

The Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by Teacher Leaders at SMP Negeri 2 Pasir Limau Kapas

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* by Teacher Leaders at SMP Negeri 2 Pasir Limau Kapas, focusing on differentiated and contextual learning strategies in 3T (Frontier, Outermost, and Disadvantaged) areas. The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach through fieldwork, with data collection techniques including in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and documentation of teaching materials. The findings show that the Teacher Leaders were able to design and implement learning tailored to students' needs through initial assessments, integration of local culture, and the management of relevant Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects (P5). Teachers also demonstrated creativity in addressing infrastructure limitations, with support from the school principal and the local community serving as enabling factors. The study concludes that the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in 3T areas can be effective when carried out adaptively, collaboratively, and reflectively, with teacher leadership being the key to learning transformation.

Keywords: *Merdeka Curriculum, Teacher Leaders, 3T areas, differentiated learning, P5, contextual learning.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia is a transformative step in the field of education to address the challenges of the 21st century. This curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning, differentiation, and project-based learning. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek, 2022), the Merdeka Curriculum aims to provide space for teachers and educational institutions to adapt the learning process to the context and characteristics of students. This becomes particularly relevant when applied by key actors such as Teacher Leaders, who play a strategic role in transforming education at their respective schools (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). In this context, curriculum reform is expected to enhance the quality of learning through professional teacher autonomy (Fullan, 2007).

Teacher Leaders are agents of change within the school environment who have been equipped with training and mentoring to become learning leaders. According to Suyata (2021), a Teacher Leader is a teacher who can inspire, facilitate active learning, and encourage the creation of a positive learning culture. Their role is crucial, especially in effectively implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the school level (Suyata, 2021; Kemendikbudristek, 2023). In line with this, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) emphasize that teacher leadership is a vital element in driving sustainable educational change at the school level.

SMP Negeri 2 Pasir Limau Kapas, as a school located in a 3T area (frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged), is a compelling site for studying how this national policy is implemented at the grassroots level. The school's geographical and social context presents its own challenges in curriculum implementation. As stated by Tilaar (2009), local context significantly influences the implementation of educational policies. Centrally-driven curriculum implementation without local adaptation often fails to address the real needs of students (Tilaar, 2009; UNESCO, 2020). In this case, a community-based education approach becomes one relevant strategy for schools in remote areas (Bray, 2000).

Therefore, Teacher Leaders are required to adjust the curriculum to the needs, characteristics of students, and local conditions at SMP Negeri 2 Pasir Limau Kapas. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires a flexible yet structured approach. According to Tomlinson (2001), differentiated learning is one important approach to tailoring the learning process to students' readiness, interests, and learning styles. Teacher Leaders need strong pedagogical competence and high innovation capacity to implement these principles in daily teaching. Implementing this curriculum is not just about replacing teaching materials, but also about shifting paradigms in the teaching and learning process (Tomlinson, 2001; Directorate General of Teachers and Education Personnel, 2022). This is in line with OECD's (2018) view that modern education systems must allow for curriculum flexibility to remain relevant to future needs.

The research question in this study is: How do Teacher Leaders implement the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 2 Pasir Limau Kapas? This question serves as the basis for the researcher to explore the experiences, strategies, challenges, and achievements of Teacher Leaders in their real-world practice. In accordance with Creswell (2014), a qualitative approach enables researchers to understand phenomena deeply from the perspective of the subjects studied.

This study is important because its findings can provide a real picture of the effectiveness of the Teacher Leader program in promoting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, especially in 3T areas. As explained by Miles and Huberman (1994), the qualitative approach with field observation and in-depth interviews can uncover contextual and layered data. In this context, the experience of Teacher Leaders becomes a rich and valuable source of data for analysis.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using fieldwork methods. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the social reality in schools within the context of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum by Teacher Leaders. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), qualitative research is an effort to understand social reality based on participants' perspectives within their natural settings.

The research site was SMP Negeri 2 Pasir Limau Kapas, a public junior high school located in a coastal area, specifically in a 3T region (Frontier, Outermost, and Disadvantaged). This school is actively implementing the Merdeka Curriculum with support from the roles of Teacher Leaders.

