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## Teachers' Perception of the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum: A Case Study at SD Negeri 090 Palembang

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### Abstract

*This study aims to analyze teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) at SD Negeri 090 Palembang through a qualitative case study approach. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observation involving the school principal and two classroom teachers who have directly implemented the curriculum since 2022. Data analysis followed the Miles & Huberman interactive model, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Trustworthiness was established through source triangulation and technique triangulation. The findings reveal three main themes: (1) teachers hold generally positive perceptions, viewing the Merdeka Curriculum as an opportunity to enhance student-centered learning and differentiated instruction; (2) key constraints include insufficient socialization, limited teacher training on new modules and assessment methods, and inadequate supporting facilities; and (3) teachers express hope for more systematic training and policy-level support. These findings confirm the critical role of teacher perception in curriculum implementation while highlighting context-specific challenges in urban elementary schools in Palembang. This study contributes to the limited body of research on Merdeka Curriculum implementation in the South Sumatera context and offers practical implications for school administrators and education policymakers.*

**Keyword: Merdeka Curriculum; teacher perceptions; qualitative case study; elementary school; curriculum implementation**

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## INTRODUCTION

Education quality in Indonesia is closely tied to curriculum policy and its implementation at the school level. The Merdeka Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*), officially introduced by the Indonesian Ministry of Education in 2022 as a successor to the 2013 Curriculum, represents a significant shift toward student-centered, competency-based, and character-driven education (Undang-Undang No. 20 Tahun 2003). Its core philosophy emphasizes learning flexibility, contextual relevance, and the development of learners' unique talents and interests through differentiated instruction and project-based learning (*Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila*, or P5).

Despite its progressive framework, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the school level is not without challenges. Research across multiple regions has documented that teachers—as the primary implementers—often face knowledge gaps, insufficient professional development, and infrastructural constraints that affect how they perceive and enact the curriculum (Kumala et al., 2023; Rahmi et al., 2024). Teachers' perceptions are

particularly critical because they mediate between policy intent and classroom practice. As Kottler (2000, p. 94) asserted, perception is a process by which individuals select, organize, and interpret information to form a meaningful understanding of their environment—and this process inevitably shapes teachers' professional responses to curriculum change.

Prasetyo and Hamami (2020) noted that curriculum change in Indonesia has historically been driven by five developmental principles: relevance, flexibility, continuity, efficiency, and effectiveness. Since independence, Indonesia has revised its national curriculum eleven times, each revision reflecting broader socio-political and educational goals. The Merdeka Curriculum, however, marks a more radical departure by giving teachers and schools greater autonomy in curriculum design and implementation.

Prior studies on the Merdeka Curriculum have explored teacher perceptions at the secondary school level (Kumala et al., 2023) and in urban school settings in Java and Riau (Rahmi et al., 2024; Sari et al., 2024). Sari et al. (2024) found that elementary school teachers in West Java generally perceived the curriculum positively but encountered difficulties with assessment reform and module preparation. However, empirical research on the perceptions of elementary school teachers in the Sumatera Selatan region, particularly in Palembang, remains limited. This represents a significant research gap, as local context—including resource availability, institutional support, and regional education infrastructure—may substantially influence how teachers perceive and implement curriculum policy.

SD Negeri 090 Palembang began implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in the 2022/2023 academic year. As an urban public elementary school with limited access to advanced digital infrastructure and specialized teacher training, it provides a representative case for understanding implementation dynamics in comparable institutional contexts. This study therefore aims to address the following research questions: (1) What are the perceptions of teachers at SD Negeri 090 Palembang toward the Merdeka Curriculum? (2) What internal and external factors influence these perceptions? (3) What challenges do teachers face in implementing the curriculum?

The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of literature on Merdeka Curriculum implementation in Indonesian elementary education and to offer practical recommendations for local education authorities, school administrators, and curriculum developers.

## **METHODS**

This study employed qualitative research design with a case study approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which was selected to enable an in-depth, contextual examination of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation at SD Negeri 090 Palembang. The case study design is particularly appropriate when the research aims to explore a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clear (Yin, 2018).

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals with direct and substantive involvement in curriculum implementation. The research participants consisted of the school principal and two classroom teachers from Grade 3, who were among the earliest cohorts to implement the Merdeka Curriculum at the school. While the number of participants is intentionally limited, consistent with qualitative case study methodology, which prioritizes depth over breadth, their selection was based on their relevance and richness of experience with the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data were collected through three primary methods: (1) semi-structured in-depth interviews, conducted individually with each participant using a pre-developed interview guide covering curriculum perception, implementation strategies, challenges, and expectations; (2) participatory classroom observation, conducted over three school visits to observe instructional practices aligned with Merdeka Curriculum principles; and (3) documentation analysis, including lesson plans (*modul ajar*), student assessment records, and school curriculum documents.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), comprising three concurrent stages: (1) data reduction—systematically condensing raw data by identifying relevant codes and categories; (2) data display—organizing coded data into thematic matrices and narrative summaries; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification—interpreting patterns across themes to construct analytical insights.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, two triangulation strategies were applied: *source triangulation* (cross-checking information across participants) and *technique triangulation* (comparing data from interviews, observations, and document analysis). Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm accuracy of interpretation.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### *Result*

Thematic analysis of interview data, observational field notes, and school documentation yielded three overarching themes: (1) positive perceptions and motivational orientation toward the Merdeka Curriculum; (2) constraints in implementation; and (3) expectations for institutional and policy support. The following subsections present the findings from each theme, illustrated with excerpts from the interviews and cross-referenced with supporting documentation.

