English Teachers' Perceptions and Challenges in Implementing *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Rural Schools: A Conceptual Analysis

Panji Abdillah, Sri Wahyuni
English Education Study Program, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang
apanji@students.unnes.ac.id
DOI: https://doi.org/10.15294/eltlt.v1i1.291
QRCBN 62-6861-2530-756

ABSTRACT
The *Kurikulum Merdeka* or Emancipated Curriculum represents a major educational reform in Indonesia, fostering resilience in the learning process using student-centred learning methods. However, implementing this new curriculum in rural areas encounters various challenges. This conceptual analysis examines English teachers' perspectives and challenges in rural areas as they implement this new curriculum. Drawing on previous research findings, this study highlights teachers' support for the curriculum goals, such as fostering students' independence, critical thinking, and learning flexibility. While also identifying systematic barriers, such as inadequate infrastructures, professional training, and student readiness. The findings underscore the vital role of teacher agency in adapting curriculum to the local contexts, along with the need for circumstantial support systems. Recommendations included professional training enhancement, infrastructure equalization, local community engagement development, and ensuring that policymakers help bridge the gap between the curriculum vision and the reality faced in rural areas.

Keywords: *Emancipated Curriculum, rural education, teacher perceptions, curriculum implementation, ELT*

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* or Emancipated Curriculum is the most significant change in Indonesia's education system in recent years. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology launched this reform intending to free the teachers and schools through competency-based learning, curriculum flexibility, and student-centred learning (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). The Emancipated Curriculum emphasises local implementation while responding to global changes in education, as part of a vast curriculum reform process to meet the necessities of the 21st century (Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Schleicher, 2018).

However, it is not very easy to implement these revolutionary changes in rural villages. The already wide disparities between rural and urban schools are widened further by geographical remoteness, inadequate infrastructure, and disparate professional development levels (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017; UNESCO, 2018). These systemic issues impact teachers' comprehension and application of reforms, particularly language teachers who must contend with pedagogical shifts and sociolinguistic limitations (Richards & Rodgers, 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

English language instruction is strategically significant in Indonesia. English is positioned as a tool for global engagement as a foreign language, but the success of its teaching often depends on teachers' resources, confidence, and professional skills. These elements interact with institutional, cultural, and financial constraints in rural areas. Teachers in such regions still need to implement national reforms without adequate contextual support, so their perspectives and experiences are essential for understanding the actual impact of reforms (Hidayah et al., 2022; Fatmasari, 2024).

While national policy points in a general direction, teachers' voices are underrepresented in academic work, especially from resource-poor districts. Moreover, the above-referenced studies have reported teachers' diverse reactions to curriculum change, i.e., their agency, resistance, and coping strategies. (Kelchtermans, 2009; Priestley et al., 2015). Few, however, have particularly addressed rural English teachers'

experiences with the Emancipated Curriculum.

This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining how rural English teachers view and respond to the implementation of the Emancipated Curriculum. The research seeks to contribute rich data to ongoing debates about educational equity, curriculum reform, and teacher autonomy in Indonesia by investigating their views and issues at stake.

Literature Review

1. Curriculum Change and Educational Reform

Curriculum reform is a continuous issue within international education, and it is often shaped by changes in society and the economy, emerging technology, and emerging pedagogies (Fullan, 2007; Schwab, 2016). The *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Indonesia represents a shift from centralised, content-oriented instruction to a more decentralised, student-centred methodology (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). This reform grants increased autonomy to schools and teachers in developing curricula that address local needs, diminishing reliance on inflexible, uniform approaches.

The policy change corresponds with global demands for developing 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). The relevance of these competencies is heightened in a rapidly evolving global economy, where adaptability and lifelong learning are essential (Schleicher, 2018). Translating high-level policy goals into classroom practice presents a significant challenge, especially for teachers in resource-limited environments.

2. The Role of Teachers in Curriculum Implementation

Teachers are not passive recipients of educational reform but actors who, according to their beliefs, experience, and context, construct the realisation of reforms (Priestley et al., 2015). As Kelchtermans (2009) contends, a teacher's identity, which encompasses their values and previous experiences, lies at the heart of understanding and performing new curriculum standards. This perspective rejects top-down approaches to reform based on blanket adoption as an assumption and highlights the situatedness of educational change.

Indonesian studies have shown that while most teachers

appreciate the Kurikulum Merdeka's flexibility, they remain uncertain about how it will be implemented (Jasrial et al., 2023; Bahri & Daulay, 2024). Teachers must reconcile emerging expectations like project-based learning and differentiation with constraints like high teacher-to-pupil ratios, rigid examination regimes, and insufficient training.

