

Collaborative Leadership and Curriculum Reform: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka*

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Article Information

Received: October 10, 2025
Revised: November 11, 2025
Accepted: November 27, 2025
Online: December 15, 2025

Keywords

Kurikulum Merdeka
Curriculum Implementation
Collaboration
Project-Based Learning
Educational Leadership

ABSTRACT

Curriculum reform in Indonesia through the Kurikulum Merdeka aims to create more flexible, contextual, and student-centered learning. However, the implementation process at the school level remains challenging, especially in non-pilot institutions with limited resources. This study explored how the Kurikulum Merdeka was implemented at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha, focusing on four key dimensions: curriculum planning, coordination, instructional practices, and evaluation. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving 12 participants consisting of the principal, teachers, administrative staff, and students. The findings reveal that curriculum planning was conducted collaboratively but remained adaptive rather than innovative, as teachers still relied on government templates. Coordination and collaboration were supported by strong principal leadership and professional learning communities, though participation levels varied across departments. Instructional implementation demonstrated a gradual shift toward project-based and differentiated learning, despite limited facilities and uneven teacher readiness. Evaluation practices emphasized holistic assessment, integrating academic, character, and social aspects aligned with the Profil Pelajar Pancasila. Overall, the study concludes that successful curriculum implementation depends not only on policy clarity but also on local school ecosystems that nurture teacher collaboration, leadership, and continuous learning. The findings suggest that ongoing professional development, reflective practice, and adequate institutional support are critical to realizing the goals of the Kurikulum Merdeka in diverse educational contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Educational transformation has become a global priority as countries adapt their curriculum policies to respond to rapid social, technological, and economic changes. Contemporary curriculum reforms emphasize flexibility, competence mastery, and the development of 21st-century skills to ensure that learners can thrive in increasingly complex environments (González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022; Taliak et al., 2022). In Indonesia, one of the most significant shifts in education policy in

recent years is the introduction of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, a curriculum designed to promote learner autonomy, differentiated instruction, and character development through the Profil Pelajar Pancasila framework (Kristiyuana et al., 2025; Zulaiha, 2025). This policy reflects a broader movement toward competence-based and project-based learning models that prioritize depth over breadth and encourage meaningful learning experiences (Hakim et al., 2024; Purwanti et al., 2025).

Following the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indonesian government identified substantial learning loss and unequal access to quality learning across regions (Ssenyonga, 2021; Widiastuti, 2025). As a response, the *Kurikulum Merdeka* was introduced as a flexible policy that allows schools to adapt instructional design, learning materials, and assessment approaches according to local contexts (Irsyad et al., 2024; Rahmia et al., 2025). Through the *Capaian Pembelajaran*, project-based learning, and differentiated instruction, the curriculum aims to strengthen student engagement and promote holistic competencies (Fajrina et al., 2024; Kristiyuana et al., 2025). At the secondary school level, these principles are expected to enhance students' critical thinking, creativity, and independence, skills essential for meeting contemporary societal demands (Pratiwi et al., 2025; Zainuddin et al., 2025).

Although the curriculum provides greater autonomy, its implementation in schools remains challenging. Previous studies have shown that teachers often struggle to interpret and operationalize new curriculum components such as project-based learning, differentiation strategies, and formative assessment (Bielik et al., 2022; Zainuddin et al., 2025). Research conducted in elementary schools indicates that many teachers still depend heavily on government-issued teaching modules, demonstrating limited capacity in designing innovative learning experiences (Aliyyah et al., 2023; Fatimah et al., 2024). Other studies note that infrastructure limitations, inadequate technological support, and resistance to pedagogical change impede effective implementation (Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025; Singun, 2025). These findings highlight structural and pedagogical issues that hinder the realization of *Kurikulum Merdeka's* goals.

