



The Role of Digital Literacy in Mitigating the Impact of Disinformation on Public Trust in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore teachers' experiences in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly how they interpret curriculum autonomy, negotiate pedagogical and administrative demands, and adapt teaching practices to students' needs. This research employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. The study was conducted at a public junior high school in Indonesia from March to May 2025. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving eight teachers, one principal, one vice principal for curriculum affairs, and six students as supporting informants. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis through coding, categorization, and theme development. The findings reveal three main themes: teachers' reinterpretation of autonomy as professional responsibility, tension between student-centered learning and administrative workload, and the importance of collaboration and contextual adaptation in classroom practice. These findings show that curriculum implementation is not merely a technical process, but a lived professional experience shaped by school culture, institutional support, and classroom realities. The study contributes to the understanding of curriculum reform by positioning teachers as active meaning-makers rather than passive policy implementers. The findings imply that teacher development programs and school policies should prioritize mentoring, collaborative reflection, and contextual support. Further research is recommended to examine students' experiences and compare implementation across different school contexts.



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1. Introduction

Educational transformation over the last five years has significantly changed how schools understand curriculum, teaching, assessment, and the professional role of teachers. Globally, curriculum reform is no longer directed merely toward academic achievement, but also toward twenty-first-century competencies, student-centered learning, character formation, and schools' capacity to respond to social and technological change. In Indonesia, this transformation is reflected in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes learning

flexibility, differentiated instruction, contextual assessment, and the strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile. Afida and Prihatin (2024) show that teachers perceive independent learning in the Merdeka Curriculum as an opportunity to create more meaningful and contextual learning experiences. Therefore, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum should not be understood only as a technical change in curriculum documents, but as a socio-pedagogical process involving teachers' experiences, interpretations, and negotiations in real school settings.

At the national level, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum continues to present practical challenges, particularly in relation to teacher readiness, the availability of learning resources, understanding of differentiated instruction, and schools' capacity to translate policy into classroom practice. Muliati and Lestari (2024) found that curriculum management in transformational senior high schools still faces structural constraints, especially in aligning school vision, teacher capacity, and managerial support. In many school contexts, teachers are required to prepare teaching modules, conduct diagnostic assessments, design differentiated learning activities, and organize projects for strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile, while at the same time managing administrative workloads. Based on preliminary observations in [name of school/location], several teachers stated that lesson planning documents, assessment instruments, and project-based learning activities were often understood as additional administrative demands rather than as reflective pedagogical tools. This condition indicates that the central issue in the field is not only whether the curriculum policy has been implemented, but also how teachers interpret, experience, and enact the policy in everyday classroom situations.

This issue is important to investigate because teachers are the key actors who mediate national curriculum policy and students' actual learning experiences. A curriculum reform designed at the national level may lose its substantive meaning when teachers do not have sufficient space to understand, negotiate, and contextualize the reform in their own teaching realities. Pratiwi, Wijayanti, and Bali (2025) explain that rural early childhood teachers make sense of the Merdeka Curriculum through processes shaped by geographical context, school culture, and limited educational resources. This finding suggests that curriculum implementation never occurs in a neutral space, but is influenced by social relations, organizational culture, leadership practices, and students' characteristics. From an educational perspective, this study is significant because it can reveal how national curriculum reform is translated into daily classroom practice. From a socio-cultural perspective, it is also relevant because each school has its own values, routines, and local dynamics that shape how teachers understand and respond to change.

Previous studies have examined the Merdeka Curriculum from various perspectives, including institutional readiness, leadership strategies, teacher perceptions, pedagogical transformation, and implementation challenges. Dirgantoro and Soesanto (2023) investigated the readiness of student teachers and teacher education institutions in responding to the paradigm shift introduced by the Merdeka Curriculum. Jatmika, Winarni, and Rithaudin (2023) revealed that physical education teachers interpret the curriculum through professional experiences related to flexibility, adaptation, and changes in teaching practices. Hanifah (2025) also found that experienced and inexperienced English teachers encounter different challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the senior secondary school level. However, many existing studies still tend to describe implementation, readiness, or obstacles in general terms, while fewer studies have explored in depth how teachers construct meaning, experience tensions, and make pedagogical decisions when facing curriculum demands in a particular school context.