3. English Language Teaching in Rural Indonesia

English is a required foreign language in Indonesian schools, although the conditions for teaching it are very different in cities and the country. Teachers in rural areas typically have problems such as not having enough access to professional development, not having enough access to new resources, and not having enough chances to work with other teachers (Wang et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2018). It is tough to implement new ideas in these situations, like the Emancipated Curriculum.

Empirical research indicates that English teachers in rural schools may find it challenging to practice student-centred approaches as they receive little access to the pedagogic practice required or fail to receive support from their institutions (Fatmasari, 2024; Masyithah et al., 2024). Moreover, the digital literacy and internet accessibility gap also inhibits the employment of modern, technology-inclined learning practices (Yunitasari et al., 2023). These factors make a critical understanding of how rural English teachers interpret and react to curriculum change in their immediate contexts inevitable.

4. Teachers' Perceptions of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*

The literature is growing and has begun investigating Indonesian teachers' perceptions of the Emancipated Curriculum. The evidence shows varying opinions, from optimism towards its actualisation to scepticism regarding its implementation (Maulidin, 2023; Lestari et al., 2024). For example, Wardani et al. (2024) state that some teachers perceive the curriculum as freedom-giving, citing more autonomy and freedom in planning lessons. Some teachers have raised concerns about unclear instructions, poor training, and workload overloading.

Similarly, Syofyan et al. (2024) point to teacher preparedness as a factor in successful implementation. Their

work cites mindset, pedagogical capital, and institutional support as critical to teachers' curriculum adoption. Without proper preparation and ongoing professional development, reforms may be enacted in tongue but not in substance, not achieving the far-reaching pedagogical transformation policymakers dream about.

5. Challenges Specific to Rural Implementation

International and local studies report on the challenges of implementing education reforms in rural schools. These range from logistical issues, such as transport and communication difficulties, to socio-economic issues, such as poverty and low parental education levels, to professional ones, such as isolation and lack of mentorship (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017; Rasmin & Isma, 2024).

In rural districts, the generic constraints are exacerbated by individual institutional and cultural circumstances. Teachers have to cater to several grades with minimal bureaucratic support, which makes it challenging to realize national goals (Ndari et al., 2023). The Emancipated Curriculum emphasis on student agency and differentiated teaching may be incongruent with prevailing classroom norms or logistical realities in such schools. These localised issues must be understood to develop responsive policy and practice.

METHODS

This study is grounded in the understanding that curriculum change is both a top-down policy directive and a highly local, socially planted process. While national educational policies such as the Emancipated Curriculum may come from the central authorities, the success or failure of the implementation depends on how teachers, as active agents, interpret and implement the policies, which are faced with various factors during the process. Following the theoretical work of Priestley et al. (2015) and Kelchtermans (2009), this study focuses on teacher agency as a mediator between policy and practice. Teacher agency, the ability of teachers to act intentionally and reflectively in the context of their workplace environment, is a crucial influence on the success of curriculum reform.

Teachers in Indonesian rural areas generally face challenges such as insufficient infrastructure, isolation, and inadequate opportunities for professional development; teacher agency becomes more critical to understand. Teachers are not passive recipients of policy but active mediators who read, translate, and resist appropriate curriculum change depending on the interspace between systemic structures and their practices. This theoretical framework explores how English teachers in rural areas interpret and implement the Emancipated Curriculum in various conditions that are less conducive and full of limitations.

Key Concept Definitions

1. Curriculum

Curriculum is a systematically planned study with objectives, content, teaching methods, and approaches to assessment. Kelly (2009) also defines it as "all the learning which is planned and guided by the school", emphasizing its planned nature. Similarly, Ornstein & Hunkins (2017) describe it as "an organized plan of instruction", whereas Marsh (2009) is of the view that curriculum is politically, culturally, and socially constructed. This definition highlights the dual nature of the curriculum as both a formal document and a lived experience in the classroom.

2. Curriculum Implementation.

Curriculum implementation involves implementing the intended curriculum. According to Fullan (2007), curriculum implementation is not an easy process, with local variables such as teacher beliefs, institutional support, and available resources influencing it. Priestley et al. (2015) assert that implementation is an interpretive and dynamic process instead of being an act of policy compliance. Alsubaie (2016) asserts that barriers such as lack of training, top-down directives, and infrastructure can hinder successful implementation.