However, current research remains concentrated on elementary schools and schools designated as *Sekolah Penggerak*. Empirical studies focusing on ordinary junior high schools (*SMP non-penggerak*), particularly those located in semi-rural or resource-limited regions are still scarce. The implementation dynamics in these contexts may differ substantially due to variation in teacher readiness, school management practices, and local educational ecosystems. Despite the importance of understanding curriculum implementation across diverse settings, very few studies have provided an in-depth phenomenological analysis of how teachers, principals, and students experience the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at the junior secondary level.

This gap is significant because the success of curriculum reform depends not only on policy design but also on how education stakeholders interpret, negotiate, and internalize its principles within their everyday practices. Junior secondary schools occupy a critical position in shaping foundational competencies and learner identities. Therefore, investigating how curriculum implementation unfolds in these schools is essential for evaluating the curriculum's feasibility, identifying challenges, and formulating context-sensitive strategies for improvement.

SMP Negeri 1 Nuha in East Luwu Regency represents a relevant case for examining these issues. As a public school located outside major urban centers, it faces typical challenges associated with teacher readiness, limited technological facilities, and shifting pedagogical orientations. At the same time, the school is required to align its instructional practices with the key principles of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, including project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and strengthened character development. Understanding how these components are planned, coordinated, implemented, and evaluated at the school level provides important insights into the curriculum's practical realities.

Therefore, this study explores the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha by analyzing four key dimensions: curriculum planning, coordination mechanisms, instructional practices, and evaluation strategies. Using a phenomenological approach, this research captures the lived experiences of principals, teachers, administrative staff, and students in interpreting and applying the curriculum. The study aims to fill the empirical gap in junior secondary school contexts and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of curriculum implementation in non-pilot schools.

This study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it expands existing literature by presenting contextualized evidence from a junior high school setting that has received

limited attention in previous studies. Practically, the findings may assist schools, policymakers, and teacher development programs in identifying challenges and designing targeted interventions to strengthen the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach ([Pilarska, 2021](#)) to explore the lived experiences of education stakeholders in implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha. Phenomenology was chosen because it allows researchers to capture participants' subjective perceptions, meanings, and interpretations of curriculum implementation practices within their real-life contexts. This approach is appropriate for understanding complex social processes such as curriculum enactment, which involves personal judgments, institutional dynamics, and contextual constraints.

Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha, a public junior secondary school located in East Luwu Regency, Indonesia. The school was selected purposively due to its relevance as a non-pilot institution that has recently adopted the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, making it an appropriate setting for examining curriculum implementation in a real, non-laboratory context. As a semi-rural school with diverse student backgrounds and varying levels of teacher readiness, SMP Negeri 1 Nuha provides a representative picture of the challenges and opportunities faced by many Indonesian schools undergoing curriculum reform.

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling ([Douglas, 2022](#)) to ensure the inclusion of individuals who possess substantial knowledge and direct experience with the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. A total of twelve participants were involved, consisting of the school principal, six teachers from different subject areas, two administrative staff members, and three students. This composition allowed for a comprehensive understanding of curriculum implementation processes, as each group plays a distinct role within the school's instructional and managerial ecosystem. The principal contributed insights into policy interpretation, planning, and coordination; teachers provided detailed accounts of classroom practices and instructional challenges; administrative staff offered perspectives on institutional support systems; while students shared their lived experiences and responses to the new learning approaches. The involvement of these varied stakeholders enriched the data and enabled the study to capture the multidimensional nature of curriculum implementation at the school.

Data Collection Procedures

Data for this study were collected through three complementary techniques: in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis ([Miles et al., 2014](#)). Semi-structured interviews served as the primary technique, allowing the researcher to explore participants' experiences, interpretations, and challenges in implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Interview guides were developed based on the four focal dimensions of curriculum implementation, planning, coordination, instructional practices, and evaluation while still providing flexibility for participants to elaborate on issues they considered important. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy during transcription and analysis.

