



CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

TANTANGAN IMPLEMENTASI KURIKULUM MERDEKA DI SMP: TINJAUAN PUSTAKA SISTEMATIS

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Abstrak

Kurikulum Merdeka diterapkan untuk menghadapi tuntutan pembelajaran abad ke-21 melalui fleksibilitas, penyederhanaan materi, dan penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengidentifikasi tantangan implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka pada tingkat SMP melalui pendekatan *Systematic Literature Review* (SLR). Pencarian artikel dilakukan melalui Mendeley, ScienceDirect, dan Google Scholar dengan pedoman PRISMA, menggunakan kriteria artikel tahun 2020–2025, berbahasa Inggris, dan membahas tantangan implementasi di SMP. Sebanyak 16 artikel memenuhi kriteria inklusi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kurikulum ini menawarkan peluang positif, seperti meningkatnya kreativitas guru dan pembelajaran yang lebih kontekstual, namun tantangan implementasi masih sangat dominan. Hambatan utama meliputi rendahnya pemahaman guru terhadap konsep inti seperti diferensiasi, asesmen formatif, dan pengembangan modul ajar, keterbatasan fasilitas sekolah dan teknologi, rendahnya motivasi serta kesiapan siswa, serta minimnya pelatihan dan pendampingan berkelanjutan. Selain itu, transisi dari kurikulum sebelumnya dan kurangnya dukungan orang tua turut menghambat proses implementasi. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa keberhasilan Kurikulum Merdeka memerlukan peningkatan kapasitas guru, perbaikan sarana-prasarana, serta dukungan pendampingan yang sistematis dan berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci: Tantangan, Kurikulum Merdeka, SMP

Abstract

The Merdeka Curriculum is implemented to meet the demands of 21st-century learning through flexibility, simplification of material, and strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile. This study aims to identify the challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the junior high school level through a *Systematic Literature Review* (SLR) approach. Articles were searched for through Mendeley, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar using the PRISMA guidelines, with criteria of articles published between 2020 and 2025, written in English, and discussing implementation challenges in junior high schools. A total of 16 articles met the inclusion criteria. The results show that this curriculum offers positive opportunities, such as increased teacher creativity and more contextual learning, but implementation challenges remain dominant. The main obstacles include low teacher understanding of core concepts such as differentiation, formative assessment, and teaching module development, limited school facilities and technology, low student motivation and readiness, and a lack of training and ongoing mentoring. In addition, the transition from the previous curriculum and lack of parental support also hindered the implementation process. These findings emphasize that the success of the Merdeka Curriculum requires increased teacher capacity, improved infrastructure, and systematic and continuous support.

Keywords: Challenges, Merdeka Curriculum, Junior High School



INTRODUCTION

Education forms the foundation of national development by equipping the younger generation to meet global challenges, adapt to technological advances, and respond to evolving socio-cultural dynamics (Setiawan & Arsanti, 2024). In the context of rapid global change and technological progress, the demand for 21st-century skills and societal adaptation requires an education system that is both adaptive and responsive. A central component of this system is the curriculum (Sanjaya, 2008, p. 10), which provides a framework for learning content and methodological direction, shaping how students learn, how teachers instruct, and how assessments are conducted. In Indonesia, curriculum reform is a regular government initiative to enhance the quality of learning and to prepare a younger generation that is more competent and relevant to the evolving needs of society (Afifa et al., 2025; Anas et al., 2025; Putri et al., 2025).

Indonesia's curriculum policy has evolved rapidly, moving from the Competency-Based Curriculum (KBK) to the Education Unit Level Curriculum (KTSP), then to the 2013 Curriculum (K-13), and now to the Merdeka Curriculum. The Merdeka Curriculum was developed in response to issues such as an overloaded curriculum, low literacy and numeracy, unequal regional quality, and diverse student needs (Nurdini et al., 2024, pp. 2–10). It promotes student-centered learning, flexibility, a focus on essential material, project-based learning (PBL), and strengthens the Pancasila student profile. By addressing previous limitations, it provides teachers and schools with greater creative autonomy (Saputra & Stiawan, 2024).

The Merdeka Curriculum, rooted in constructivist theory, promotes meaningful learning through real-world experiences (Kurniawan, 2025, p. 112). It empowers teachers with autonomy to design instruction tailored to students' traits, school conditions, and local contexts, enabling differentiated approaches to meet individual needs. More than technical adjustments, this curriculum initiates a teaching paradigm shift, making students active participants in the learning process (Nurdini et al., 2024, pp. 31–35).

