensive understanding of curriculum implementation in Indonesia.

Conclusion

Junior high school teachers in Ambon City demonstrate a very good understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, supported by frequent training and socialization. All schools have implemented the curriculum and KOSP, with increased extracurricular activities and widespread P5 project adoption. The curriculum has positively impacted teacher performance, student learning, and character development. However, challenges remain in planning, implementation, and assessment—particularly in P5 design, integration of literacy and numeracy, use of ICT, differentiated learning, and assessment instruments. Continued teacher capacity building is crucial for optimal implementation.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by providing empirical evidence from junior high schools in Ambon City. The findings offer practical insights for policymakers, school leaders, and teachers in designing targeted professional development programs to strengthen curriculum implementation. However, this study was limited to junior high schools in Ambon City and primarily employed descriptive analysis, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future studies are recommended to involve broader geographical areas, different educational levels, and more comprehensive analytical approaches to further examine the effectiveness and long-term impact of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation.

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