3. Challenges in Curriculum Implementation

Changing the curriculum is filled with both individual and systemic challenges. Sahlberg (2011) refers to more general socio-political forces, while Hargreaves & Fullan (2012) speak of emotional exhaustion on the part of teachers, including

burnout and loss of professional trust. In Indonesia, Rasmitadila et al. (2020) refer to challenges such as poor internet connection, lack of teaching materials, and poor teacher preparedness, especially in rural areas.

4. English Language Teaching (ELT)

ELT involves multiple facets of teaching English to non-native speakers and is guided by pedagogical, linguistic, and sociocultural considerations. As Richards (2015) suggested, its multidisciplinary approach involves linguistics, psychology, and education. Harmer (2007) indicates the importance of communication-focused and learner-centred approaches. Febriana et al. (2018) note that English Language Teaching is particularly challenging in Indonesian rural schools because of the limited resources, low exposure to English, and lack of professional training.

5. Teaching in Rural Areas

Rural education is also subject to some of its limitations and needs. These include multi-grade teaching, limited training options, and close local connections with curriculum implications. Muslim & Sumarni (2023) describe rural schools as inadequately equipped and in remote places, while Nasution et al. (2023) highlight difficulties in teaching in rural areas caused by low parental engagement, limited teaching media, and multi-subject teaching loads. Liska Afriani & Erianti Zulhijah (2022) emphasize the need for culturally responsive and community-based teaching practices in remote areas.

Conceptual Relationships

The framework posits the following relationships:

- Curriculum Design informs Curriculum Implementation, which directly affects ELT Practices.
- Challenges mediate the implementation process—particularly in rural contexts—affecting how the curriculum is adapted.
- Contextual Factors (rurality, teacher capacity, and community support) influence both implementation fidelity and ELT effectiveness.

Theoretical Lens

The study employs a dual-theory approach that utilizes **teacher agency theory** and **implementation science** to examine rural English teachers' implementation of Emancipated Curriculum. Priestley et al. (2015) consider agency an ecological experience emanating from the interaction of individual capability, social context, and time factors. According to this view, agency is not a trait but an emergent property of the interaction between teachers and their contexts.

To further enrich this analysis, the study incorporates implementation science principles proposed by Palinkas et al. (2015) and Patton (2015). This exists across three basic dimensions:

- The Intervention: This dimension focuses on the characteristics of the intervention itself. It includes the core components, adaptations, and the evidence base supporting the intervention. Understanding the intervention is important for successful implementation because it determines what needs to be put into practice.
- The Context: This dimension examines the setting where the intervention is being implemented. It includes both the inner setting (e.g., resources and leadership) and the outer setting (e.g., the broader community and policies). Analysing the context helps identify potential barriers and facilitators to implementation.
- The Implementation Process: This dimension focuses on the steps and strategies used to implement the intervention. It includes how the intervention is introduced, delivered, and sustained in specific settings. This dimension also involves understanding the perspectives and experiences of individuals involved in the implementation, such as teachers, school leaders, and policymakers.

Combining these two approaches, this study places teachers at the centre as dynamic agents with professional judgment capacities in response to policy pressures and local contexts.

Relevance to Rural English Language Teaching

The conceptual framework is particularly relevant in the context of English teachers in rural Indonesian schools' practice with curriculum reform. The teachers work under challenging circumstances—limited internet connectivity, no teaching materials, and inadequate administrative support. Nevertheless, their responses to the *Kurikulum Merdeka* vary. Some embrace its flexibility and learner autonomy; others struggle with its vagueness and are provided with no explicit guidelines.

This framework captures the richness of the context of rural curriculum reform. It explains why reforms succeed in some classrooms but fail in others. Emancipated Curriculum emphasizes agency, support, and contextual fit over compliance. While promising in principle, the Emancipated Curriculum requires maximum teacher engagement, contextual adaptation, and strong support structures to be effective in practice.

This theoretical model offers a broad, human-centred approach to curriculum change scholarship in rural English language education. Integrating teacher agency theory and implementation science recognizes teachers as significant stakeholders for school change. It places curriculum implementation into the realities of constraints and possibilities in the day-to-day settings of under-resourced rural environments.