The research subjects were two Teacher Leaders actively implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 2 Pasir Limau Kapas, namely: Teacher 1, an Indonesian language teacher with over ten years of teaching experience. She completed the 9th cohort of the Teacher Leader program and is actively developing differentiated teaching modules and facilitating project-based learning. Teacher 2, a teacher of the Local Content subject on Malay Riau Culture, also with ten years of teaching experience. He is known for actively fostering students' character through a contextual approach based on local culture.

Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and documentation of teaching materials. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format to explore teachers' perspectives, strategies, and reflections during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. According to Moleong (2017), semi-structured interviews offer flexibility for researchers to adjust the direction and depth of questions according to the dynamics of participants' responses.

Classroom observations were carried out to directly observe the practice of differentiated learning, project management, and teacher–student interaction within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. Documentation involved analysis of teaching modules, teacher reflection journals, and reports on the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5).

The data analysis technique followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), consisting of three main stages: (1) data reduction, (2) data display, and (3) conclusion drawing and verification. The analysis was conducted continuously throughout the data collection process.

To ensure the validity of the data, the researcher applied triangulation of sources and methods, comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. Additionally, member checking was conducted by returning the interpreted results to the informants to ensure that the meanings captured aligned with the participants' actual experiences.

This research was conducted in May 2025, covering the stages of planning, data collection, analysis, and validation of findings.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals how the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* is carried out in practice by two Teacher Leaders at SMP Negeri 2 Pasir Limau Kapas. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and instructional documentations, and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The findings are organized into six main aspects of *Merdeka Curriculum* implementation.

1. *Understanding and Commitment to the Merdeka Curriculum*

Both teachers demonstrated a deep understanding of the essence of the Merdeka Curriculum as a student-centered, flexible, and contextual learning approach. Teacher 1 interpreted this curriculum as a space for pedagogical freedom to tailor learning to students' potential and needs. He stated, "The Merdeka Curriculum gives me the freedom to teach with heart—not just following textbooks, but truly seeing who my students are."

Teacher 2 emphasized the importance of freedom of thought and innovation in designing lessons relevant to local culture and student characteristics. She said, “I want the learning in my classroom to reflect the everyday life of children in this coastal village so that school feels close and meaningful.”

Their motivation for joining the Teacher Leader program also showed a spirit of leadership and commitment to educational transformation. Teacher 1 said, “I want to be an agent of change, starting from my own classroom.” Meanwhile, Teacher 2 stated, “I joined the Teacher Leader program because I want to contribute more to education in 3T areas like this. I want teachers here to also be forward-thinking even with limited facilities.”

2. *Planning for Differentiated Learning*

Planning was done systematically, starting with diagnostic assessments to identify students’ learning readiness. Teacher 1 designed teaching modules using a differentiation approach based on students’ learning styles and abilities. He integrated local elements into the learning materials, such as folklore and poetry themed around local culture. He stated, “I start by getting to know my students—some grasp things quickly, others need more time. From there, I create activities that match how they learn.” He added, “When I ask them to write poems about the sea or fishermen, they get excited because that’s their world.”

Teacher 2 applied planning based on initial assessments, collaborating with other subject teachers to create interdisciplinary connections. She designed contextual learning based on Malay culture and religious values relevant to the students’ environment. In the interview, she said, “We teachers often discuss, especially if there’s a theme that connects multiple subjects, so students don’t feel like lessons stand alone.” She also added, “I incorporate Malay stories and Islamic values into the lessons because those are what they experience daily.”

3. *Contextual and Inclusive Learning Practices*

Both teachers implemented differentiated learning in the classroom as part of contextual and inclusive practices. Teacher 1 grouped students based on assessment results and learning styles, allowing them to support one another in understanding the material. He said, “I group the kids based on their learning preferences. Some prefer visuals, others discussions. So I form groups so they can learn together comfortably.”

Teacher 2 offered multiple learning methods such as lectures, hands-on practice, discussions, and role-playing. She stated, “I give options—learning through storytelling, hands-on activities, or discussions. The kids are more enthusiastic because they feel they have a choice.”