In addition to interviews, non-participant classroom observations were conducted to examine how the principles of *Kurikulum Merdeka* were applied in actual teaching practices. Observations focused on teacher-student interactions, learning activities, instructional strategies, the use of teaching media, and the alignment between planned instructional materials and real-time implementation. These observations provided contextual depth and enabled the researcher to verify whether pedagogical practices reflected the curriculum's emphasis on project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and formative assessment.

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, document analysis was also undertaken. Relevant documents, including lesson plans, learning modules, project guidelines, assessment records, and school policy documents were reviewed to gain insight into how curriculum planning and evaluation processes

were formally structured at the school. Document analysis helped triangulate data obtained from interviews and observations, ensuring that the interpretation of curriculum implementation was comprehensive and grounded in multiple sources of evidence. The integration of these three methods allowed for a more holistic and reliable understanding of how the *Kurikulum Merdeka* was enacted at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha.

Data Analysis

The data collected from interviews, observations, and documents were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. The analysis followed the systematic steps proposed by (Braun & Clarke, 2021), beginning with repeated reading of interview transcripts and observation notes to achieve deep familiarization with the data. During this stage, the researcher noted preliminary ideas and significant statements that appeared relevant to the study focus. This was followed by the process of generating initial codes, in which meaningful units of information were highlighted and categorized based on their relevance to curriculum planning, coordination, instructional practices, and evaluation.

After coding, the researcher searched for broader themes by clustering related codes into coherent categories that captured the essence of participants' experiences. These themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure internal consistency and clear distinctions among categories. Attention was given to ensuring that each theme was grounded in participant narratives and supported by observational and documentary evidence. Once finalized, each theme was defined, named, and organized into an interpretive framework that addressed the study's research questions. The final stage involved synthesizing the themes into a narrative that integrated the perspectives of principals, teachers, staff, and students, thereby presenting a holistic depiction of curriculum implementation at the research site. Throughout the process, the researcher maintained reflexive awareness to minimize bias and ensure that interpretations remained faithful to the participants' lived experiences.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor and credibility of the qualitative findings, this study employed four trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation by integrating data from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, as well as source triangulation involving principals, teachers, administrative staff, and students. Member checking was conducted with selected participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations and ensure that the findings genuinely reflected their experiences. Transferability was enhanced by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and school conditions, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar educational settings.

Dependability was ensured by documenting each step of the research process systematically, including interview protocols, observation guidelines, and analytic procedures, so that the study could be replicated or audited by other researchers. To establish confirmability, the researcher maintained reflexive notes and an audit trail throughout data collection and analysis to minimize personal bias and ensure that interpretations were grounded in participants' narratives rather than researcher assumptions. Together, these strategies reinforced the trustworthiness of the study and supported the validity of its findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institution overseeing the research. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing participants' names and roles in all reports and publications. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence.

RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal that the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha was characterized by an adaptive and collaborative process involving multiple stakeholders. The data were organized into four major themes that reflect the stages of curriculum enactment: curriculum

planning, coordination mechanisms, instructional implementation, and evaluation practices. Overall, while the school demonstrated significant efforts to apply the new curriculum, the process was constrained by limited facilities and varying levels of teacher readiness.

Curriculum Planning

The planning stage of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha focused on developing essential learning documents such as the *Capaian Pembelajaran* (Learning Outcomes), *Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran* (Learning Objective Sequences), and project-based learning modules. Teachers collaboratively designed learning activities that aligned with the objectives of the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*. The school principal played a central role in guiding the formulation of school-based curriculum documents while ensuring they were adjusted to the school's context and resources. As stated by the school principal, Erniwati:

"We understand that this curriculum change brings new challenges for teachers, especially in designing teaching modules and applying project-based learning. Therefore, we continuously encourage teachers to share ideas and best practices through internal learning communities. Through these communities, teachers can support one another, exchange experiences, and develop creativity in teaching."