Through such an approach, the study aims to gain insights into how curriculum reforms are read, used, and enacted by teachers working in the periphery of the education sector. This is important in helping inform policy design, professional development training, and support systems that align better with rural teachers' lived realities. Lastly, the framework maintains that sustainable school reform hinges on visionary policies and enables teachers who can actualize those visions within their local and immediate contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section reveals the overall findings from English teachers' responses to the closed-ended questionnaire and

semi-structured interviews, categorised under overarching themes. The findings identified four principal concerns: (1) positive perceptions towards the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, (2) authentic implementation challenges in rural areas, (3) coping strategies adopted by teachers, and (4) structural gaps in support and policy coherence. Each theme is discussed in existing literature, especially those studies focusing on curriculum reform, teacher agency, and rural education contexts.

1. Positive Perceptions of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*

Although practical, most participants had positive attitudes towards the underlying philosophy and intent of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Teachers viewed the curriculum as a progressive reform encouraging students' autonomy, critical thinking, and contextualised instruction. These views confirm the findings of Bahri & Daulay (2024), who elaborated on the fact that teachers adhere to the vision of the curriculum without having any idea how to operationalise it. One participant remarked, "I appreciate this curriculum because it is more flexible and considers the needs of rural students, rather than merely imitating urban schools."

Some teachers welcomed the concept of curriculum flexibility, particularly over the earlier strict models. This is echoed in the literature on teacher agency and locally responsive pedagogies being the most critical (Fullan, 2007; Priestley et al., 2015). Teachers also viewed the *Kurikulum Merdeka* as leaving more room for creativity and the individual's teaching styles, corroborating Kelchtermans' (2009) value placed on the teacher's identity and ownership of designing instruction. However, the urge for the curriculum's ideals did not always translate to simple practice—a disparity explored in greater depth below.

2. Implementation Challenges in Rural Contexts

Although conceptual alignment was clear, significant barriers to implementation were routinely noted. The primary issues identified were inadequate infrastructure, insufficient training, low student preparation, and inconsistent support from local educational authorities.

a. Infrastructure Limitations

The rural areas especially in Indonesia presented logistical difficulties. Many schools were deficient in sufficient technology resources to effectively execute the digitally integrated elements of the curriculum, including project-based learning, which necessitates multimedia technologies. Teachers indicated inconsistent internet connectivity, obsolete instructional resources, and overcrowded classrooms.

These concerns align with UNESCO's (2018) recognition of rural education inequalities and Logan & Burdick-Will's (2017) results about rural-urban educational discrepancies. One respondent stated, “We are required to develop digital projects, although the computer lab at our school is non-functional. We must innovate with whatever tools we have.”

b. Deficiencies in Professional Development

Among the most pressing concerns was the shortage of continuous, relevant training. Teachers complained that they received only shallow or generic workshops, which were stockpiled with theory classes and contained minimal hands-on advice on actual classroom application. This indicates the apprehensions expressed by Hidayah et al. (2022) and Syofyan et al. (2024) concerning the inadequacy and variability of teacher preparation programs throughout Indonesia’s curricular shifts. One teacher stated, “The training sessions failed to address specific teaching techniques, despite that being our primary requirement.” This deficiency in professional development undermines teacher confidence and heightens their dependence on peer improvisation or antiquated techniques.

c. Student Readiness and Parental Engagement

Several teachers indicated that rural students generally lacked the appropriate literacy and inclination to engage meaningfully with the *Kurikulum Merdeka*’s student-led, inquiry-learning strategy. This is especially visible in the examination of group and work activities. Furthermore, insufficient parental support, often from limited means or inadequate formal education, exacerbates the issue. This issue aligns with the findings of Wang et al. (2017) and Rasmin & Isma (2024), which demonstrate how rural socio-economic

limitations impede educational innovation.

The implementation gap between urban and rural schools' points to systemic inequalities that hinder the success of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. As shown in Table 1, English teachers in rural areas face more complex barriers –ranging from infrastructure deficits to isolated professional development– that teachers in urban areas rarely encounter. These disparities underscore the need for context-sensitive policy adjustments to ensure equitable curriculum implementation across regions.

Table 1: Urban vs. Rural Implementation Challenges

Challenge	Urban Schools	Rural Schools
Infrastructure	High-speed internet, ICT labs	Limited/no internet, outdated equipment
Teacher Training	Regular workshops, peer networks	One-time generic training, isolation
Student Readiness	High English exposure, parental support	Low literacy, limited parental engagement
Policy Adaptation	Schools tailor curriculum easily	Rigid standards, lack of local guidelines

3. Teachers' Coping Strategies and Local Adaptations

English teachers adapted to address these challenges and localise the curriculum while attempting to remain faithful to its core principles. These adaptations included:

- Modifying project-based activities to use inexpensive, local materials.
- Collaboration with peers in informal peer mentoring groups to co-plan lessons.
- Focus on literacy fundamentals before moving to inquiry-based methods.

