


Strategy for Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP in Labuhan Haji Barat

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify and analyze the implementation strategies of the Merdeka Curriculum in order to improve the quality of education at the Junior High School (SMP) level in the Labuhan Haji Barat District. This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, direct observations, and document analysis involving school principals, teachers, supervisors, and school committees as key informants. The research results show that schools in the Labuhan Haji Barat District have implemented several important strategies, including: strengthening the role of school principals as learning leaders, forming teacher practitioner communities, utilizing the Merdeka Mengajar digital platform, and implementing projects based on local wisdom. The main challenges faced include the low digital literacy of some teachers, limited infrastructure, and relatively high administrative demands. These findings indicate that to optimize the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, it is crucial to maximize the leadership of school principals and the existing culture of teacher collaboration to leverage online training and digital learning resources. Integrate the Pancasila Student Profile project with local themes to increase student interest. This study recommends strengthening teachers' digital literacy, improving infrastructure, and encouraging sustainable collaboration to enhance the impact of curriculum implementation.

Keywords: *Merdeka Curriculum, Strategy, Implementation, Education Quality, SWOT Analysis*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, Indonesia has implemented various educational reforms aimed at improving the quality, equity, and relevance of education (Pasaribu, 2017). Starting from the Competency-Based Curriculum (KBK) in the early 2000s, the Education Unit Level Curriculum (KTSP) in 2006, to the 2013 Curriculum (K-13), each reform has sought to address the gap between national educational achievements and the rapidly changing demands of society (Kurdie, 2017). These reforms reflect the government's commitment to decentralizing education management, strengthening school autonomy, and promoting a learner-centered approach to education with an emphasis on character building, critical thinking, and creativity (Rohmah, 2013). In this context, the Merdeka Curriculum emerges as the latest effort to present a more flexible, contextual, and responsive curriculum, in line with global trends and local educational needs (Tunas & Pangkey, 2024).

Education in the 21st century faces increasingly complex and dynamic challenges. The development of science, digital technology, globalization, as well as social and cultural dynamics forces the education system to not only focus on mastering knowledge content but also emphasize strengthening the competencies and character of learners (Etistika Yuni Wijaya et al., 2016). In the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and Society 5.0, learners are required to possess critical thinking skills, creativity, communication and collaboration abilities, digital literacy, as well as resilient and adaptive character. In line with these demands, educational

institutions in various countries are transforming their curricula to produce graduates who are relevant to the needs of the times (Saputra, 2024).

In Indonesia, the awareness of presenting a flexible, contextual, and globally responsive curriculum has long emerged as an agenda for educational reform. One concrete step taken by the government is the launch of the Merdeka Curriculum through the Merdeka Belajar policy (Nurwiatin, 2022). This curriculum was born as an answer to the weaknesses of the previous curriculum, which was deemed too content-heavy and solely oriented towards cognitive achievements, thus limiting teachers and students in exploring a more creative and in-depth learning process (Firdaus & Permana, 2024). With the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers are given the autonomy to adjust learning to the conditions and needs of students through differentiation approaches, project-based learning, and strengthening formative assessments.

The Merdeka Curriculum is also oriented towards character development of students through the strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile. This profile encompasses six dimensions, namely: faith and devotion to God Almighty and noble character, global diversity, mutual cooperation, independence, critical thinking, and creativity (Darmayanti et al., 2024). The implementation of this profile is integrated into regular learning activities as well as the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), which encourages students to learn contextually, collaboratively, and with a focus on solving real problems in their surrounding. Thus, this curriculum not only encourages academic achievement but also strengthens character values and 21st-century life skills.

The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to provide space for innovation at the educational unit level. Schools are expected to be able to develop independent teaching modules, adjust materials to the local context, and utilize environmental potential as learning resources. This strategy aims to strengthen the relevance of learning while also improving the quality of education in various regions, including peripheral or remote areas (Azzahra et al., 2025). However, the success of the Merdeka Curriculum highly depends on the implementation strategies applied by schools, particularly the role of the principal as the learning leader, teachers as facilitators, and supervisors as companions who ensure the quality of the learning process is maintained (Yunanto & Amalia, 2025).