However, implementing the Merdeka Curriculum remains challenging. Key obstacles for teachers include understanding new paradigms, such as differentiated learning, formative assessment, and project-based learning (Limbong & Limbong, 2023). Additional barriers include insufficient training, limited guidance, and difficulties in transitioning from the previous curriculum (Siregar et al., 2025). Teachers also struggle with inadequate facilities, poor infrastructure, uneven access to technology, scarce teaching materials, and heavy administrative loads (Astari & Ramadhan, 2023; Fabela et al., 2024).

In addition, teachers' perceptions and readiness are key elements in the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Delita et al., 2025). Teachers are the main implementers of education policy (Dekawati, 2025, p. 35), so their understanding, acceptance, motivation, and belief in the new curriculum greatly determine the quality of its classroom implementation. Several studies show that teachers with positive perceptions tend to be more adaptive and able to apply creative learning strategies, while teachers who feel unprepared, burdened, or unfamiliar with the basic paradigm of the Merdeka Curriculum show resistance that hinders its effectiveness implementation (Wildani et al., 2025).



Although there have been various studies on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, most of these studies are limited in nature, focusing on specific case studies or only examining specific aspects such as learning models, teacher readiness, and school facilities (Herawati, 2023; Rabi'ah & Nurulita, 2025; Suripah et al., 2023). There have been few studies that comprehensively analyze the implementation challenges at the junior high school level using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. In fact, SLR can provide a comprehensive picture by synthesizing findings from various previous studies, resulting in a more holistic and in-depth understanding (Bancong, 2025, p. 190). This gap is the important basis for conducting this study.

Based on this background, this study aims to identify and analyze various challenges that arise in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in junior high schools (SMP) through SLR of English articles. The synthesis results are expected to serve as a basis for recommendations for educators, policymakers, and future researchers to improve implementation and better support the success of the Merdeka Curriculum.

METHODS

This study used the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to identify, evaluate, and synthesize research findings related to Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Junior High Schools. The review procedure was conducted according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, as described by Moher et al. (2009). This method was chosen because it provides a structured, transparent, and replicable review process, thereby increasing the credibility and accuracy of the research results (Kitchenham, 2004, p. 2). The article search was conducted through several academic databases, namely Mendeley, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. For searching on Google Scholar, the author used the Publish or Perish software. The keywords used in the search included: "Challenges," "Merdeka Curriculum," and "Junior High School (SMP)." The publication year range was limited to 2020–2025, in line with the research focus on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which is still relatively new.

All articles obtained were then subjected to a multi-layered selection process in accordance with the PRISMA flow. At the identification stage, the initial search yielded 1,986 articles related to the challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in junior high schools. The next stage was screening, which involved removing duplicate and irrelevant articles. The screening process was conducted using the Rayyan application. The eligibility stage involved reading the entire content of the articles to ensure the articles' substance was relevant to the study's focus. In the final stage, namely inclusion, only articles that met all the relevance criteria were included as final studies for in-depth analysis. The inclusion criteria for this study include: 1) published between 2020 and 2025, 2) specifically discussing the challenges of implementing the merdeka curriculum in secondary schools, 3) available in full text, 4) in the form of scientific journal articles, 5) focusing on the junior high school level, and 6) written in English.