This statement illustrates the collaborative and adaptive efforts undertaken during the curriculum planning stage. The principal emphasized collective professional learning as a foundation for capacity building. Administrative support also played an important role in managing the technical and organizational aspects of curriculum planning. According to Irsan, an administrative staff member:

"Administrative support for planning these projects is very important, especially in managing schedules and allocating resources."

This underscores that successful curriculum planning depends not only on pedagogical readiness but also on effective institutional coordination. Moreover, teachers highlighted that collaboration with colleagues helped them gain confidence and creativity in planning lessons under the new curriculum. As expressed by Nuriani, a teacher of Islamic Education and Character Education:

"We feel more confident because we can discuss the difficulties we face and receive feedback from our colleagues. Sometimes, we also get new ideas that can be directly implemented in the classroom. This collaboration has truly become an effective solution to overcome existing obstacles."

These excerpts reveal that the curriculum planning process at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha was built upon teamwork, reflection, and mutual learning. Although teachers still faced limitations such as inadequate facilities and varying levels of readiness to design project-based modules, their collective efforts and continuous learning culture enabled them to adapt progressively to the demands of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

Coordination and Collaboration

The coordination of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha was carried out through collaborative mechanisms that involved the principal, teachers, administrative staff, and the local community. The principal played a central role as a leader who ensured that the school's vision was reflected in every stage of curriculum implementation. Coordination extended beyond internal structures to include cooperation with the local education office and community organizations, particularly in supporting environmental and cultural projects. Open communication and collective decision-making became essential for ensuring effective coordination. As stated by the principal, Erniwati:

"Good coordination is the key so that the Kurikulum Merdeka does not remain just a formal policy but truly operates in daily practice."

This perspective highlights the principal's understanding of coordination as an ongoing process that requires active engagement and clear communication among all school members. Teachers were also actively involved in professional learning communities that functioned as forums for sharing experiences, discussing challenges, and identifying collective solutions. One teacher described:

“Regular discussions help us find the best ways to overcome obstacles in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka. In this forum, teachers share experiences about classroom challenges, such as limited facilities, difficulty designing teaching modules, or the need to adapt learning to students’ characteristics. From these discussions, creative ideas often emerge, such as using local materials for environmental projects or simple technology to support digital learning. In addition, these discussions are also a place for emotional and professional support, so teachers feel that they are not alone in facing challenges.”

This testimony demonstrates that teacher collaboration and peer support played crucial roles in sustaining motivation and innovation. Another dimension of coordination involved partnerships with external stakeholders. The school regularly collaborated with the local education office and community groups to integrate local culture and environmental awareness into project-based learning. These partnerships strengthened the implementation of the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* and allowed students to experience authentic learning connected to their surroundings. Despite these positive efforts, several challenges persisted, such as the limited availability of learning resources and varying levels of teachers’ understanding of the new curriculum. As one teacher explained:

“Although the training helped us understand the basic concepts of the curriculum, we still face challenges in preparing teaching modules that truly suit the students’ needs.”

This indicates that continuous professional development and stronger resource support are still necessary to enhance coordination and ensure consistent understanding among teachers. In summary, coordination and collaboration at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha reflected a strong collective spirit and shared commitment to realizing the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. However, sustaining this coordination required ongoing leadership, structured mentoring, and institutional support to address capacity gaps and maintain implementation consistency across all levels of the school.

Instructional Implementation

The implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha reflected a significant pedagogical shift from traditional teacher-centered methods toward more student-centered learning approaches. The instructional process emphasized project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and the integration of the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* values into daily classroom activities. Based on classroom observations, students were actively engaged in thematic projects such as tree planting, traditional art creation, and environmental campaigns. These projects did not only develop students’ critical and creative thinking but also fostered collaboration and social responsibility. As one teacher described:

“The environmental-based projects that we carried out not only teach skills but also build students’ awareness of the importance of protecting their environment.”