International and national studies have shown that the success of curriculum reform is closely related to the readiness and capacity of human resources in schools, a supportive organizational culture, and collaboration between central and regional governments (Kunaifi & Wahyudi, 2024). Therefore, the strategy for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum is not just about administrative technicalities, but also includes strengthening teacher competencies, building a culture of collaboration, enhancing academic supervision, and managing facilities and infrastructure that support the learning process.

In the context of Junior High School (SMP), the Merdeka Curriculum presents an important opportunity to improve the overall quality of education. As a transitional stage between elementary school and high school, junior high school (SMP) plays a strategic role in shaping students' learning skills, attitudes, and character (Sista, 2017). The implementation of appropriate strategies can help schools maximize students' potential, prepare them to face challenges at the next level, and build a foundation of national values and character in accordance with the Pancasila Student Profile (Setyorini & Anbiya, 2025).

Therefore, the study of the implementation strategies of the Merdeka Curriculum, especially at the junior high school level in areas such as Labuhan Haji Barat District, becomes very important to ensure that this curriculum transformation truly has a positive impact on the quality of education. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum as a national policy launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology since 2022 is essentially aimed at improving the quality of education comprehensively. This curriculum is designed with a more flexible learning philosophy, centered on students, and provides space for creativity and innovation for teachers and educational units.

Conceptually, the Merdeka Curriculum is designed as a major effort to transform national education, providing flexibility for teachers and schools to conduct learning that is more contextual, innovative, and student-centered. General studies in various regions that

Strategy for Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP in Labuhan Haji Barat

have successfully implemented the Merdeka Curriculum, as revealed by (Apriana et al., 2024), show that effective curriculum implementation strategies include the preparation of independent teaching modules by teachers, the continuous implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile project, the use of formative assessments as reflective tools, and the strengthening of academic supervision by school principals. The results of studies in urban areas even show that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum not only improves students' academic achievements but also fosters independence, critical thinking skills, and creativity.

On the other hand, the phenomenon occurring in the West Labuhan Haji District shows a significant gap between the ideal concept and the reality of its implementation on the ground. Although schools in this region have started the administrative implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, its execution is still marked by various obstacles. For example, teachers have not yet fully been able to develop and use independent teaching modules, the implementation of differentiated learning has not been optimal, and the Pancasila Student Profile project activities tend to be carried out only as symbolic activities, rather than as a deep and reflective learning process. In addition, the limited infrastructure, lack of training, and low digital literacy among teachers pose real challenges that hinder the optimal implementation of this curriculum.

This gap indicates that there is an important issue that needs to be scientifically examined, namely how the implementation strategy of the Merdeka Curriculum can be adapted to the local school context, resource limitations, and the characteristics of students in Labuhan Haji Barat District. This means that although general studies in other regions have proven the success of this curriculum implementation when supported by strong school leadership, teacher collaboration, and resource support, the reality on the ground shows that similar conditions have not yet fully occurred in semi-peripheral areas like Labuhan Haji Barat.

Thus, this research is important to identify and formulate relevant, contextual, and realistic implementation strategies for the Merdeka Curriculum, so that it can support the improvement of education quality in Junior High Schools in the region. This research is expected to serve as a bridge to close the gap between the ideal concept of the Merdeka Curriculum as reflected in general studies and its implementation reality in the field, as well as to provide a foundation for more effective and sustainable educational policy-making and practices.

Research on the Strategy for Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum to Improve the Quality of Education at the Junior High School Level in Labuhan Haji Barat District has significant relevance both theoretically and practically. From a theoretical perspective, this research makes a significant contribution to the development of educational management studies and curriculum policy implementation, particularly regarding the strategic approaches used by schools to translate the Merdeka Curriculum into daily learning practices.

This is in line with the thoughts of Sulistyowati & Radiana (2024) who state that educational transformation not only requires a good curriculum on paper but also contextual, adaptive, and collaborative implementation strategies to meet real needs on the ground. In addition, this research also has high contextual relevance because it is focused on the Labuhan Haji Barat District, a semi-peripheral area that faces unique challenges compared to urban areas. The reality in this area includes limited supporting infrastructure, restricted access to teacher training, and a digital literacy gap. Therefore, this research is important to explore and formulate the implementation strategy of the Merdeka Curriculum that is suitable for local conditions. The findings of this research are expected not only to enrich the academic literature but also to serve as a model or example for regions with similar characteristics.