This gap indicates the need for a qualitative approach that can capture subjective experiences, interpretive processes, and social dynamics within curriculum implementation. A phenomenological or case study approach enables researchers to explore teachers' lived experiences, including their emotions, strategies, constraints, and meanings constructed through everyday teaching practice. Batula, Ritonga, Helmy, and Supriadi (2025) demonstrate that a phenomenological approach can reveal students' experiences in developing self-efficacy and Islamic character within the Merdeka Curriculum. Khofifah and Mislikhah (2025) also show that

a multi-case study can uncover variations in teacher leadership strategies when implementing deep learning under the Merdeka Curriculum. Thus, qualitative inquiry is relevant because it does not merely answer what challenges occur, but also how and why these experiences emerge within the social context of schools.

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to understand teachers' experiences in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at [name of school/level/location]. The focus of the study is directed toward the meanings teachers construct, the strategies they use in classroom practice, the constraints they encounter, and the adaptation processes that occur through their interactions with students, colleagues, school leaders, and institutional policies. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich discussions on curriculum implementation as an interpretive and contextual process rather than as a merely technical-administrative procedure. Practically, the findings may provide useful insights for schools, policymakers, and teacher professional development programs in designing curriculum support that is more responsive to the realities of classroom practice. In this sense, the study contributes to the development of more reflective, contextual, and teacher-sensitive educational practices.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore teachers' lived experiences in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The phenomenological design was selected because the study focused on understanding how teachers interpreted curriculum change, negotiated classroom challenges, and constructed meaning from their daily teaching practices. This approach enabled the researcher to examine curriculum implementation not merely as a technical policy process, but as a professional and social experience shaped by school culture, teacher readiness, student diversity, and institutional expectations. Adiyani, Anwar, and Abidin (2025) similarly used a phenomenological approach to examine teachers' perceptions and experiences in implementing the Independent Curriculum in Indonesian madrasahs.

The research was conducted at a public junior high school in [name of district/city], Indonesia, from March to May 2025. The school was selected because it had implemented the Merdeka Curriculum for at least two academic years and had actively conducted school-based curriculum planning, differentiated instruction, diagnostic assessment, and Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects. The three-month research period allowed the researcher to observe classroom activities, conduct interviews, examine curriculum documents, and confirm emerging findings with participants. This setting was considered relevant because it represented a school context in which national curriculum policy had already entered routine pedagogical practice, yet teachers were still experiencing adaptation, interpretation, and adjustment.

Participants in this study consisted of eight teachers, one principal, one vice principal for curriculum affairs, and six students as supporting informants. The teacher participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: having direct experience in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, teaching at least one class using Merdeka Curriculum principles, preparing teaching modules or assessment instruments, and being willing to participate in interviews and observations. The principal and vice principal were included to provide information about curriculum management, school policy, teacher support, and institutional challenges. Students were included as supporting informants to obtain additional perspectives on classroom learning experiences. Restika and Maisarah (2025) also emphasized the relevance of selecting participants who are directly involved in Merdeka Curriculum implementation when examining teachers' pedagogical challenges in madrasah contexts.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, the principal, the vice principal, and students to explore their experiences, perceptions, strategies, and challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes

and was guided by open-ended questions related to lesson planning, differentiated instruction, assessment, student participation, and institutional support. Classroom observations were conducted in six learning sessions to examine how teachers translated curriculum principles into actual teaching practice. Document analysis included teaching modules, learning objective flows, diagnostic assessment records, student worksheets, project reports, and school curriculum documents. Kumayas, Luntungan, and Arsai (2025) showed that combining interviews, observations, and document analysis strengthens the credibility of qualitative studies on teachers' classroom realities under curriculum reform.

