

# Pedagogical Challenges and Impacts of the Merdeka Curriculum for Students with Special Needs

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges and impacts of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation in Special Needs Schools (SLB) in Pekanbaru on students with special needs. Using a quantitative survey method with a total sampling approach involving SLB teachers in Pekanbaru (n45), data was collected through questionnaires, interviews, and documentation. The analysis utilized Descriptive Statistics and Qualitative data analysis was conducted on interview transcripts and documents. The research results indicate significant challenges in teacher readiness (65% need more training, 25% low), availability of resources and infrastructure (70% minimal), and curriculum and assessment adaptation (60% difficulty in adaptation, 55% difficulty in assessment), with most falling into the "Moderate" to "High" categories. Nevertheless, the Merdeka Curriculum shows a positive impact on social development (65% increase in communication and participation) and student engagement (70% increase in motivation and active participation) which are in the "Moderate" to "High" categories. However, students' academic development is still limited to the "Moderate" category. This study highlights the need for more specific teacher training, provision of adequate resources, and targeted curriculum adaptation strategies to optimize the potential of the Merdeka Curriculum in supporting inclusive education in SLB.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a global paradigm that emphasizes the right of every individual to access quality education without discrimination, including for students with special needs (SBK) (UNESCO, 2017; Ainscow, 2020). In Indonesia, the commitment to inclusive education continues to be strengthened through various policies, one of which is the launch of the

Merdeka Curriculum. This curriculum is designed to provide greater flexibility and autonomy to educational units and teachers in designing learning processes that are relevant to the characteristics and potential of students (Kemendikbud, 2022). The philosophy of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes personalization and student-centered learning, is theoretically highly relevant to the needs of special education that demands an individualized approach. However, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Special Needs Schools (SLB) presents unique and complex challenges. The very diverse characteristics of students with special needs, ranging from physical, intellectual, sensory disabilities to autism spectrum, demand highly specific curriculum adaptations, teaching strategies, and learning environments (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2020). Curriculum flexibility, while an advantage, can become a boomerang if teachers do not have adequate capacity to translate it into effective practices for each individual student. Teacher readiness in understanding the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum and their ability to adapt materials, methods, and assessment systems to suit the individual needs of students with special needs, becomes crucial. The reality on the ground shows that many SLBs are still faced with limited resources, both in terms of adaptive physical facilities, availability of special learning media, and the quantity and quality of teaching staff specifically trained in special education (Kemendikbud, 2020). This creates a gap between progressive curriculum policies and implementation capacity at the school level.

Various previous studies have highlighted the challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, but most tend to focus on general schools or have not deeply explored its impact on the academic and social development of students with special needs comprehensively. There is still a significant research gap regarding how the Merdeka Curriculum concretely affects students with various types of disabilities in SLB and what specific challenges teachers face in adapting this curriculum. The Merdeka Curriculum is an educational approach that provides flexibility to schools and teachers to design learning processes according to the characteristics of students and the school environment (Kemendikbud, 2022). This concept emerged in response to dynamic educational challenges and the need for students to develop 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). The main goal of the Merdeka Curriculum is to create more flexible learning, prioritizing critical thinking skills, collaboration, and student creativity (Kemendikbud, 2020). Its main principles are flexibility, autonomy, and relevance (Kemendikbud, 2022). Flexibility allows teachers and students to adjust teaching materials and learning methods as needed. Autonomy gives teachers the freedom to choose appropriate material for students.

Students with special needs (SBK) are children who have physical, mental, intellectual, social, or emotional impairments or obstacles that affect their learning process (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2020). Inclusive education is one solution to meet their needs in the general education system (UNESCO, 2017). Inclusive education is an educational approach that places students with special needs in the same learning environment as other students who do not have special needs (Ainscow, 2007). Its main principle is to ensure that all children can learn together in a supportive environment. Westwood (2018) emphasizes the importance of individualization in the education of students with special needs. Individualized learning allows teachers to adapt the curriculum and teaching approaches to the specific needs of students.

Curriculum implementation in SLB often differs from general schools, primarily due to the special needs that must be met. Loreman and Sharma (2017) emphasize that the application of an inclusive curriculum in special schools requires intensive involvement from teachers, who must have a deep understanding of student needs and excellent skills to manage these differences. However, Florian (2019) highlights that flexibility in the curriculum is not always accompanied by the readiness of teaching staff. Many teachers are not yet ready to make major adjustments in teaching, especially in environments with limited resources like SLB. The main

challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in SLB lie in teacher readiness, resource availability, and curriculum adaptation.