A teacher stated, "Rather than employing digital tools, we created a straightforward environmental activity for students to complete at home." Priestley et al. (2015) noted that these

ideas exemplify teacher agency under constraints. Despite being bound by material constraints, teachers used professional judgment to maintain pedagogical integrity. This capacity for resilience and innovation is commendable, but it also implies that more systemic support is necessary to avoid overdependence on teachers.

4. Structural Gaps in Support and Policy Coherence

Teachers frequently pointed to a disconnect between policy design and field realities. Several respondents expressed frustration that curriculum mandates were not adjusted to rural school contexts, especially regarding performance standards, project-based assessments, and digital tools. One remarked: "The policy is good, but it feels like it was designed for big-city schools, not for us in the villages."

This critique reflects findings by Jasrial et al. (2023) and Masyithah et al. (2024), who note that national curriculum reforms in Indonesia often fail to account for regional disparities. Teachers felt pressure to meet difficult benchmarks, if not impossible, without adequate infrastructure, resources, or contextualised guidance. In line with Darling-Hammond et al. (2020), these findings suggest that successful implementation requires visionary reform and equitable scaffolding that supports diverse school ecosystems.

Synthesis of Findings

The findings of this study reveal a complex dynamic of curriculum goal alignment and mismatch in conditions of enactment. Teachers in rural areas tend to align with the values of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, yet face considerable structural and systemic barriers to its implementation.

The results suggest that curriculum attainment in rural Indonesia depends on teacher readiness and policy responsiveness, infrastructure development, and locally grounded support networks. These are echoed in more comprehensive reform literature (Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2021), noting that system change must include both visionary policy and practical feasibility.

CONCLUSION

Applying the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in rural areas provides a special perspective on Indonesia's ongoing education reform process. In essence, the curriculum is tasked with reshaping the education paradigm from the long-established, rigid, and exam-centred model to one that is flexible, student-centred, and practice-based. It fosters critical thinking, differentiated learning, and learning connected to students' everyday lives. These are complex and long-awaited ambitions, especially in a system historically plagued by inequalities of access and quality.

The English teachers in this study generally express clear and sincere sympathy with these aims. They understand the need to promote independent learning and critical thinking, and many are genuinely enthusiastic about using more student-centred methods. This warm reception shows that teachers' values, even in rural areas where educational resources are usually lacking, are in tune with the philosophy of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Teachers are not resistant to change; many are eager to learn and improve.

It is not so easy, however, to put these ideas into everyday classroom practice. The study uncovered persistent limitations that hamper rural teachers' ability to implement the curriculum as designed. These include a shortage of fundamental learning materials, infrastructure (such as access to the internet or multimedia capabilities), professional development opportunities, and student preparedness disparities in independent learning and language proficiency. Compounding this is a view held by many teachers that national policies are created with little consideration for rural school conditions. As a result, there is a disconnect between expectations and what can realistically be achieved.

This tension between ambition and reality focuses attention on the role of teacher agency. Following Kelchtermans (2009) and Priestley et al. (2015), research places teachers within the role of agentive curriculum reformers—neither merely implementing top-down policy, but reading, negotiating, and making sense of it in localised contexts. Through this agency, teachers act to help teachers

modify lesson plans, improvise to overcome conditions of resource constraint, and impact pedagogical response to meet students' needs. However, this agency is not absolute. It is exercised in a setting shaped by broader economic, institutional, and policy-related structural conditions that tend to suppress innovation and evolution.

Hence, the triumph of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* cannot be dependent only on curriculum design. These results align with Fullan's (2007) and Darling-Hammond et al. 's (2020) contention that lasting change requires more than a top-down vision. It requires a support ecosystem that mobilises teachers as change owners while addressing the contextual conditions that shape their work. These involve providing sustained, practice-based professional development; developing school leaders to build a culture of innovation and collaboration; and creating policy levers responsive to local context rather than being prescriptive or one-size-fits-all.

A second significant implication of this study is the need to revisit the approach to educational equity through national reform. Unless rural schools are to become true vessels for the *Kurikulum Merdeka* promises, the playing field must become more real. That would mean more equitable resource distribution and a revision to the way reforms are communicated and continued in the field. Teachers need more than just instructions and rules; they need consultation with policymakers and a stake in implementing classroom reforms.