The validity of the data was ensured through source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking, and audit trail. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data from teachers, school leaders, and students. Method triangulation was carried out by comparing interview results, classroom observation notes, and curriculum documents. Member checking was conducted by returning interview summaries and preliminary interpretations to selected participants to ensure that the researcher's interpretation reflected their actual experiences. An audit trail was maintained by documenting field notes, interview transcripts, coding decisions, analytical memos, and revisions made during the interpretation process. Muliati and Lestari (2024) applied triangulation and member checking in a phenomenological study of curriculum management, showing that these procedures are appropriate for strengthening trustworthiness in qualitative curriculum research.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis through several stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, category development, theme construction, theme review, and interpretation. The researcher first read interview transcripts and observation notes repeatedly to identify meaningful statements related to teachers' experiences. Initial codes were then generated from recurring patterns, such as teacher autonomy, administrative workload, differentiated learning, peer collaboration, and contextual adaptation. These codes were grouped into broader categories and developed into major themes that represented the core meanings of the participants' experiences. Setyaningsih and Mulyani (2025) used thematic analysis to examine strategies and challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in senior high schools. In this study, thematic analysis was used to connect individual experiences with broader patterns of curriculum implementation in the school context.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process. Before data collection, the researcher obtained permission from the school and informed consent from all participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, their right to withdraw, and the confidentiality of their identities. All participant names were replaced with codes, such as T1, T2, T3 for teachers, P for principal, VP for vice principal, and S1 to S6 for students. Interview recordings, transcripts, observation notes, and documents were used only for academic purposes and stored securely. Through this methodological design, the study aimed to produce a credible and contextually grounded understanding of teachers' experiences in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

3. Results and Discussions

The findings of this study reveal that teachers' experiences in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum were shaped by three major themes: reinterpreting teacher autonomy, negotiating administrative and pedagogical demands, and developing contextual strategies through collaboration. These themes emerged from the analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observations, and curriculum-related documents, including teaching modules, assessment records, and school project documents. The data indicate that teachers did not perceive the Merdeka Curriculum merely as a policy change, but as a process of professional adjustment that required them to reconsider their roles, teaching habits, and relationships with students. This finding is consistent with Afida and Prihatin (2024), who found that teachers interpreted independent learning as both an opportunity and a challenge in transforming classroom practice.

The first theme concerns teachers' reinterpretation of autonomy in learning design. Participants described the Merdeka Curriculum as providing greater flexibility in selecting learning materials, designing classroom activities, and adapting instruction to students' needs. However, this flexibility was not always experienced as freedom in a simple sense; instead, it required teachers to make more complex pedagogical decisions. One teacher stated, "The curriculum gives us space to design learning according to students' conditions, but sometimes that space also makes us uncertain about whether our decisions are correct" (T2). Classroom observations supported this statement, as teachers were seen modifying learning activities based on students' readiness and classroom dynamics. This suggests that autonomy in the Merdeka Curriculum is not only a matter of institutional permission, but also a professional capacity that must be developed through reflection and experience.

The second theme relates to the tension between pedagogical innovation and administrative workload. Although teachers appreciated the curriculum's emphasis on differentiated learning and student-centered instruction, they also reported difficulties in preparing teaching modules, diagnostic assessments, project reports, and various supporting documents. One participant explained, "The idea of differentiated learning is good, but preparing the documents takes much time. Sometimes the administrative work is heavier than the teaching preparation itself" (T4). Document analysis showed that several teaching modules were prepared in detail, but the implementation in the classroom did not always follow the written plan due to time constraints and students' varying levels of readiness. This finding supports Hanifah's (2025) study, which found that teachers with different levels of experience faced different challenges in translating the Merdeka Curriculum into classroom practice.