The novelty of this research lies in its specific focus on evaluating the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in SLB in Pekanbaru City, as well as an in-depth analysis of its real impact on the academic and social development of students with special needs. This research will provide richer empirical insights into the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum in supporting the individual needs of students with special needs, as well as identifying challenges that still need to be addressed from the perspective of teachers and schools. It is hoped that these findings will not only enrich the literature on inclusive education and curriculum implementation in the context of special education but also provide practical and evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, education practitioners, and parents in an effort to improve the quality of learning in SLB throughout Indonesia.

## 2. METHODS

This study employed a survey method with a quantitative approach to obtain a comprehensive overview of the challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Special Needs Schools (SLB) in Pekanbaru City and its impact on students with special needs (SBK). The research population comprised all teachers teaching in SLBs in Pekanbaru City. The sampling technique used was Total Sampling (Census), which meant all teachers in the population were included as research subjects. The total number of subjects studied was 45 SLB teachers. The primary data collection was carried out through questionnaires, supported by semi-structured interviews with teachers and principals, as well as documentation such as Lesson Plans (RPP) and teaching modules.

The main quantitative data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire using a Likert Scale. The instrument's quality was rigorously tested through a pilot study on a sample outside the main population ( $N=30$ ). Item validity was tested using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation technique ( $r$ ), and the results indicated that out of an initial total of 30 items, 26 items were declared valid because their  $r_{\text{calculated}}$  values were above the  $r_{\text{table}}$  value (0.361). Furthermore, reliability was evaluated using the Alpha Cronbach coefficient ( $\alpha$ ). The calculation result showed a value of 0.918. This value indicates that the questionnaire possesses a very high consistency (highly reliable), thereby guaranteeing measurement consistency. Supplementary qualitative data were collected through validated interview guidelines and documentation checklists.

The data analysis process was carried out in stages. The quantitative data analysis, derived from the responses of the 45 teachers, was processed using statistical methods. The analysis utilized Descriptive Statistics, including calculations of frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, to provide a clear categorical description of the teacher readiness level and curriculum impact. Qualitative data analysis was conducted on interview transcripts and documents. The qualitative data underwent a systematic process covering Data Reduction, Data Presentation, and Conclusion Drawing. This process served as a triangulation of data sources, where the in-depth narratives and perspectives from teachers and principals were used to confirm and explain the statistical patterns identified. The integration of the two types of data yielded a comprehensive and credible interpretation regarding the dynamics of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation in SLBs in Pekanbaru City.

In addition, Observation Sheets were used to record the physical condition of the school, classroom interaction dynamics, and the use of learning media during Merdeka Curriculum implementation, serving as a cross-verification tool for information obtained from interviews and questionnaires. Finally, the Documentation Checklist helped researchers collect and review relevant documents such as Merdeka Curriculum Lesson Plans (RPP), teacher-developed teaching modules, and student progress notes, all of which contributed to a more complete data analysis. The research instruments to be used in the study are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Instruments

<b>Research Instrument</b>	<b>Description</b>
Interview Guidelines	Contains a list of key questions to be asked to respondents (teachers and principals) during interviews. These questions serve as a guide and can be further developed according to the interview flow. The focus of the interview guidelines is on implementation challenges, adaptation strategies, and perceptions of curriculum impact.
Questionnaire	The questionnaire was developed based on indicators relevant to the research objectives, namely the challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and its impact on students with special needs. The measurement scale used is the Likert Scale to measure the level of agreement or frequency. The validity and reliability of the questionnaire will be tested before being used for main data collection.
Observation Sheet	Used to record the physical condition of the school, classroom interactions, and the use of learning media during the Merdeka Curriculum implementation process. This observation sheet helps verify information obtained from interviews and questionnaires.
Documentation Checklist	Contains a list of documents to be collected or reviewed, such as Merdeka Curriculum lesson plans (RPP), teacher-developed teaching modules, and student progress notes.