The *Kurikulum Merdeka* is a promising and ground-breaking initiative for education in Indonesia. It appears beneficial since it focuses on student-centred teaching, learning in context, and giving teachers freedom. However, the findings of this research underscore the need to bridge the vision-implementation gap. Teachers in rural areas are willing to change, but cannot achieve it alone. Its full potential, however, will not be realised until reform efforts acknowledge the untidiness of local contexts and are dedicated to sustained support for teachers as primary collaborators in the venture.

By listening to rural teachers' voices, investing in their schooling, and questioning the conditions they work under, Indonesia can strive for a locally led, sustainable, effective, and

equitable vision of education. As Indonesia ventures into education reform, the voice and reality of rural teachers must be brought into the discussion, not on the fringes but at the centre.

Suggestions and Recommendations

This study highlights several practical steps to support a more inclusive and effective implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, particularly in rural areas in Indonesia. The recommendations below are directed toward policymakers, school leaders, and curriculum developers who play a role in arranging how this curriculum takes root in diverse educational settings.

1. Make Teacher Training More Contextual and Sustainable

Teachers in rural areas require professional training or development that can reflect the circumstances they face every day. One-time workshops are often too general and do not relate to or are disconnected from the reality they face in classrooms. Instead, training should be practical, hands-on, and sustained over time. This includes:

- Ongoing guidance from experienced teachers who are well familiar with rural contexts.
- Classroom-based training in responding, e.g., managing large, mixed-ability classes or working with the resources already on hand in class for project work.
- Professional opportunities to work with others in peer learning clusters to share experience, solve problems, and build each other's confidence (Syofyan et al., 2024).

Teachers are more likely to apply what they learn when training is grounded in real situations and encourages collaboration.

2. Invest in Fair and Accessible School Infrastructure

There are still so many rural schools that lack basic teaching tools essential for delivering the learning materials based on the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which often uses digital and project-based elements. Even the best teaching practices can fall short without a good internet connection, functional ICT rooms, or even updated textbooks. To support all schools equally, there’s a need to:

- Upgrade or repair ICT infrastructure and provide minimal digital resources.
- Increase rural internet coverage to make e-learning possible.
- Provide printed learning resources that are curriculum-based and easy to utilize.

These are not just technological transitions—they're about creating equal chances for all students to learn regardless of where they reside (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017; UNESCO, 2018).

3. Give Schools More Freedom to Adapt the Curriculum

The most prominent aspect of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* is flexibility. However, teachers still face many pressures while trying to follow rigid assessment and content guidelines. To make the curriculum truly adaptable, district education offices should:

- Allow more room for schools to adjust assessments based on student needs.
- Provide more room for schools to adapt assessments to meet student needs.
- Encourage the incorporation of local knowledge, language, and culture into classrooms.
- Allow teachers to consider inventions as important input sources for curriculum design instead of deviations from the standard (Jasrial et al., 2023).
- Trust in the capability of teachers to make decisions ensures ownership and implies that the curriculum is more likely to be operationalised in different contexts.

4. Design Curriculum Support Tools that Work in Rural Classrooms

Teachers often lack access to user-friendly, ready-to-use resources that match the new curriculum's goals. Curriculum developers should create learning materials that are specifically tailored to resource-constrained areas. This could include:

- Offline, printable versions of student and teacher modules.
- Low-technology project ideas that don't rely on online

access or costly equipment.

- Tips on how other rural teachers have found ways to modify lessons creatively and successfully.

These tools can reduce the load on teachers and enable them to concentrate on effective teaching (Martaliana et al., 2021).

5. Build Strong, Supportive School Leadership

The principal or school leader is key to making curriculum reform successful in the field. In successful schools, principals do more than manage; they support teachers, encourage experimentation, and create a learning culture. To make this happen:

- They should promote open dialogue and risk-taking without punishment or blame.
- They should become facilitators between policy and everyday practice.
- Specific leadership training needs to be offered, with the main focus on facilitating curriculum shifts in resource-poor environments (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2021).

School leaders' empowerment will ensure there is a solid platform for sustainable change.

6. Engage the Local Community in the Learning Process

Education does not just happen alone, especially in rural areas, where the school is deeply connected to the local community. Schools must engage parents, local leaders, and community organizations to improve learning. This can involve:

- Applying families and village elders separately to develop local initiatives or context-related activities.
- Using learning materials based on the knowledge of the community, agriculture, artefact production, or the history of the region.
- Holding activities that will engage the community at large and, if possible, inform them of the value of education.

Studies have shown that when the community is involved, students are engaged, and schools are connected to the realities of students' lives (Fatmasari, 2024; Raudah et al., 2024).