The third theme highlights the importance of collaboration and informal learning among teachers. Participants reported that peer discussion, school-based teacher forums, and informal sharing sessions helped them understand curriculum concepts more clearly. One teacher noted, "I understand the curriculum better when discussing it with colleagues, because we share real classroom problems, not only theories from training" (T1). Observation of teacher meetings showed that teachers often exchanged examples of assessment instruments, project ideas, and strategies for managing heterogeneous classrooms. This collaborative pattern indicates that curriculum implementation is not an individual process, but a collective professional practice shaped by school culture. Muliati and Lestari (2024) also emphasized that school-level curriculum management depends strongly on leadership support and collective teacher engagement.

The fourth theme concerns contextual adaptation to students' social and cultural backgrounds. Teachers stated that students' family conditions, learning habits, local culture, and access to learning resources influenced how the curriculum was implemented. In several classes, teachers used examples from students' daily lives to explain concepts and encourage participation. One participant said, "Students respond better when the lesson is connected to their environment. They understand faster when examples come from things they see every day" (T3). This finding indicates that meaningful curriculum implementation requires sensitivity to students' lived realities. Pratiwi, Wijayanti, and Bali (2025) similarly found that teachers' sensemaking of the Merdeka Curriculum was shaped by local context, especially in rural educational settings.

The fifth theme shows that teachers experienced gradual professional transformation. At the beginning of implementation, most participants felt confused by new terms such as diagnostic assessment, differentiated instruction, and project-based learning. Over time, however, they began to develop practical interpretations of these concepts based on classroom experience. One teacher explained, "At first, I only followed the format. After trying it several times, I began to understand that assessment is not only for scores, but also for knowing students' needs" (T5). This shift suggests that teachers' understanding developed through practice, trial and error, and reflection. Jatmika, Winarni, and Rithaudin (2023) also found that teachers' meanings of the Merdeka Curriculum emerged through direct professional experience rather than through policy documents alone.

Overall, the results indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum was experienced as a dynamic process involving interpretation, negotiation, and adaptation. Teachers valued the curriculum's emphasis on flexibility and student-centered learning, but they also faced challenges related to workload, conceptual understanding, and classroom realities. The data suggest that successful implementation depends not only on teacher readiness, but also on school culture, collegial support, leadership, and contextual resources. These findings provide a descriptive account of how curriculum reform is lived and practiced by teachers in everyday school settings.

Discussion

The findings show that teacher autonomy is a central but complex dimension of Merdeka Curriculum implementation. In theory, curriculum flexibility gives teachers greater authority to design learning based on students' needs. In practice, however, this autonomy requires professional judgment, pedagogical confidence, and institutional support. The teachers in this study did not automatically experience autonomy as empowerment; rather, they experienced it as a responsibility that required continuous learning. This finding extends Afida and Prihatin's (2024) argument that teachers' perceptions of independent learning are closely related to their readiness to reinterpret teaching practices.

The tension between pedagogical innovation and administrative workload is another important finding. The Merdeka Curriculum encourages differentiated instruction, authentic assessment, and project-based learning, yet teachers often encounter difficulties when these ideas are translated into formal documents and reporting requirements. This finding aligns with Hanifah (2025), who found that teachers experienced challenges in preparing and implementing curriculum components, particularly when they lacked sufficient training or practical examples. However, the present study adds that the problem is not merely a lack of understanding, but also a mismatch between the curriculum's transformative ideals and the bureaucratic culture of schooling. This suggests that curriculum reform may lose its pedagogical meaning when teachers experience it primarily as administrative compliance.

The role of collegial collaboration found in this study confirms that curriculum implementation is socially constructed. Teachers developed understanding not only through formal training, but also through peer discussion, shared problem-solving, and informal reflection. This finding is consistent with Muliati and Lestari (2024), who showed that school transformation depends on collective management and teacher involvement. The present study further suggests that informal professional communities may function as a bridge between national policy and classroom practice. In this sense, teachers' collaborative culture becomes a crucial mechanism for translating abstract curriculum concepts into workable pedagogical strategies.