From a practical standpoint, this research also has significant benefits for school principals, teachers, and related parties in their efforts to improve the quality of education. Principals can gain a clearer picture of effective strategic steps to promote the success of the Merdeka Curriculum, such as through participatory planning, strengthening academic supervision, and developing a culture of collaboration in schools. For teachers, the results of

this research can serve as a reference in developing independent teaching modules, implementing differentiated learning, and integrating the Pancasila Student Profile project into more contextual learning. Thus, the strategies formulated through this research are expected to strengthen teachers' competencies and encourage more innovative teaching practices.

Furthermore, the relevance of this research is also evident in the context of policy. The research results can serve as input for the Education Office and local policymakers in designing more targeted and needs-based support, training, and supervision programs for schools. In line with the spirit of Merdeka Belajar, which emphasizes data-based policies and real needs on the ground, this research is very important to ensure that educational policies are implemented effectively down to the school level, not just stopping at the regulatory level.

This research is relevant and significant as an effort to bridge the gap between the ideal concept of the Merdeka Curriculum and its implementation reality, while also contributing to the improvement of education quality in Junior High Schools, particularly in the Labuhan Haji Barat District. The findings of this research are expected to serve as an important reference for education practitioners, researchers, and policymakers in strengthening the sustainable national education transformation.

Research on the implementation strategy of the Merdeka Curriculum for improving the quality of education at the Junior High School level in Labuhan Haji Barat District is based on several interrelated theories, namely the theory of educational strategic management, curriculum theory, and the theory of educational quality. This theoretical foundation serves as the basis for understanding how the planning, implementation, and evaluation of strategies can be carried out effectively to achieve the goal of improving the quality of education.

First, in the context of educational management, this research refers to strategic management theory, which emphasizes the importance of the process of formulating vision, mission, goals, internal strength and weakness analysis, as well as external opportunities and threats as the basis for strategy formulation. According to Aluf (2024), strategies in education are not merely technical steps, but must also include adjustments to real conditions, school characteristics, organizational culture, and the needs of students. Thus, the implementation strategy of the Merdeka Curriculum must be formulated in an adaptive, realistic, and contextual manner, in order to address specific challenges in areas such as Labuhan Haji Barat District.

Second, from the perspective of curriculum theory, this research is based on the idea that the curriculum is not just a formal document, but also a dynamic process that highly depends on its implementation at the educational unit level. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers are given the freedom to create independent teaching modules, implement differentiated learning, and apply formative assessments that meet the needs of students. This theory emphasizes that the success of the curriculum heavily depends on the competence of teachers, the leadership of the principal, and the culture of collaboration within the school environment. Therefore, effective implementation strategies are key to ensuring that the philosophy and principles of the Independent Curriculum can truly be translated into everyday learning practices.

Third, this research is also based on the theory of improving the quality of education, which states that the quality of education is not only measured through academic results but also through a quality learning process, character development of students, and the creation of a conducive learning environment. In this framework, the Merdeka Curriculum emerges as one of the efforts to transform the national education system to produce students who are not only cognitively intelligent but also possess character profiles in line with the values of Pancasila, think critically, creatively, and adaptively to changes. Therefore, the implementation strategy of the Merdeka Curriculum at the school level must include steps that support the achievement of those dimensions.

This research combines these three theoretical perspectives to formulate a framework for how the implementation strategy of the Merdeka Curriculum can be designed to align with the vision of improving the quality of education. In the context of Labuhan Haji Barat District,

strategic management theory helps map the conditions and potential of schools; curriculum theory provides guidance in designing innovative learning processes; while quality improvement theory ensures that all strategies formulated aim to enhance students' learning outcomes, character, and skills sustainably.

This theoretical foundation not only serves as a conceptual basis for the research but also as a practical guide for data analysis, strategy formulation, and the development of recommendations that align with the needs and realities of education at Junior High Schools in the Labuhan Haji Barat District.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study type, chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation strategies of the Merdeka Curriculum at the Junior High School (SMP) level in the Labuhan Haji Barat District. The qualitative approach is deemed appropriate because it allows researchers to comprehensively explore the dynamics of curriculum implementation, including supporting factors, obstacles, and strategies applied by the school. This case study is focused on real conditions in the field, so the research results are expected to depict the local context in a complete and detailed manner, as Creswell suggests that qualitative approaches are very effective for exploring complex and contextual educational phenomena.