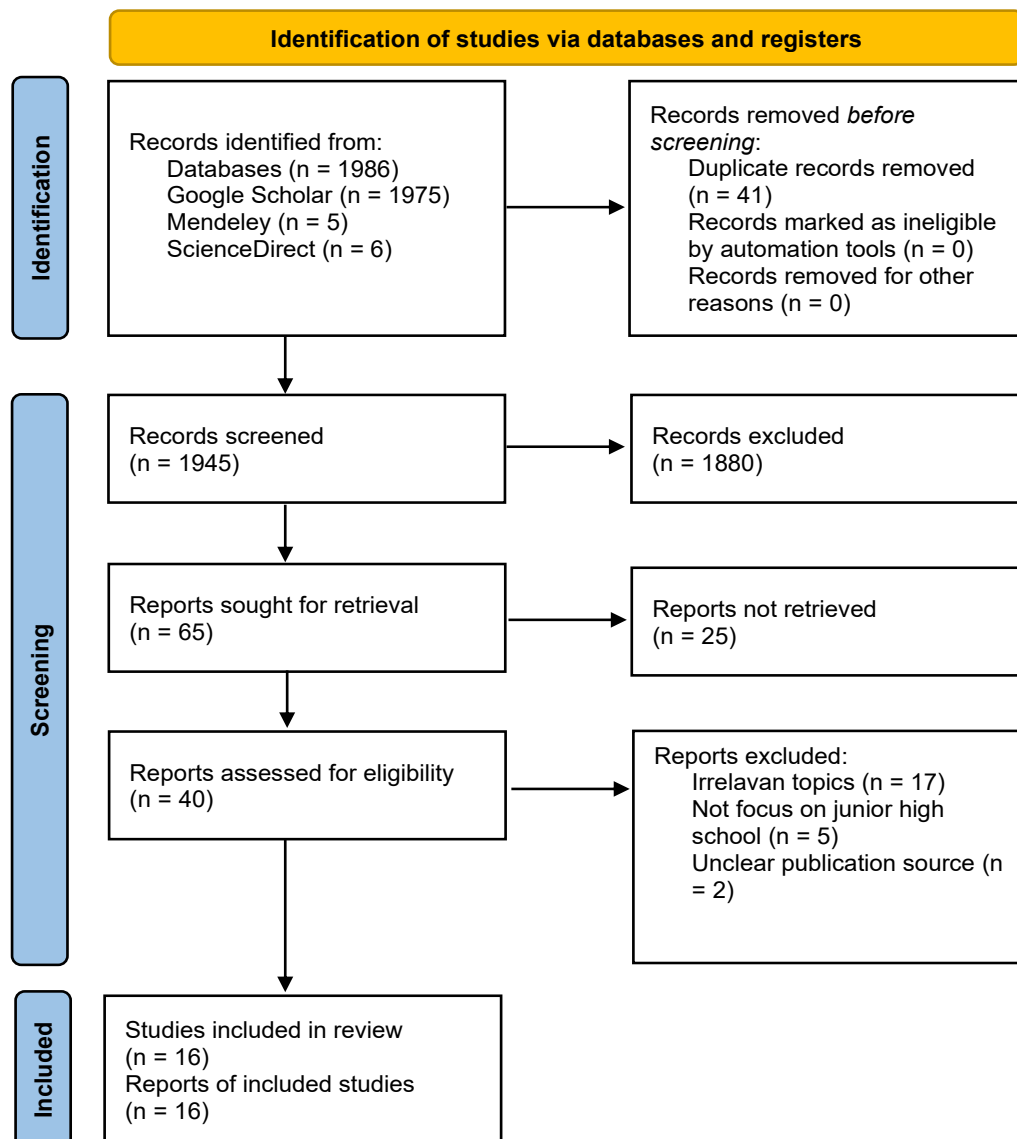


Figure 1. PRISMA diagram

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

After the PRISMA selection process, this study identified and analyzed 16 articles that met the inclusion criteria and were relevant to the study's focus. These 16 articles formed the basis for a comprehensive synthesis of findings to understand the challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the junior high school level.

Table 1. Summary of Findings from Selected Final Studies

Code	Autors/Title	Study Design	Measuring	Findings
A1	Fabela et al. (2024)	Descriptive qualitative	Observation, interviews & documentation	The Merdeka Curriculum has a positive impact on student motivation and participation. Teachers have more freedom to develop modules, but there are challenges: teachers are less prepared, minimal training, limited



				facilities, difficult to let go of old methods, and students are not ready.
A2	Romdhoni et al. (2023)	Descriptive qualitative	Interviews, observations and documentation	The Independent Curriculum allows flexible PAI learning. However, there are challenges: teachers' understanding of the curriculum, difficulty in switching from the 2013 Curriculum method, inadequate facilities (no projector/Wi-Fi), and low student readiness to play an active and independent role in learning.
A3	Siregar et al. (2025)	Descriptive qualitative	Interviews, observations and documentation	Teachers still have difficulty adapting to new approaches, lack of understanding of the concept of differentiated learning, and the burden of managing two curricula simultaneously. Efforts: attending training, collaborating with other teachers, and using government modules, but ongoing support is needed for optimal implementation.
A4	Said et al. (2023)	Descriptive qualitative	Interviews	English teachers at the Makassar Islamic Boarding School have a positive perception of the Independent Curriculum, but its implementation is less than optimal. Teachers don't understand projects, assessments, differentiation. Training is limited, facilities are lacking, so it is difficult to use digital media for modern learning.
A5	Julianti et al. (2025)	Descriptive qualitative	Interviews, observations and documentation	Implementation of the Independent Curriculum includes learning planning (effective week, analysis of results, objectives, modules) and implementation (introduction, core, conclusion, assessment). teacher difficulties: developing modules, understanding the new curriculum, implementing learning strategies, low student motivation. Student learning outcomes are less than optimal even though teaching is repeated.
A6	Astuti et al. (2024)	Qualitative	Interviews, observations and documentation	Teachers and students face various challenges in implementing the Independent Curriculum: lack of understanding of the new curriculum concept, difficulty developing teaching