To address the identified systemic challenges in the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in rural areas, targeted interventions at different stakeholder levels are required. Table 2 outlines actionable recommendations paired with responsible stakeholders and concrete examples. This structured approach ensures accountability while recognizing the need for contextually appropriate solutions in resource-constrained environments.

Recommendation	**Stakeholder**	**Action Example**
Contextual Teacher Training	Ministry of Education	Rural-focused PD with mentoring programs
Infrastructure Investment	Local Government	Subsidized ICT tools, internet expansion
Community Engagement	Schools	Parent workshops, local resource projects
Flexible Assessment Guidelines	Policymakers	Allow rural schools to modify benchmarks

Table 2: Recommendations and Policy Actions

Final Reflection

This research contributes to the growing literature on curriculum reform in decentralized and diverse educational settings. By focusing on the voices of English teachers in rural schools, it underscores the fact that reform is a social and structural process, not just a pedagogical one. If we want the *Kurikulum Merdeka* to develop in all regions and not only concentrated in big cities, it must be accompanied by a thorough review of how schools are supported, how teachers are empowered, and how communities are engaged.

The promise of *Kurikulum Merdeka*—a liberated and learner-centred education—cannot be realized through top-down mandates alone. It must emerge through dialogue, trust, and investment at every level of the system.

REFERENCES

Alsubaie, M. A. (2016). *Journal of Education and Practice www.iiste.org ISSN* (Vol. 7, Issue 9). Online. www.iiste.org

Bahri, U. L., & Daulay, S. H. (2024). The Implementation of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum: Teachers' Perception. *ENGLISH FRANCA : Academic Journal of English Language and Education*, *8*(1), 133–142. https://doi.org/10.29240/ef.v8i1%20May

Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2020). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, *24*(2), 97–140. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791

Fatmasari, A. D. (2024). *TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION IN ENGLISH VOCABULARY TEACHING AT RURAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS*.

Febriana, M., Nurkamto, J., Rochsantiningsih, D., & Muhtia, A. (2018). *Comparative Study of Post-Marriage Nationality Of Women in Legal Systems of Different Countries. International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding Teaching in Rural Indonesian Schools: Teachers' Challenges*. *5*, 11–20. http://ijmmu.com

Fullan, M. (2007). *The New Meaning of Educational Change, Fourth Edition!* (4th ed.). Teachers College Press.

Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school*. Teachers College Press.

Hargreaves, A., & Shirley, D. (2021). Leadership, identity, and intersectionality. In *Future Alternatives for Educational Leadership* (pp. 111–125). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003131496-11

Harmer, J. (2007). *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (4th ed.). Pearson Education.

Hidayah, R., Wangid, M. N., & Wuryandani, W. (2022). Elementary School Teacher Perception of Curriculum Changes in Indonesia. *Pegem Egitim ve Ogretim Dergisi*, *12*(2), 77–88. https://doi.org/10.47750/pegegog.12.02.07

Jasrial, D., Syarif, H., & Zainil, Y. (2023). *ENGLISH TEACHERS'*

VOICES ON CURRICULUM CHANGE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN RURAL JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS IN INDONESIA. *2023*(9), 2355–2069. https://doi.org/10.29300/ling.v9i2.12440

Kelchtermans, G. (2009). Who I am in how I teach is the message: Self-understanding, vulnerability, and reflection. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, *15*(2), 257–272. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540600902875332

Kelly, A. V. (2009). *The Curriculum: Theory and Practice* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Kemendikbudristek. (2022). *Panduan Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka*. Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi. https://kurikulum.kemdikbud.go.id/

Lestari, D. P., Lestari, S., & Nularsih. (2024). English Teacher Perception of Implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka in English Teaching Learning Process. *BAHTERA: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Dan Sastra*, *23*, 1–15. http://journal.unj.ac.id/unj/index.php/bahtera/

Liska Afriani, Z., & Erianti Zulhijah, A. (2022). Teachers' Challenges in Teaching English at Rural Areas. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, *12*(6). https://doi.org/10.30845/ijhss.v12n6p5

Logan, J. R., & Burdick-Will, J. (2017). School Segregation and Disparities in Urban, Suburban, and Rural Areas. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *674*(1), 199–216. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716217733936

Marsh, C. J. . (2009). *Key concepts for understanding curriculum*. Routledge.