This statement illustrates how teachers integrated local and ecological contexts into lessons, transforming classrooms into spaces for experiential and value-oriented learning. Differentiated instruction was also applied to accommodate the diverse abilities and learning needs of students. Teachers assessed students’ initial understanding and grouped them according to their competency levels. As one teacher explained:

“We try to understand students’ learning needs through initial assessments and then group them based on their level of understanding of the material.”

This approach enabled teachers to provide learning tasks that were tailored to students' readiness levels, thus optimizing engagement and learning outcomes. Observation data confirmed that differentiated learning fostered more inclusive participation, especially among students who were previously hesitant to speak or participate in discussions. Despite these pedagogical innovations, limited technological resources remained a challenge. According to Sukman, an ICT teacher:

"We often use simple tools or manual media because of the limited technology at school. We also hold small workshops to design and develop project-based teaching modules. From these learning communities, we managed to create several collaborative projects, such as school greening activities using organic waste as fertilizer. We also use simple technology, like free applications, to support digital learning."

This excerpt highlights how teachers demonstrated creativity and adaptability in managing resource limitations. Rather than viewing constraints as barriers, they used them as opportunities for contextual innovation and collaborative problem-solving. Overall, instructional implementation at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha demonstrates that teachers were progressively internalizing the core philosophy of the Kurikulum Merdeka. Although the transition to student-centered learning was gradual and occasionally hindered by limited resources, the collective effort among teachers, students, and school leaders fostered a dynamic learning environment that supported both academic and character development.

Evaluation and Assessment

The evaluation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* implementation at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha was carried out systematically to ensure that the learning process aligned with the intended objectives and contributed to continuous improvement. The evaluation covered several dimensions, including teaching effectiveness, the development of the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5) values, teacher performance, student participation, and the adequacy of learning facilities. The process involved collaboration among teachers, the principal, students, and the local education office, and was conducted through formative and summative assessments, reflective meetings, and project reviews. The school principal explained:

"We do not only assess students' academic achievement, but also how they can demonstrate character and skills aligned with the values of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila."

This statement highlights the school's holistic approach to evaluation, which extends beyond cognitive outcomes to encompass affective and psychomotor domains. The principal emphasized that assessment must serve as a tool for character formation, not merely as a measure of academic competence. Teachers also shared that project-based assessments had increased students' engagement and motivation to learn. One teacher stated:

"This project has succeeded in building students' self-confidence and increasing their participation in community activities."

This finding illustrates how evaluation practices under the *Kurikulum Merdeka* integrate experiential learning with community involvement, creating authentic learning experiences that shape students' personal and social development. The evaluation process also included regular reflection meetings among teachers, the principal, and administrative staff. According to Hapsiah, the vice principal for student affairs:

"Routine evaluation helps us understand what has worked well and what needs improvement, especially in preparing teaching modules and managing time for projects."

This reflects the school's commitment to continuous professional reflection and collaborative problem-solving as part of its evaluation culture. Through these sessions, teachers identified specific areas that required attention, such as time management, the alignment of projects with learning outcomes, and the need for ongoing professional training. Furthermore, infrastructure evaluation

revealed that limited access to technological tools and teaching materials continued to hinder optimal curriculum implementation. The principal acknowledged this issue, stating:

“We need to improve facilities to provide students with a more meaningful learning experience.”

This statement underscores the interdependence between pedagogical quality and resource availability. The school recognized that adequate infrastructure is a prerequisite for sustaining high-quality project-based and differentiated learning. In summary, evaluation and assessment under the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha were characterized by a comprehensive and reflective process. The school implemented multiple assessment types, formative, summative, and project-based supported by structured supervision and collaborative reflection. Although challenges persisted in resource provision and teachers' technical skills, the ongoing evaluation culture significantly contributed to improving teaching quality and student learning outcomes, aligning with the broader goals of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

DISCUSSION

Curriculum Planning

The findings indicate that curriculum planning for the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha was primarily adaptive, emphasizing collaboration among teachers and school leaders. Teachers relied on templates and guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education while gradually contextualizing them to local conditions. This aligns with who found that teachers often face difficulties designing innovative learning plans due to limited training and understanding of project-based and differentiated instruction ([Cahyono et al., 2024](#); [Fajrina et al., 2024](#)). The collaborative process at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha demonstrates a pragmatic approach, balancing compliance with creativity within the school's capacity.