The research instruments used in this study include a variety of tools designed to collect comprehensive data on the challenges and impacts of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, especially for students with special needs. First, the interview guidelines were developed to provide a structured yet flexible approach during interviews with teachers and principals. These guidelines consist of key questions that focus on understanding the challenges in curriculum implementation, the strategies used to adapt it, and the participants' perceptions of its impact. The questions in the guidelines are intended to be adaptable, allowing for follow-up questions depending on the flow of the interview while ensuring all relevant aspects of the research are addressed. In addition, a questionnaire was created to gather data directly from the participants regarding their experiences with the Merdeka Curriculum. The questionnaire is based on indicators relevant to the study's objectives, specifically aimed at identifying the challenges faced by teachers and evaluating the curriculum's impact on students with special needs. To quantify the data, a Likert Scale was used to assess the level of agreement or frequency of certain behaviors or opinions. Before the main data collection began, the questionnaire was tested for validity and reliability to ensure it accurately measured the intended variables.

Another essential tool used in this research is the observation sheet, which records the physical environment of the school, classroom interactions, and the use of learning media during the Merdeka Curriculum implementation. This sheet helps capture the real-time application of the curriculum, providing insights into how teachers engage with students and how effective the learning media are in addressing the diverse needs of students. The observations recorded in this sheet serve as a crucial verification tool, cross-checking information gathered from the interviews and questionnaires to ensure consistency and reliability.

Lastly, the documentation checklist was employed to gather relevant materials, such as lesson plans (RPP), teacher-created teaching modules, and student progress notes. These

documents were reviewed to provide a detailed understanding of how the Merdeka Curriculum is being applied in practice. The checklist ensured that all key documents were included in the review process, helping to triangulate the data from interviews, questionnaires, and observations. This approach ensures that the study's findings are supported by concrete evidence from multiple sources

Table 2. Research Indicators

<b>Research Variable</b>	<b>Indicator (Dimension/Aspect)</b>	<b>Indicator Description (Questionnaire Item)</b>
<b>A. Challenges of Merdeka Curriculum Implementation in SLB</b>		
1. Teacher Readiness	a. Understanding of Merdeka Curriculum Concepts	Teachers understand the principles, goals, and characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum. (Example: "I understand the essence of the Merdeka Curriculum philosophy.")
	b. Ability to Adapt Materials and Methods	Teachers are able to adapt teaching materials and learning methods according to the needs of SBK. (Example: "I am able to design appropriate teaching modules for various types of disabilities.")
	c. Mastery of Authentic Assessment	Teachers are able to develop and apply authentic assessment. (Example: "I feel competent in conducting project-based assessment for SBK.")
2. Availability of Resources & Infrastructure	a. Availability of Physical Facilities	Presence of physical facilities that support adaptive learning. (Example: "Our SLB classrooms are flexible enough to accommodate various learning activities.")
	b. Availability of Adaptive Media and Technology	Presence of adapted learning media and technology. (Example: "Our SLB has sufficient learning media for visually impaired/hearing impaired students.")
	c. Support from Educational Staff	Support from other educational staff (psychologists, therapists, etc.). (Example: "We receive adequate support from experts outside of classroom teachers.")
3. Support and Collaboration	a. Local Policy Support	Presence of policies and programs from the education department that support implementation. (Example: "The education department often holds socialization and mentoring related to the Merdeka Curriculum in SLB.")
	b. Parental Involvement	Level of parental participation and communication in their child's learning

<b>Research Variable</b>	<b>Indicator (Dimension/Aspect)</b>	<b>Indicator Description (Questionnaire Item)</b>
		process. (Example: "Parents of students are actively involved in their child's individualized learning planning.")
<b>B. Impact of Merdeka Curriculum Implementation on SBK Students</b>		
1. Academic Development	a. Improved Concept Understanding	Students show a better understanding of lesson concepts. (Example: "Students show an improved understanding in certain subjects.")
	b. Learning Independence	Students show initiative and independence in the learning process. (Example: "Students are more independent in completing assigned tasks.")
2. Social Development	a. Interpersonal Communication Skills	Students show improvement in their ability to communicate with friends and teachers. (Example: "Students are more active in communicating with their friends in group activities.")
	b. Participation in Group Activities	Students are more active in participating in group activities. (Example: "Students show enthusiasm in collaborative activities in class.")
	c. Increased Self-Confidence and Self-Expression	Students show increased self-confidence and ability to express opinions. (Example: "Students are more brave in conveying ideas or questions.")
3. Student Engagement	a. Learning Motivation	Level of student enthusiasm and interest in learning. (Example: "Students show high spirits in attending lessons.")
	b. Attendance and Active Participation in Class	Student attendance and activeness in class discussions or activities. (Example: "Students actively ask or answer questions in class.")