**Theme 1: Positive Perceptions and Motivational Orientation.** All participants expressed an overall positive orientation toward the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers described it as an improvement over the 2013 Curriculum, particularly because of its emphasis on student agency and differentiated learning pathways. One teacher articulated: "The Merdeka Curriculum gives us flexibility to adjust learning methods to the needs and character of each student. This is very different from the previous curriculum which felt more rigid." (Teacher 1, personal interview, March 2026)

This perception aligns with findings from Sari et al. (2024), who reported that elementary teachers in West Java similarly viewed the Merdeka Curriculum as enabling more responsive and creative instructional design. The school principal reinforced this view, noting that since implementation began in 2022, students in Grade 3 have demonstrated improved engagement and participation in project-based activities.

Analysis of lesson planning documents (*modul ajar*) confirmed that teachers had adopted student-centered frameworks, including the incorporation of multiple learning modalities and contextual learning activities. These findings suggest that positive teacher perception, particularly regarding pedagogical empowerment, can serve as a facilitating factor for effective curriculum adoption.

Theme 2: Constraints in Implementation. Despite their positive orientation, teachers identified several significant constraints, summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Identified Constraints in Merdeka Curriculum Implementation at SD Negeri 090 Palembang**

No.	Obstacle Categories	Description
1.	Lack of Socialization and Training	Teachers feel that they have not received adequate training on teaching modules and assessment systems based on the Independent Curriculum.
2.	Limited Learning Time	The allocation of time available is not always sufficient to optimally implement differential learning activities and P5 projects.
3.	Limited Digital Facilities and Infrastructure	Access to technology and digital learning media is still limited, especially to support project-based learning.
4.	Understanding of Uneven Curriculum Concepts	Not all teachers have a strong understanding of core concepts such as independent learning and the development of students' interests/talents.

These constraints are consistent with those documented in similar studies. Rahmi et al. (2024) found that teachers in Pekanbaru similarly reported insufficient socialization as a primary barrier to effective Merdeka Curriculum implementation. Kumala et al. (2023) identified inadequate digital resources as a recurring challenge for biology teachers in South Sumatera, a finding that resonates with the infrastructure limitations observed in this study.

Notably, the combination of positive perceptions alongside substantial implementation constraints represents a tension that is characteristic of top-down curriculum reform (Fullan, 2007). Teachers at SD Negeri 090 Palembang embraced the curriculum's vision but lacked the scaffolding necessary to translate that vision into consistent practice.

Theme 3: Expectations for Support. Teachers articulated clear expectations for policy-level support. These included: (1) more frequent, targeted in-service training workshops specifically addressing Merdeka Curriculum modules and new assessment formats; (2) the provision of additional digital learning resources and supplementary teaching materials; and (3) more active mentoring from education supervisors (*pengawas sekolah*). The school principal noted that without systematic capacity-building, the risk of curriculum adoption remaining superficial—focused on compliance rather than genuine pedagogical transformation—remains high

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study make several contributions to the literature on Merdeka Curriculum implementation. First, they confirm and extend findings from prior studies by providing evidence from the Palembang urban elementary school context setting that has received limited research attention. The positive perceptions documented here align with the broader national trend reported by Sari et al. (2024) and Rahmi et al. (2024), suggesting that the Merdeka Curriculum's student-centered philosophy resonates with teachers regardless of regional context.

Second, the specific tension identified in this study—between teachers' genuine enthusiasm for the curriculum and their unmet needs for professional development—contributes a contextually specific insight. While previous research has broadly documented training deficits, the present study reveals how this gap manifests in a particular institutional environment where digital infrastructure limitations compound the challenge. This finding has direct implications for the design of localized professional development programs.

Third, the methodological use of source and technique triangulation strengthens the credibility of the present findings relative to prior studies that relied solely on questionnaire data (Rahmi et al., 2024). The convergence of interview data, observational evidence, and document analysis provides a more robust picture of teacher perception as both a cognitive and behavioral phenomenon.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings align with Kottler's (2000) conceptualization of perception as a selective and interpretive process. Teachers at SD Negeri 090 Palembang selectively attended to the curriculum's positive attributes (flexibility, student-centeredness) while also acknowledging structural obstacles. This selective perception is likely influenced by both intrinsic motivational factors (professional identity, commitment to student learning) and extrinsic factors (institutional support, resource availability).

## CONCLUSION

This study examined teachers' perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation at SD Negeri 090 Palembang through a qualitative case study approach. Three principal findings emerged. First, teachers hold genuinely positive perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum, viewing it as a meaningful improvement that empowers student-centered and differentiated learning. Second, significant implementation constraints persist, particularly related to insufficient professional development, limited digital infrastructure, and incomplete conceptual understanding of core curriculum principles. Third, teachers express a clear demand for more systematic institutional and policy-level support to enable deeper and more consistent implementation.

The study contributes to the limited body of empirical research on Merdeka Curriculum implementation in the South Sumatera regional context. The findings carry practical implications for local education authorities (*Dinas Pendidikan*), school administrators, and curriculum developers. Specifically, structured and sustainable professional development programs—focused on module design, differentiated assessment, and P5 project facilitation—are recommended as a priority intervention. Future research

should adopt larger and more diverse participant samples, including longitudinal designs that track changes in teacher perception across implementation phases, to build a more comprehensive understanding of Merdeka Curriculum adoption in Indonesian elementary education.

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