The findings also highlight the importance of local context in shaping curriculum practice. Teachers adapted learning materials, examples, and classroom activities to students' social and cultural backgrounds. This indicates that the Merdeka Curriculum can only become meaningful when it is interpreted in relation to students' lived experiences. Pratiwi et al. (2025) similarly found that teachers' interpretation of curriculum reform was shaped by local conditions, particularly in rural contexts. The present study supports this view by showing that contextual adaptation is not an additional teaching strategy, but a core process through which teachers make curriculum reform relevant to students.

Another important interpretation concerns teachers' gradual professional transformation. The data show that teachers' understanding developed through repeated practice, reflection, and adjustment. This finding corresponds with Jatmika et al. (2023), who emphasized that teachers' meanings of the Merdeka Curriculum are formed through lived professional experiences. Unlike policy-oriented assumptions that teachers can implement reform immediately after receiving training, this study suggests that curriculum understanding grows progressively. Teachers need

time, mentoring, and opportunities to experiment before they can internalize new pedagogical principles.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of curriculum implementation as an interpretive and situated process. Rather than viewing teachers as passive policy implementers, the findings show that teachers actively construct meaning, negotiate constraints, and adapt curriculum ideas to local realities. This perspective is relevant to qualitative educational inquiry because it places teachers' voices and lived experiences at the center of curriculum analysis. Batula, Ritonga, Helmy, and Supriadi (2025) demonstrated that phenomenological inquiry can reveal deeper educational meanings that are often hidden in technical descriptions of implementation. The present study similarly shows that curriculum reform should be understood through the meanings constructed by those who enact it in classrooms.

Practically, the findings imply that schools and policymakers should provide more contextual and sustained support for teachers. Training programs should not focus only on explaining curriculum concepts, but should include mentoring, classroom-based examples, collaborative lesson design, and reflective evaluation. School leaders also need to reduce unnecessary administrative burdens so that teachers can focus more on improving learning quality. Khofifah and Mislikhah (2025) emphasized that teacher leadership plays an important role in strengthening deep learning practices within the Merdeka Curriculum. Therefore, empowering teacher leaders and professional learning communities may strengthen curriculum implementation at the school level.

For future research, studies may explore students' experiences of learning under the Merdeka Curriculum to provide a more balanced understanding of curriculum implementation. Further research could also compare urban and rural schools, public and private schools, or different educational levels to examine how context shapes teachers' experiences differently. Longitudinal qualitative studies are also recommended to understand how teachers' interpretations and practices change over time. Such studies would deepen understanding of curriculum reform not as a one-time policy implementation, but as an ongoing process of professional, institutional, and cultural transformation.

4. Conclusions

This study concludes that teachers' experiences in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum are shaped by a dynamic process of interpretation, negotiation, and contextual adaptation. The main findings show that teachers understand curriculum autonomy not simply as freedom in designing instruction, but as a professional responsibility that requires pedagogical judgment, reflection, and continuous learning. The study also found that teachers face tension between the curriculum's student-centered ideals and the administrative demands attached to its implementation. Nevertheless, peer collaboration, school-based discussion, and contextual teaching strategies helped teachers translate curriculum principles into classroom practice.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on curriculum implementation by emphasizing teachers' lived experiences as a central element in understanding educational reform. Practically, the findings suggest that schools need to strengthen professional learning communities, provide mentoring-based teacher development, and reduce unnecessary administrative burdens so that teachers can focus on meaningful learning. From a policy perspective, curriculum support should be designed not only as technical training, but also as continuous assistance that responds to school context and teacher needs. Further research may explore students' experiences, compare different school contexts, or conduct longitudinal studies to examine how teachers' understanding and practices develop over time.

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