Martaliana, L., Syahrul, S., & Safitri, L. (2021). The Seven Time Managing Strategies of English Teachers to Adapt with the Change in Curriculum. *Elsya : Journal of English Language Studies*, *3*(1), 45–49. http://ojs.journal.unilak.ac.id/index.php/elsya

Masyithah, N., Muhayyang, M., Aeni, N., & Dzhelilov, A. A. (2024). Merdeka Curriculum: Teachers' Perception About The Implementation In Teaching English At Smkn 1 Polewali. *English, Teaching, Learning, and Research Journal)*, *10*.

https://doi.org/10.24252/Eternal.V201.2024.A1

Maulidin, M. R. (2023). *THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MERDEKA BELAJAR CURRICULUM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF AN ENGLISH TEACHERS*.

Muslim, M. A., & Sumarni, S. (2023). A Review on the Design and Characteristics of English Language Learning and Teaching in a Standard-Based Curriculum: Kurikulum Merdeka. *English Language and Literature International Conference*, *6*(1), 504–515. https://jurnal.unimus.ac.id/index.php/ELLIC/index

Nasution, S. A., Daulay, S. H., & Rahman, B. I. (2023). TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS IN RURAL AREAS: TEACHERS' CHALLENGES. *TELL-US Journal*, *9*. https://doi.org/10.22202/tus.2023.v9i1.6532

Ndari, W., Suyatno, Sukirman, & Mahmudah, F. N. (2023). Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and Its Challenges. *European Journal of Education and Pedagogy*, *4*(3), 111–116. https://doi.org/10.24018/ejedu.2023.4.3.648

Ornstein, A. C. ., & Hunkins, F. P. (2017). *Curriculum : foundations, principles, and issues*. Pearson.

Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, *42*(5), 533–544. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Priestley, M., Biesta, G. J. J., Philippou, S., & Robinson, S. (2015). *The teacher and the curriculum: exploring teacher agency*.

Rasmin, L. O., & Isma, A. (2024). Challenges and Experiences of English Teachers in Implementing Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Rural Indonesia: A Case Study. *Prosiding Seminar Nasional Pendidik Dan Pengembang Pendidikan Indonesia*, 29–37. https://ejournal.mandalanursa.org/index.php/ProsPen/article/view/7840

Rasmitadila, Aliyyah, R. R., Rachmadtullah, R., Samsudin, A., Syaodih, E., Nurtanto, M., & Tambunan, A. R. S. (2020).

The perceptions of primary school teachers of online learning during the covid-19 pandemic period: A case study in Indonesia. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, *7*(2), 90–109. https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/388

Raudah, S., Noor, P., Najmiah, L., Ulama, U. N., Selatan, K., & Gambut, I. (2024). English Teachers' Perception at Junior High School Level on The Implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka in Banjar District. *Linguistics and English Language Teaching Journal*.

Richards, J. C. (2015). *Key issues in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2011). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

Sahlberg, P. (2011). *Finnish lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* (1st ed.). Teachers College Press.

Schleicher, A. (2018). *World Class: How to build a 21st-century school system, Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education*. OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/4789264300002-en

Schwab, K. (2016). *The Fourth Industrial Revolution: what it means, how to respond*.

Syofyan, H., Rosyid, A., Fadli, M. R., & Yusuff, A. A. (2024). Teacher Readiness Factors that Influence the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Elementary Schools. *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching*, *13*(5), 168–180. https://doi.org/10.5430/jct.v13n5p168

Trilling, B., & Fadel, C. (2009). *21st Century Skills: Learning For Life In Our Times*. Jossey-Bass.

UNESCO. (2018). *Education in Rural Areas: Issues and Challenges*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265990

Wang, X., Luo, R., Zhang, L., & Rozelle, S. (2017). The Education Gap of China's Migrant Children and Rural Counterparts. *Journal of Development Studies*, *53*(11), 1865–1881. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2016.1274395

Wardani, H. K., Aji, M., Fanani, T., & Hidayah, B. (2024). ENGLISH TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE IMPLEMENTATION OF "KURIKULUM MERDEKA" AT

SMA ASSA'ADAH BUNGAH GRESIK. *JEELL (Journal of English Education, Linguistics and Literature)*. https://doi.org/10.32682/jeell.v10i2.3388

Yunitasari, D., Suastra, I. W., & Lasmawan, I. W. (2023). Implementation challenges of merdeka curriculum in primary schools. *Prisma Sains : Jurnal Pengkajian Ilmu Dan Pembelajaran Matematika Dan IPA IKIP Mataram*, *11*(4), 952. https://doi.org/10.33394/j-ps.v11i4.8079