				modules, and limited facilities. Student motivation and participation is low, and they have difficulty adapting to a more independent and active learning approach so that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is not optimal.
A7	Hasibuan et al. (2024)	Qualitative (critical discourse analysis)	Observations and documentation	The Merdeka Curriculum is implemented through diagnostic assessments, P5 and PMO. The PAI learning process has followed the Independent Curriculum, showing that student learning outcomes have improved (cognitive and psychomotor), but the affective aspect is still low. Challenges: senior teachers lack technology (internal) and parents lack understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum (external). Solution: teacher training and intensive communication with parents.
A8	Ningsih et al. (2024)	Descriptive qualitative	Observation, interviews (teachers of grade 7 & 8), and documentation.	Teachers face six challenges: choosing the right method, influence of mother tongue, low motivation, lack of vocabulary, limited facilities and materials. Solution: provision of initial vocabulary, motivation, group discussions, demonstrations, contextual teaching, and using technology. Teachers apply direct methods, cognitive strategies, exercises, communication strategies, QNA, and discussions to build speaking skills
A9	Tangahu et al. (2025)	Qualitative with a case study approach	Observations	The Independent Curriculum in Citizenship Education gives teachers freedom to design student learning and character. P5 program 1 hour/week, but not optimal because teachers don't understand new methods, lack modules, limited facilities. Solution: teacher training, provision of facilities and regular assistance.
A10	Purkoni & Qowim (2024)	Qualitative	Interviews, observations and documentation	Implementation of the Independent Curriculum through P5 at Tahfidz Assyifa Al Islami Parung Middle School with the theme of entrepreneurship and democracy, held every Friday (30 JP/theme). This



				program strengthens religious character and values and contextual learning experiences, but is constrained: teachers do not understand P5, minimal training, facilitator communication is less effective, supervision is weak, and there are no teaching modules (teachers rely on the internet).
A11	Firmansyah et al. (2024)	Qualitative descriptive	Interviews	Main challenges: large number of students, difficult to differentiate learning, high admin burden, senior teachers adapting to technology, and the K13 transition to the Independent Curriculum is confusing. Teachers try to overcome these challenges: be innovative, use technology, but need training and school support by innovating materials.
A12	Murni et al. (2024)	Qualitative	Interviews & observations	Main issues: lack of government socialization and assistance, unclear implementation guidelines, suboptimal diagnostic assessments, teachers finding it difficult to adapt to and understand the Merdeka Mengajar platform, confusing integration of the P5 project, as well as technological constraints and reduced teaching hours. Training and guidance support are urgently needed.
A13	Pratama et al. (2023)	Qualitative descriptive	Observation, interviews, and documentation	The Merdeka Curriculum is implemented in Islamic schools through general and elective subjects based on student interests, as well as P5 projects that produce works. The main challenges are that teachers must understand the curriculum independently without government training, facilities are limited, and there is a need to adapt to the CP, teaching modules, and new systems. Teachers continue to strive for implementation through collaboration and independent training.
A14	Limbong & Limbong (2023)	Mixed method	Survey & interview	Main obstacles: teachers are not yet ready to develop lesson plans, difficulties in teaching and choosing learning models, lack of training in



				assessment, low student behavior change, and suboptimal learning evaluation. The results show the need for ongoing training for teachers in curriculum planning, assessment, and evaluation.
A15	Sijabat et al. (2023)	Qualitative (Case study)	Observation, interviews, and documentation	Science teachers' perceptions of the Independent Curriculum are mostly positive. They feel helped by simple lesson plans and constructivist learning. Constraints: quality of teacher human resources, limited facilities & infrastructure, teachers are comfortable with the old curriculum, and lack of experience with the Independent Curriculum. better training and infrastructure is needed.
A16	Nursaid et al. (2023)	Qualitative descriptive	Observation, interviews, and documentation	Teachers assess that one-page lesson plans are very helpful in reducing admin burden and simplifying planning. Constraints: lack of socialization, teachers don't understand the new format, the format is different from the old curriculum. Solutions: workshops, teacher group work, subject teacher groups, and regular mentoring.