Learning materials were also designed to be close to students’ lives. Teacher 1 used local folklore and guided students to write poems about their environment. He said, “When they write poems about the sea, stilt houses, or mangrove forests, it feels alive because that’s their real world.”

Teacher 2 included stories of local religious leaders and Malay cultural practices in the lessons, creating a meaningful atmosphere that touched students’ cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. She explained, “I tell stories about local religious figures they know and relate it to the lesson. The students feel it’s not foreign—it’s close to their everyday lives.”

4. *Implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5)*

Both Teacher Leaders actively managed and implemented the P5 projects that engaged students in interdisciplinary activities. Teacher 1 carried out a project on *Sustainable Lifestyle*, guiding students to create a school garden and conduct digital campaigns on environmental conservation. He explained, “I had the kids plant vegetables and flowers in the school garden. They also made short videos to campaign for water conservation and proper waste disposal. Besides learning, they felt proud because the results were tangible.”

This project aimed to cultivate environmental awareness while also training students in communication, collaboration, and social responsibility.

Meanwhile, Teacher 2 developed a project on *Preserving Malay Traditions*, where students explored local culture through traditional dance performances and writing narratives of local history. She said, “We brought in village culture like zapin dance and stories of the area’s origins. The kids performed at school events and wrote stories in their own words. It made them more confident.”

These activities not only reinforced Pancasila values such as cooperation, local wisdom, and global diversity but also integrated local potential as a meaningful part of student identity and learning.

5. *Strategies for Overcoming Limited Facilities and Principal Support*

Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in 3T areas inevitably faces challenges such as limited facilities, scarce learning resources, and unstable internet access. Both Teacher Leaders addressed these conditions with innovative and contextual strategies.

Teacher 1 created manual learning media like flashcards, handmade information boards, and used the surrounding environment for outdoor learning. He said, “Since the network often drops, I make my own materials with paper and cardboard. We often learn outside too, observing plants or community activities directly.”

Teacher 2 used traditional tools and recycled materials, such as bamboo musical instruments, posters made from used paper, and hands-on activities based on local culture. She said, “I involve students in making learning aids from recycled items, like turning cans into musical instruments. It's cheap but makes them creative and eager to learn.”

On the other hand, the school principal provided full support for the Merdeka Curriculum and the Teacher Leaders' roles. This included flexibility in time for developing teaching materials, facilitating learning communities, and providing spaces for teacher collaboration. Teacher 1 said, “The principal is very supportive. He said, ‘Feel free to develop the best methods as long as it's for the students.’ That motivates us.”

Teacher 2 added, “We often discuss in the teacher's room—there's a collaboration corner prepared by the principal. He also monitors progress and is always open to new ideas.” This shows that the success of curriculum implementation in limited areas is heavily influenced by progressive school leadership that promotes learning transformation.

6. Learning Reflection and Community Engagement

Reflection was a key part of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation, especially in improving the quality of the learning process and outcomes continuously. Teacher 1 consistently wrote daily reflection journals and discussed findings and challenges with other teachers in learning communities. He said, “After every lesson, I note what worked and what didn't. Sometimes I discuss it with fellow teachers in the community—it really helps me grow.”

Teacher 2 evaluated project outcomes by directly interviewing students to understand changes in attitudes, understanding, and learning impact. She said, “I want to hear directly from them—was the activity meaningful? I ask what they learned and how they felt. That becomes my material for improving future lessons.”

As for parental involvement, although not yet optimal overall, there were positive developments. Some parents started getting involved, especially in cultural and P5-based activities. Teacher 1 noted, “During the environmental project, some parents helped prepare gardening tools and came to school during the harvest.”

Additionally, the local community supported learning activities relevant to their lives, such as providing venues for art performances or sharing folktales in class. Teacher 2 said, “We invited traditional leaders to school to share stories about the village's history. The children were enthusiastic, and the community felt included.”

The research findings show that Teacher Leaders understand the Merdeka Curriculum as an innovative and transformative space for learning. Its implementation is carried out through contextual approaches that integrate local culture and apply differentiated learning based on students' characteristics. One concrete form of this implementation is the Pancasila Student Profile Project (P5), which has proven effective in developing students' values and competencies holistically. Despite infrastructure challenges, the teachers overcame them through creativity and collaboration with school management. Moreover, continuous reflection and peer collaboration have driven consistent and sustainable improvement in curriculum implementation.