The principal's role in fostering teamwork through internal learning communities reflects concept of educational change, which highlights collaboration as a driver of reform sustainability ([Fullan, 2020](#)). Teachers' mutual support, as described by Nuriani in the interviews, illustrates how professional learning communities help overcome uncertainty and enhance teacher confidence, similar to findings by ([Levy et al., 2022](#)). Furthermore, administrative involvement in scheduling and resource management, as mentioned by Irsan, underscores that effective curriculum planning also depends on institutional coordination ([Prøitz, 2023](#)).

Despite these strengths, the planning process remains constrained by teachers' dependence on government modules and limited pedagogical innovation. This echoes relevant research conclusion that reforms often stagnate when curriculum planning remains procedural rather than transformative ([Kandiko Howson & Kingsbury, 2023](#); [Sholeh et al., 2023](#)). Thus, while collaboration and leadership support have laid a strong foundation, continuous professional development and mentoring are essential to help teachers design creative, contextual, and learner-centered learning plans that truly embody the spirit of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

Coordination and Collaboration

The study revealed that coordination in implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha relied heavily on the principal's leadership and the collective engagement of teachers. Regular meetings, cross-departmental collaboration, and communication with the local education office fostered a shared understanding of curriculum goals. This finding aligns with theory of change, which emphasizes the importance of relational trust and shared vision in sustaining school reform ([Fullan, 2020](#)). Similar results were also reported by research who found that strong coordination structures facilitate consistency and commitment in curriculum implementation, particularly in schools with diverse teacher readiness levels ([Wang et al., 2023](#); [Wulandari et al., 2024](#)).

Teachers' participation in professional learning communities (PLCs) became a central mechanism for sharing challenges and solutions. This practice reflects collaborative professionalism theory, in which teachers co-construct knowledge through dialogue and joint reflection ([Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018](#)). As shown in the interviews, regular discussions helped teachers develop creative strategies despite limited facilities, a pattern also observed by research who argue that peer collaboration strengthens teacher motivation and adaptability during curriculum reform ([Abbaspour et al., 2024](#);

[Nguyen & Ng, 2020](#)). The school's engagement with the local community in project-based learning activities further illustrates the integration of social learning and civic engagement, supporting the holistic goals of the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*.

However, coordination still depended largely on the principal's initiative, and teacher participation varied across departments. This partial dependence mirrors findings by research who note that distributed leadership is often uneven in early stages of educational reform. Strengthening shared leadership and institutionalized collaboration structures remains essential to sustain implementation ([Liu et al., 2020](#); [Traver-Martí et al., 2021](#)). Therefore, developing continuous mentoring systems and decentralized decision-making can help schools like SMP Negeri 1 Nuha move from compliance-driven coordination toward a culture of collective responsibility and professional autonomy in realizing the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

Instructional Implementation

The findings show that instructional practices at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha reflected a gradual transition from teacher-centered to student-centered learning in line with the principles of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Teachers began to integrate project-based and differentiated instruction, although implementation varied depending on their readiness and available resources. This shift supports the pedagogical transformation envisioned by the Ministry of Education, emphasizing active learning and contextual engagement. Similar transitions have been observed in other Indonesian schools where teachers adopt flexible learning designs to enhance student engagement ([Pramesworo et al., 2023](#); [Ruswandi et al., 2025](#)).