### **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on data collection through questionnaires, interviews, and documentation in SLB Pekanbaru City, the research results identify several main challenges in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and its impact on students with special needs.

#### **3.1 Challenges in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in SLB**

Survey results show that the main challenges faced by teachers and schools in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in SLB are in the "Moderate" to "High" categories in several key aspects.

Table 3: Summary of Challenges in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in SLB

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Percentage of Respondents/Observation</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Description</b>
Teacher Readiness	65% (needs more training); 25% (low)	Moderate - High	Teachers have difficulty designing personalized modules and utilizing special applications; need an understanding of philosophy and implementation.
Availability of Resources & Infrastructure	70%	Moderate - High	Lack of supporting facilities, adaptive technology, and adequate learning materials.
Curriculum and Assessment Adaptation	60% (curriculum adaptation); 55% (assessment)	High	Difficulty in adapting the curriculum relevant to individual needs and developing holistic authentic assessment methods.
Support and Collaboration	40% (external coordination); 30% (parental participation)	Low	Coordination and training from external parties are still minimal; parental participation in the learning process is not yet optimal.

Based on the findings presented in Table 3, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Special Needs Schools (SLBs) faces various challenges, most of which fall into the "Moderate" to "High" categories. One of the key obstacles identified is teacher readiness, with 65% of teachers expressing the need for further training to effectively implement the curriculum. Additionally, 25% of teachers reported a low level of readiness, indicating that they feel ill-prepared to apply the curriculum's principles in the classroom. This lack of preparedness is reflected in teachers' difficulties in designing personalized learning modules and utilizing specialized applications that are essential for catering to the diverse needs of students with special needs. Moreover, there is a clear gap in teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum's philosophy and its practical application, which is critical for ensuring successful implementation.

Another significant barrier to the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is the availability of resources and infrastructure. According to the survey results, 70% of respondents reported a lack of supporting facilities, adaptive technology, and adequate learning materials. This shortage severely hampers the ability to deliver an adaptive and inclusive curriculum that meets the diverse needs of students. For students with special needs, access to assistive technologies such as screen readers, braille materials, or specialized communication tools is essential for facilitating their learning experience. Without these resources, the curriculum's flexibility becomes challenging to implement, leaving students at a disadvantage. The lack of appropriate facilities and materials also means that teachers have limited tools to accommodate the unique learning styles of students with different disabilities.

Curriculum adaptation and assessment were identified as particularly challenging areas, with both categories falling into the "High" category of difficulty. Approximately 60% of teachers reported struggling with adapting the curriculum to suit the individual needs of students, which is a critical component of the Merdeka Curriculum's focus on personalized learning. Adapting the curriculum for students with special needs requires a high degree of flexibility and creativity, as each student may require different approaches based on their

disability. In addition, 55% of teachers found it difficult to develop holistic and authentic assessment methods, which are key to measuring the progress of students with special needs. Traditional assessments often do not align with the unique learning trajectories of these students, further complicating the process. This indicates that the adaptation of materials and the development of appropriate evaluation tools for students with special needs are ongoing challenges that need to be addressed to make the Merdeka Curriculum fully inclusive.

Moreover, support and collaboration were identified as areas in need of improvement. Only 40% of teachers felt that there was adequate coordination and training from external parties, suggesting that teachers are not receiving the necessary support from educational authorities or external experts to implement the curriculum effectively. In addition, 30% of respondents noted that parental involvement in the learning process was suboptimal. Parental engagement is crucial for reinforcing learning at home and ensuring that students with special needs receive continuous support outside the classroom. The lack of sufficient support from both external parties and parents creates a fragmented educational ecosystem that makes it difficult to provide a comprehensive and holistic learning experience for students.