Based on a synthesis of 16 selected articles, the study's results show that implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the junior high school level offers several positive opportunities but also faces complex challenges. In general, the findings of this study confirm that the Merdeka Curriculum can encourage flexibility in learning, increase teacher creativity, and provide space for more contextual and student-centered learning. Research findings A1, A2, A4, A7, and A9 confirm that this curriculum has succeeded in encouraging teacher creativity, enabling more contextual learning, and strengthening character through the implementation of P5. These findings align with the constructivist theory that underpins the Merdeka Curriculum, in which students actively construct knowledge through meaningful learning experiences (Kurniawan, 2025, p. 112). Thus, the results of this study show that, conceptually, the Merdeka Curriculum has created a space that aligns with the basic principles of constructivist theory. In addition, articles A15 and A16 state that simplifying teaching tools, such as one-page lesson plans, can help teachers reduce their administrative burden. These findings indicate that the Merdeka Curriculum has great potential to create learning that is more relevant to students' needs and the changing times.

However, implementation challenges still dominate the research results. Almost all articles highlight that the biggest obstacles lie in teacher competence and readiness. Articles coded A3, A4, A5, A10, A12, and A14 found that teachers find it difficult to understand core concepts such as differentiated learning, formative assessment, teaching module development, and P5 integration. In addition, adaptation from the old patterns formed in the 2013 Curriculum has



resulted in some teachers continuing to use conventional approaches, so that the learning process does not yet fully reflect the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, this was found in articles A1, A2, and A11. The lack of continuous training and mentoring is a factor that slows down teachers' readiness to apply this new paradigm. This situation can be understood through the results of research by Putra et al. (2025), which states that curriculum changes are often hampered by teacher resistance due to old habits, lack of understanding, and weak implementation support.

On the other hand, various external limitations also contribute to implementation constraints. Articles A2, A4, A6, A8, A9, and A13 discuss limited school facilities, such as a lack of technological devices, inadequate internet access, and a shortage of learning resources which are frequently cited obstacles. This is in line with the results of research by Suripah et al. (2023) and Rabi'ah & Nurulita (2025) which shows that the readiness of school infrastructure is still a determining factor in the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, especially for technology-based activities and collaborative learning. Ansori et al. (2025) states that facilities are among the fundamental components in supporting the effectiveness of learning. Student readiness is also still low, characterized by a lack of motivation, ability gaps, the dominance of the mother tongue, and resistance to learning that demands independence and activity, as found in articles A1, A6, A8, and A9. These findings are in line with humanistic learning theory, which states that learning success is greatly influenced by students' internal conditions, such as motivation, interest, and readiness for independent learning (Hapudin, 2021). Patimah's (2024) research also shows that students' adaptation to changes in learning methods requires a lengthy process, especially when the role of students changes from passive to active. In fact, Article A7 states the role of parents remains a challenge because some do not yet understand the direction of the curriculum change. This reinforces the findings of a study Nurwidyayanti et al. (2024), which states that social support, including from parents, has a significant impact on the successful implementation of the new curriculum. These various obstacles indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum does not only depend on teachers, but also requires systemic support from schools and the surrounding environment.

Various solutions reported in the literature demonstrate the ongoing efforts schools have made to overcome these obstacles. Some strategies that often appear include increasing teacher capacity through workshops, teacher collaboration, the use of the Merdeka Mengajar platform, and regular guidance (Murni et al., 2024; Nursaid et al., 2023; Purkoni & Qowim, 2024; Siregar et al., 2025). In addition, the use of innovative methods such as group discussions, contextual approaches, cognitive strategies, and technology integration is also a quite effective solution for increasing student engagement (Firmansyah et al., 2024; Ningsih et al., 2024). Overall, the synthesis of the articles shows that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has strong potential, but its success depends heavily on teacher readiness, facility support, and a consistent, sustainable training system.

CONCLUSION

The study's results show that implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the junior high school level presents both significant opportunities and challenges. Conceptually, this curriculum provides space for teacher creativity, more flexible learning, and character building through P5, but findings from 16 articles analyzed show that the biggest obstacles lie in teacher readiness,



understanding of core curriculum concepts, limited facilities, low student motivation and readiness, and a lack of training and ongoing support. Teachers' difficulties in understanding differentiation, formative assessment, module development, and adaptation from the previous curriculum also slow successful implementation, while infrastructure constraints and parental support affect implementation in the field. Thus, the success of the Merdeka Curriculum depends heavily on improving teacher competence, strengthening school facilities, and providing consistent mentoring support. Further research is recommended to evaluate the effectiveness of teacher-training models and to examine the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in regions with diverse resource conditions.

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