Teachers' efforts to apply project-based learning resonate with Dewey's experiential learning theory and the constructivist paradigm, where students learn through real-world experiences and collaboration. The environmental and cultural projects described by participants exemplify how contextual learning promotes critical thinking and social awareness, findings consistent with research who reported that project-based learning strengthens creativity and character education ([Gianistika, 2022](#); [Madania & Universitas, 2025](#)). Differentiated instruction, as practiced through grouping based on students' readiness, reflects model of inclusive pedagogy, enabling equitable learning opportunities across varied competence levels ([Tomlinson, 2017](#)).

Despite these advances, challenges such as limited facilities and inconsistent teacher confidence remain barriers to optimal implementation. As noted by Sukman, teachers frequently relied on simple tools and free applications to facilitate digital learning. This adaptive behavior aligns with the concept of *teacher resilience* discussed by ([Day & Gu, 2013](#)), emphasizing teachers' capacity to sustain innovation despite resource constraints. Therefore, continuous professional training, peer mentoring, and technological support are crucial to deepen teachers' understanding of learner-centered pedagogies and ensure sustainable implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

Evaluation and Assessment

The findings show that evaluation practices at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha have shifted toward a more holistic model that combines formative, summative, and project-based assessments. This approach aligns with the philosophy of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes the development of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains as reflected in the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*. Teachers assessed not only students' academic performance but also their character and creativity, consistent with current trends in competency-based assessment ([Rogers, 2022](#); [Tarmo & Kimaro, 2021](#)). The principal's emphasis on evaluating students' behavior and participation supports the idea that assessment should serve as a process for character building rather than merely measuring achievement.

The integration of project-based assessment also strengthened students' engagement and motivation, as teachers reported increased participation and confidence during community-related projects. This is consistent with findings from research which show that authentic and performance-based assessments foster deeper learning and intrinsic motivation ([Lim, 2024](#); [Yaghoubi et al., 2025](#)). Reflective meetings among teachers further demonstrated a commitment to continuous improvement, aligning with the principle of assessment as learning, where feedback becomes part of the learning cycle ([Moura et al., 2021](#)). These collaborative evaluations promoted professional dialogue and helped teachers adjust instructional strategies based on real-time learning outcomes.

Nevertheless, inconsistencies in applying assessment criteria and the lack of adequate facilities remain challenges. Teachers expressed the need for clearer rubrics and technical guidance to implement assessments effectively, a concern echoed by research who argue that teacher assessment literacy remains uneven in the early stages of curriculum reform (Mirsanjari, 2025; Quainoo et al., 2025). Therefore, ongoing professional development, capacity building, and digital support systems are crucial to strengthen assessment practices. Establishing a culture of reflective evaluation will ensure that assessment in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* not only measures learning outcomes but also drives meaningful pedagogical transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at SMP Negeri 1 Nuha reflects a gradual but positive transformation toward a more flexible and student-centered education system. The process of curriculum planning, coordination, instruction, and evaluation showed that teachers and school leaders are beginning to internalize the values of autonomy, collaboration, and contextual learning promoted by the reform. Although challenges such as limited facilities and uneven teacher readiness persist, the school community has demonstrated strong commitment and adaptability in interpreting and applying the new curriculum framework.

The findings imply that the effectiveness of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* depends on continuous professional development, supportive leadership, and the creation of collaborative learning environments within schools. Strengthening teachers' pedagogical competence and assessment literacy is essential to ensure that the curriculum's goals are translated into meaningful classroom practices. Institutional support, including adequate infrastructure and time allocation for reflective collaboration, will further enhance the quality and sustainability of curriculum implementation.

Theoretically, this study provides insight into how curriculum reform functions as a social process shaped by collaboration, leadership, and contextual adaptation. Practically, the study offers valuable input for policymakers and educational practitioners to design targeted interventions, particularly in schools outside major urban centers. Future research is encouraged to conduct comparative or longitudinal studies to explore how these patterns evolve across different regions and school types, contributing to a deeper understanding of curriculum reform in diverse educational contexts.

Funding and Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no funding and conflicts of interest for this research.

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