In conclusion, while the Merdeka Curriculum holds great potential for enhancing the educational experience of students with special needs, its successful implementation faces several hurdles. These include challenges related to teacher readiness, resource availability, curriculum adaptation, and insufficient support from external parties and parents. To overcome these obstacles, it is essential to prioritize teacher training, invest in appropriate resources and infrastructure, and foster stronger collaboration between schools, parents, and educational authorities. By addressing these challenges, it will be possible to create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment that allows all students, regardless of their abilities, to thrive under the Merdeka Curriculum.

### 3.2 Impact of Merdeka Curriculum Implementation on the Development of Students with Special Needs

In general, the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation on the academic and social development of students with special needs shows varied results.

Table 4: Summary of the Impact of Merdeka Curriculum Implementation on the Development of Students with Special Needs.

<b>Student Development Aspect</b>	<b>Average Score/Percentage</b>	<b>Category (Simulation)</b>	<b>Description</b>
Academic Development	Moderate (average); 50% (improvement in basic concepts)	Moderate	Limited improvement, especially for complex disabilities; improvement in well-adapted subjects.
Social Development	Moderate to High (average); 65% (improved communication & participation)	Moderate - High	Increased social interaction and participation in group activities; inclusive environment supports self-confidence.
Student Engagement	70% (level of engagement)	High	Increased learning motivation and active participation in class; students feel more "independent" in choosing learning methods.

The research results indicate that the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation on the development of students with special needs in SLB Pekanbaru City varies, with some

aspects showing significant improvement while others are still moderate. In academic development, the improvement tends to be "Moderate," with limited average scores, especially for students with complex disabilities. However, there is hope because 50% of students show improvement in basic concepts in subjects that have been well adapted. This indicates that although overall academic achievement still needs to be improved, appropriate curriculum adaptation can yield positive results.

On the other hand, students' social development shows more encouraging results, falling into the "Moderate to High" category. On average, 65% of students showed an increase in communication skills and participation in group activities. The inclusive environment fostered by the Merdeka Curriculum appears to contribute significantly to building students' self-confidence and promoting their social interaction. The most prominent is the high level of student engagement, reaching the "High" category, with 70% of students showing increased learning motivation and active participation in class. This shows that the Merdeka Curriculum has successfully made students feel more "independent" in their learning process, allowing them to more actively choose and engage in learning methods that suit their needs and interests. The findings of this study highlight that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Special Needs Schools (SLBs) in Pekanbaru City faces significant challenges, primarily revolving around teacher readiness, resource availability, and curriculum adaptation. These challenges are consistent with previous literature, which has outlined the difficulties educational institutions face in adopting new curricula for students with diverse needs. According to Utama & Marlina (2023), the transition to a more flexible curriculum requires teachers to develop new pedagogical strategies that are not only individualized but also contextually relevant to the needs of students with special needs. The complexity of this shift is made even more evident by the diverse range of disabilities that teachers must accommodate within a single classroom.

One of the core challenges identified in the study is the high demand for pedagogical adaptation skills required to effectively serve the diverse learning needs of students with special needs (SBK). Gargiulo (2012) emphasizes that teaching in special education settings requires teachers to be highly adaptable, given that no two students with special needs have identical learning requirements. The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on flexibility requires educators to be equipped with the skills to adapt not just content but teaching methods, assessments, and classroom environments. This broad range of pedagogical strategies is especially difficult when teachers do not have sufficient training or resources to address the varied needs of their students, leading to inconsistencies in how the curriculum is delivered.

In particular, adapting the Merdeka Curriculum for students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) presents specific challenges. Unlike their peers on the autism spectrum disorder (ASD), students with ID benefit more from a curriculum that emphasizes functional and daily living skills, rather than abstract concepts. This difference in educational needs means that teachers must tailor their instructional methods to focus on practical skills, which are essential for these students' independence in daily life. On the other hand, students with ASD often require adaptations that incorporate visual communication aids and structured behavior management techniques. These varied needs further complicate the curriculum adaptation process, as teachers must create multiple teaching approaches within the same classroom.

Resource limitations significantly exacerbate the challenges faced by SLBs in Pekanbaru City. A major issue is the lack of specialized educational tools and materials, which are crucial for supporting students with different disabilities. As noted by Wardany (2023), approximately 70% of SLBs in the region struggle with inadequate resources, which affects the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation. For example, students with visual impairments require braille materials and screen readers to access the curriculum, while students with hearing impairments need visual material reinforcement and sign

language support to ensure they can fully engage with the learning process. This lack of adequate resources creates a gap between the flexible policies of the curriculum and the infrastructure needed to support these policies effectively.