The research respondents were determined using purposive sampling techniques, which involve deliberately selecting informants who are considered to have the best understanding of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in their schools. The respondents consist of school principals as strategic leaders and policymakers, teachers as direct implementers of the curriculum and developers of learning, school supervisors as parties who monitor and evaluate the implementation of the curriculum, and school committees or parent representatives who act as school partners. The selection of respondents with different backgrounds is carried out so that the data obtained is richer and encompasses various perspectives.

The main instrument of this research is the researcher themselves (human instrument), who plays a role from designing questions to analyzing data. As a supporting instrument, an in-depth interview guide was developed to explore information about curriculum implementation strategies, learning innovations, obstacles, and the expectations of stakeholders. In addition, observation guidelines were used to record learning activities, interactions between teachers and students, as well as the dynamics of collaboration among teachers. Documents such as school work programs, teaching modules, supervision reports, and teacher meeting notes were also reviewed through documentation study sheets. These instruments are designed based on educational management theory and the Merdeka Curriculum concept, making them relevant to the research focus.

The obtained data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification (Safrudin et al., 2023). The data reduction stage was carried out by selecting the most relevant data, such as important quotes from interviews or observation results that support the research theme. Next, the data is presented in the form of narratives, tables, and matrices to facilitate the researcher in understanding the relationships between the data. The final stage is the conclusion drawing, which is carried out iteratively, meaning that the data and analysis results are continuously reviewed to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the findings. Data triangulation, which involves comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documents, is also conducted to enhance the validity of the research findings.

As a follow-up step to strengthen the results, this research utilizes SWOT analysis to map the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats affecting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Labuhan Haji Barat District Junior High School. SWOT analysis began with the preparation of the IFAS (Internal Factor Analysis Summary) table to identify internal

Strategy for Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP in Labuhan Haji Barat

factors such as school principal leadership and teacher collaboration culture, as well as weaknesses like low digital literacy and limited facilities.

Next, the EFAS (External Factor Analysis Summary) table was prepared, which included opportunities such as training support from the Ministry of Education and Culture and collaboration with external parties, as well as threats like sudden regulatory changes and facility gaps between schools. From the results of the IFAS and EFAS, score calculations and strategy mapping into the SWOT matrix were conducted, resulting in SO, ST, WO, and WT strategies. These strategies were then analyzed to determine the implementation priorities that best align with the school's conditions.

This research method is designed to capture the reality of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in depth and comprehensively, so that the results not only describe the condition of the schools but also offer concrete strategies that are contextual, adaptive, and applicable to improve the quality of education, especially in semi-peripheral areas such as Labuhan Haji Barat District.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP in Labuhan Haji Barat

The results of this study provide an in-depth description of how the implementation strategy of the Merdeka Curriculum is applied in Junior High Schools (SMP) in the Labuhan Haji Barat District, along with supporting factors, obstacles, and improvement efforts undertaken. The qualitative research approach with a case study method allows the researcher to contextually understand the curriculum implementation process in those schools, based on data obtained through in-depth interviews, observations, and document studies. The collected data were then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model (data reduction, data display, and conclusion/verification) and reinforced with SWOT analysis techniques to formulate relevant strategies.

From the findings in the field, it appears that several schools in the Labuhan Haji Barat District have shown a strong initiative to implement the Merdeka Curriculum in accordance with the directives of the Ministry of Education and Culture. The strategies implemented include strengthening the leadership of school principals as instructional leaders, forming communities of teacher practitioners to develop teaching modules, utilizing the Merdeka Mengajar platform, and carrying out the Pancasila Student Profile project based on local wisdom, such as themes related to coastal environments and local culture. These steps are in line with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which provides space for freedom and independence for schools and teachers.

Nevertheless, the research also found several real obstacles, particularly the low digital literacy of some teachers, the limited infrastructure (such as internet networks and ICT devices), and the still considerable administrative burden. These factors pose significant challenges in the process of innovating differentiated learning and developing independent teaching modules. One teacher mentioned, "We are eager to try new approaches, but we often face obstacles when it comes to uploading materials or using applications." The findings indicate a gap between the enthusiasm for change at the policy level and the readiness of resources at the school level.