DISCUSSION

This discussion examines the research findings within the framework of curriculum implementation theory, educational leadership, as well as contextual and differentiated learning approaches. The six aspects of the findings are analyzed to show their relevance to the literature and the practice of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in 3T areas.

1. Understanding and Commitment to the Merdeka Curriculum

The two Teacher Leaders in this study demonstrated a strong conceptual understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum as an approach that emphasizes student-centered, flexible, and locally contextualized learning. This understanding aligns with Tomlinson's (2001) view on the importance of teacher flexibility in designing differentiated instruction. Their commitment to becoming agents of change in schools also reflects the characteristics of transformative teachers, as described by Hargreaves & Fullan (2012). This is crucial, considering that the success of curriculum reform largely depends on the readiness of implementing actors in the field.

2. Planning for Differentiated Learning

The planning conducted, based on diagnostic assessment, shows that teachers understand the importance of differentiation in addressing diverse learning needs. Teacher 1 adapted the materials to suit students' learning styles and backgrounds, while Teacher 2 integrated inter-teacher collaboration into the planning process. This strategy is consistent with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which promotes inclusive learning design from the outset (CAST, 2018). Such an approach responds to the complexity of classrooms in 3T areas, which are often highly heterogeneous in student abilities and backgrounds.

3. *Contextual and Inclusive Learning Practices*

The contextual learning implemented by both teachers reflects the principles of meaningful learning as proposed by Ausubel (1968), which occurs when students can connect the subject matter to their own experiences and environments. Teacher 1 employed poetry and local folklore, while Teacher 2 related learning materials to stories of religious scholars and Malay cultural practices. This demonstrates that learning is not only cognitive but also touches on affective and psychomotor domains. These practices reinforce the importance of cultural responsiveness in education, especially in regions rich in local cultural heritage.

4. *Implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Project (P5)*

The P5 projects implemented strongly represent interdisciplinary and values-based learning approaches. Projects on *Sustainable Lifestyle* and *Preserving Malay Traditions* not only fostered cognitive competencies but also strengthened students' character and national values. This aligns with the main goal of P5, which is to holistically develop the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Teachers were able to connect learning to real life and encourage active student participation.

5. *Strategies for Addressing Limitations and Principal Support*

The findings show that limited facilities are not absolute barriers but rather triggers for learning innovation. The use of alternative media, outdoor learning, and traditional tools reflect *adaptive teaching strategies*, which are essential in the context of 3T areas. Moreover, principal support proved to be critical in creating a collaborative climate and empowering teachers to innovate. The transformational leadership demonstrated by the principal strengthened the role of Teacher Leaders as learning leaders (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

6. *Reflection and Community Involvement*

Regular and collaborative reflection on teaching practices demonstrates the teachers' professionalism as lifelong learners. Evaluation through journals and student interviews enabled teachers to refine strategies and ensure meaningful learning. On the other hand, although not yet optimal, community and parental involvement is starting to show positive trends. This proves that curriculum implementation is more effective when based on partnerships with the surrounding educational ecosystem, as emphasized in school-based management and community-based education (Bray, 2000).

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* by Teacher Leaders at SMP Negeri 2 Pasir Limau Kapas was carried out adaptively and contextually in accordance with the characteristics of 3T areas (Frontier, Outermost, and Disadvantaged regions). Both teachers were able to fulfill their strategic roles as learning leaders by applying differentiated instruction based on initial assessments, integrating local culture, and delivering contextual and inclusive learning practices. They also managed the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects (P5) in innovative ways through relevant themes such as cultural preservation and environmental awareness. Despite facing limited resources, both teachers showed creativity in creating alternative teaching media and received full support from the school principal. Reflective teaching practices were continuously conducted through journal writing and professional learning community discussions, while parental and community leader involvement began to grow in supporting the educational process. Overall, the practices of both Teacher Leaders reflected the values of innovation, collaboration, and instructional leadership, which are at the core of the *Merdeka Curriculum* implementation.

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