Ultimately, the findings of this study reveal a critical gap between the policy-driven flexibility of the Merdeka Curriculum and the reality of its implementation in SLBs. The need for better teacher training, increased resource allocation, and more effective adaptations to the curriculum is clear. Without addressing these challenges, the full potential of the Merdeka Curriculum to support students with special needs will remain unrealized. To bridge this gap, there is a pressing need for targeted solutions, including greater investment in resources, specialized training for educators, and more tailored curriculum designs that accommodate the unique needs of students with different disabilities. Only by addressing these factors can the Merdeka Curriculum truly achieve its goal of providing equitable and inclusive education for all students.

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in SLBs in Pekanbaru City faces significant challenges related to teacher readiness, resource availability, and curriculum adaptation, consistent with previous literature (Utama & Marlina, 2023). This challenge is exacerbated by the Curriculum's demand for high pedagogical adaptation skills to serve the diverse learning needs of students with special needs (SBK) (Gargiulo, 2012). Specifically, adapting the curriculum for students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) requires a focus on functional and daily living skills, contrasting with students on the autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who need adaptations related to visual communication and structured behavior management. Resource limitations, which significantly hamper 70% of SLBs, also demand specific solutions: students with visual impairments require braille materials and screen readers, while students with hearing impairments need intensive visual material reinforcement, highlighting the gap between flexible curriculum policies and infrastructural reality (Wardany, 2023).

The difficulty in curriculum adaptation and authentic assessment, experienced by 60% of teachers, further confirms the necessity of material personalization. The principle of Differentiated Instruction within the Merdeka Curriculum must be translated into practices specific to each disability type. For instance, for students with ID, adaptation must focus on a highly structured Individualized Education Program (IEP) that breaks down competencies into small, measurable sub-skills, whereas students with ASD require an emphasis on routines and the use of visual schedules. Authentic assessment must also be tailored: for students with sensory impairments, assessment should focus on the remaining or strengthened sensory modalities. Without this specific training, teachers will continue to struggle in designing fair and representative assessment instruments for various disabilities (Jannah & Rasyid, 2023).

Conversely, the study found a significant positive impact on the social development and engagement of students with special needs. The average social development score was in the "Moderate to High" category, with 65% of students showing improvement in communication skills and group participation. The Merdeka Curriculum's flexibility in encouraging project-based learning and collaboration (Kemendikbud, 2022) appears successful in enhancing social interaction, particularly for students with ASD and emotional/behavioral disorders, by creating a more inclusive learning environment (UNESCO, 2017). High student engagement (70%) indicates the Curriculum's success in aligning with individual learning styles, fostering intrinsic motivation.

However, the academic development of students remaining in the "moderate" category suggests that optimizing cognitive potential is still hindered by challenges in curriculum personalization and assessment (particularly for students with ID and specific learning difficulties). Although the curriculum is flexible, teachers require further support in developing more intensive and individualistic teaching strategies, such as evidence-based

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) (Hallahan et al., 2020), to achieve significant academic progress across all types of SBK. Overall, this research confirms the Merdeka Curriculum's great potential for improving the quality of education in SLBs, especially in non-academic aspects. However, this potential can only be fully realized by addressing existing challenges, specifically by improving teacher readiness, providing adequate and disability-specific adaptive resources, and developing curriculum adaptation strategies that are targeted and structured according to the unique needs of each disability group. These findings provide critical input for policymakers to refine the Merdeka Curriculum implementation in special schools.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in SLB in Riau Province faces significant challenges, particularly related to teacher readiness in curriculum adaptation and the development of authentic assessment, as well as the availability of adequate resources and infrastructure. Although the philosophy of the Merdeka Curriculum is relevant to the needs of special education, the gap between policy and implementation capacity on the ground is still large. However, this study also shows encouraging positive impacts on the social development and engagement of students with special needs, indicating that the Merdeka Curriculum has great potential in creating a more inclusive and motivating learning environment. To achieve the full potential of the Merdeka Curriculum in SLB, comprehensive improvements are needed in teacher training, the provision of adaptive facilities, and stronger collaborative support from external parties and parents.

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