Strategy Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP in Labuhan Haji Barat

Next, a SWOT analysis is used to identify internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats). Below are the IFAS (Internal Factor Analysis Summary) table and the EFAS (External Factor Analysis Summary) table:

Table 1. Internal Factor Analysis Summary

No	Internal Factors	Weight	Rating	Score (Weight x Rating)
1	Visionary leadership of the principal	0.30	4	1.20
2	Established culture of teacher collaboration	0.25	4	1.00
3	Low level of teachers' digital literacy	0.25	2	0.50

Strategy for Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP in Labuhan Haji Barat

4	Limited facilities and infrastructure	0.20	2	0.40
Total		1.00		3.10

Table 2. External Factor Analysis Summary

No	External Factors	Weight	Rating	Score (Weight x Rating)
1	Support from policies and training by the Ministry of Education	0.35	4	1.40
2	Opportunities for collaboration with external parties	0.25	3	0.75
3	Sudden changes in regulations	0.25	2	0.50
4	Inequality of facilities among schools	0.15	2	0.30
Total		1.00		2.95

From the total IFAS score (3.10) and EFAS score (2.95), the school's strategic position is in Quadrant I of the SWOT matrix, indicating strong internal conditions and high external opportunities. This means the school is recommended to implement an aggressive strategy, which is to maximize strengths to seize existing opportunities. Next, the SWOT strategy matrix table (SO, ST, WO, WT) was obtained:

Table 3. SWOT Strategy (SO, ST, WO, WT)

	Opportunities	Threats
Strengths	SO Strategies: - Maximize the principal's leadership and the existing culture of teacher collaboration to leverage online training and digital learning resources.- Integrate Pancasila Student Profile projects with local themes to boost student interest.	ST Strategies: - Use the principal's visionary leadership to anticipate sudden regulatory changes.- Utilize the culture of teacher collaboration to help each other during times of limited facilities.
Weaknesses	WO Strategies: - Participate in online training to improve teachers' digital literacy.- Collaborate with external parties to obtain support for facilities.	WT Strategies: - Simplify administrative work and distribute tasks so teachers can focus more on teaching.- Develop alternative plans for schools facing facility constraints.

The Effectiveness of Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP in Labuhan Haji Barat

Strategic position graph (SWOT quadrant). X-axis: Strengths vs weaknesses (total IFAS). Y-axis: Opportunities vs threats (total EFAS). The school's position is in quadrant I → aggressive/progressive strategy. This graph can be made in a simple SWOT diagram:

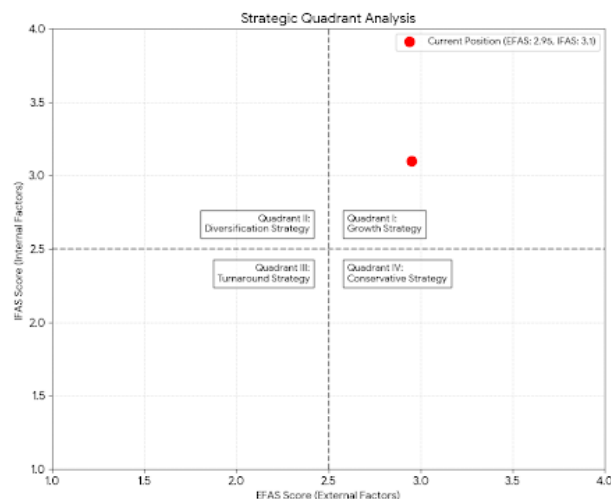


Figure 1. SWOT chart chart

The results of this study conclude that the implementation strategy of the Merdeka Curriculum, which is collaborative, adaptive, and context-based, can improve the quality of education at SMP Kecamatan Labuhan Haji Barat. This strategy will only be effective if supported by visionary school leadership, the enhancement of teachers' digital literacy, the utilization of online training, and the provision of adequate facilities and infrastructure. These findings also enrich previous studies by emphasizing the importance of internal synergy and external opportunities, especially in rural areas.

Discussion*Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP in Labuhan Haji Barat*

The research results show that the implementation strategy of the Merdeka Curriculum in Labuhan Haji Barat District Junior High Schools is dynamic with its own challenges and advantages. In general, schools in this region have been striving to implement the main principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, such as differentiated learning, the development of independent teaching modules, and character strengthening through the Pancasila Student Profile project (Susongko & Mulyono, 2025). However, the implementation in the field still faces various obstacles that reflect the gap between the ideal curriculum and the reality of the available resources (Nabila Prameswari & Nahartini, 2023). The leadership of the principal emerges as one of the key factors supporting implementation.

The principal plays an active role as an instructional leader, encouraging teachers to innovate, facilitating internal training, and creating a constructive culture of collaboration among teachers. This aligns with the opinion of Susongko & Mulyono (2025) who emphasize the importance of learning leadership as a significant factor in curriculum reform. Through academic supervision and coaching, the principal helps teachers understand the philosophy of the Merdeka Curriculum and how to implement it gradually (Nasukha, 2025).

The formation of practitioner communities in schools has emerged as another effective strategy. Teachers regularly discuss to develop teaching modules, design assessments, and share differentiated teaching experiences. These findings align with the theory of communities of practice explained by Nasukha (2025), that collaboration among teachers encourages continuous professional learning. The existence of discussion spaces makes teachers more confident and able to adjust the material to meet students' needs.

On the other hand, the limited digital literacy of teachers and inadequate infrastructure still pose significant weaknesses (Miswardi et al., 2024). This challenge is particularly evident in schools with limited internet access or lacking adequate supporting devices. This constraint affects the use of the Merdeka Mengajar platform and the utilization of online learning resources, which are actually one of the key points in supporting differentiated learning. As one teacher mentioned in an interview, "We want to use a lot of digital content, but the network often doesn't support it."

Strategy Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP in Labuhan Haji Barat

From the SWOT analysis, the most potential strategy to be developed is the SO strategy, which is to maximize internal strengths – such as the principal's leadership and the culture of teacher collaboration – to capture external opportunities, such as online training from the Ministry of Education and Culture and the teacher competency strengthening program. This strategy is relevant because, on one hand, the school already has a strong culture of cooperation, while on the other hand, the opportunities for online capacity building for teachers are increasingly available. The ST strategy is also important, namely using visionary leadership to anticipate regulatory changes and policy uncertainties. Meanwhile, the WO and WT strategies focus more on efforts to minimize weaknesses, such as improving teachers' digital literacy and developing alternative plans in schools with limited facilities.

The Effectiveness of Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP in Labuhan Haji Barat

The results of this study also reinforce previous findings, such as the research by Rosalinda et al. (2025), which states that the success of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum is greatly influenced by the readiness of human resources and school management support. These findings also fill the gap in previous research by focusing on the context of isolated areas such as Labuhan Haji Barat District, which has different characteristics and challenges compared to schools in urban areas.

This discussion shows that although the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is not yet perfect, contextual, collaborative, and responsive strategies to school conditions have proven to help improve the quality of education. Teachers become more reflective, students more active, and schools more open in responding to the challenges of change. With the strengthening of digital literacy, the improvement of facilities, and the support of sustainable policies, this strategy is expected to further optimize the quality of education in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the comprehensive research findings, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Junior High Schools within Labuhan Haji Barat District demonstrates a promising yet challenging educational transformation journey. The study reveals that while schools have successfully adopted collaborative and contextual strategies—including strengthening instructional leadership, building teacher practitioner communities, integrating digital resources, and developing locally-relevant Pancasila Student Profile projects—significant obstacles persist, particularly regarding teacher digital literacy, infrastructure limitations, and varying levels of curriculum comprehension. The SWOT analysis emphasizes that maximizing internal strengths to capture external opportunities represents the most viable approach, supported by adaptive strategies that address both challenges and limitations. Ultimately, this research underscores that successful Merdeka Curriculum implementation requires a holistic approach combining strong leadership, collaborative culture, contextual adaptation, and continuous professional development, thereby offering valuable insights not only for educational quality improvement in remote areas but also serving as a practical framework for policymakers and educators nationwide in their efforts to achieve educational equity and excellence across Indonesia's diverse educational landscape.

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