



JOURNAL OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION
Vol. 10 No. 1 January – June 2025
P-ISSN 2503-5363; E-ISSN 2528-0465
<http://www.ejournal.stitmuhbangil.ac.id/index.php/jie>

Teachers' Challenges on the Implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* for Coastal Children

*Mahsya Aura Zerlinda¹, Naufal Ahmad Rijalul Alam²

^{1,2}Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Jl. Brawijaya, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

*mahsya.aura.fai22@mail.umy.ac.id

Article Information **Abstract**

Received:

3 December 2024

Revised:

10 January 2025

Accepted:

20 January 2025

Published:

25 January 2025

Keywords:

Merdeka Curriculum, Coastal Children, Teacher Challenges.

This research focuses on teachers' challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in coastal areas, especially at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap, in the context of coastal children's education. The Merdeka Curriculum is an education policy that provides flexibility in learning by optimising local potential and strengthening character. This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. The data is collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The data collection technique used the triangulation method to ensure the accuracy and richness of the information obtained. Data validity was guaranteed through matching research findings with the reality observed by researchers in the field. Data analysis was conducted using the thematic method, which enabled the researcher to identify key themes from the interviews and documentation. These themes include the main challenges in teachers' understanding of the curriculum, limited educational resources, and efforts to integrate local potential into learning. The results show that implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in coastal areas faces various obstacles, such as low teacher understanding and challenging geographical conditions. However, environment-based programs, such as mangrove planting, have significantly strengthened students' character and

¹ orcid id: <http://orcid.org/0009-0004-4350-2657>

² orcid id: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2793-6119>

ecological awareness. This research confirms the need for close collaboration between schools, government, and communities to overcome teachers' challenges and maximise the benefits of the Merdeka Curriculum in coastal areas.

Penelitian ini berfokus pada tantangan guru dalam mengimplementasikan Kurikulum Merdeka di wilayah pesisir, khususnya di SMA Negeri 3 Cilacap, dalam konteks pendidikan anak pesisir. Kurikulum Merdeka merupakan kebijakan pendidikan yang memberikan fleksibilitas dalam pembelajaran dengan mengoptimalkan potensi lokal dan memperkuat karakter. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Teknik pengumpulan data menggunakan metode triangulasi untuk menjamin keakuratan dan kekayaan informasi yang diperoleh. Keabsahan data dijamin melalui pencocokan hasil penelitian dengan kenyataan yang diamati peneliti di lapangan. Analisis data dilakukan dengan metode tematik, yang memungkinkan peneliti mengidentifikasi tema-tema utama dari hasil wawancara dan dokumentasi. Tema-tema tersebut meliputi tantangan utama dalam pemahaman guru terhadap kurikulum, keterbatasan sumber daya pendidikan, dan upaya mengintegrasikan potensi lokal dalam pembelajaran. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka di wilayah pesisir menghadapi berbagai kendala, seperti pemahaman guru yang rendah dan kondisi geografis yang menantang. Namun, program berbasis lingkungan, seperti penanaman mangrove, telah secara signifikan memperkuat karakter dan kesadaran ekologis siswa. Penelitian ini menegaskan perlunya kolaborasi erat antara sekolah, pemerintah, dan masyarakat untuk mengatasi tantangan guru dan memaksimalkan manfaat Kurikulum Merdeka di wilayah pesisir.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is the central pillar in building a nation's civilisation. The education system has a role in creating the next generation who are competent, have integrity, and can compete in the era of globalisation (Farchan & Muhtadi, 2019). Each country has a unique approach to curriculum development according to the needs and characteristics of its society. The curriculum in Finland is considered a role model in the world of education because of its progressive approach. The Finnish government designs the education curriculum by giving flexibility to each school and allowing students to explore their interests and talents. The focus of the Finnish curriculum lies in how students have the opportunity to develop themselves outside of school. The curriculum development has provided opportunities for students to develop their interests and talents to support the formation of individual students who have a sense of humanity and ethical responsibility so that students can have the skills and knowledge needed in their lives (Laksita & Sasi, 2024).

In contrast to Finland, the UK has a curriculum that tends to be structured and oriented towards academic achievement. The UK government has implemented an education curriculum called the National Curriculum (Mulyanti et al., 2024). Education in the UK is organised into four key stages, primary and secondary, focusing on subjects such as art, history, and geography. In stages 1 and 2, compulsory subjects will be delivered in primary schools, such as English, math, science, design and technology, history, geography, art and design, music, and physical education, including swimming, computing, ancient and modern foreign languages. At stage 3, there are compulsory national curriculum subjects in the UK, such as English, math, science, history, modern foreign languages, design and technology, art and design music, physical education, citizenship, and computing. While at stage 4, most students strive to achieve a national qualification called GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary). This has resulted in the UK government policy of dividing the two groups of subjects at key stage 4 into core subjects, including English, math, and science, and compulsory subjects, including computing, physical education, and citizenship. At Key Stage 4, schools

must also offer one subject each from the areas of art, design and technology, literature, and foreign languages (Butt et al., 2013). The UK government has required schools to provide a balanced and broad education that encompasses students' spiritual, moral, cultural, mental, and physical development and prepares them for adult life. This is in line with the aims of the UK national curriculum, which is to provide the essential knowledge base for learners to become educated citizens and to value human creativity and cultural achievement. It helps teachers develop engaging and innovative lessons to support students' understanding of core knowledge and relevant skills (Butt et al., 2013).

Meanwhile, in the Southeast Asian region, especially Singapore, education is implemented to form students who have moral values as the core of student character, such as respect, responsibility, resilience, integrity, care, and harmony. Education in Singapore also strives to develop social-emotional abilities in students, and the hope is that learners who have completed their education will have skills such as self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship management. Learners in Singapore can develop 21st-century competencies, including critical thinking, adaptive, inventive, communication skills, collaboration, managing information, and civic, global, and cross-cultural literacy (Meijustika et al., 2024).

In the education process in Indonesia, the government uses the independent curriculum as the national curriculum. The *Merdeka Curriculum* is a curriculum approach that aims to create meaningful and practical learning. This curriculum emphasises flexibility for teachers and education units in designing learning that suits the needs and context of students. This is based on reducing material load, focusing on competency and character development, and orienting towards the essential needs of learning. The main objective of the *Merdeka Curriculum* is to create meaningful and practical knowledge, focusing on strengthening faith, devotion to God Almighty, and the development of noble character. This curriculum also aims to foster students' intellectual, emotional, and creative potential to become individuals who continue to learn throughout life and reflect the values of Pancasila. This concept is realised through the formation of the

Pancasila learner profile, which is the basis of the character of students (kemendikbud, 2024).

The Merdeka learning curriculum is a breakthrough in Indonesian education. The Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture compiled the independent curriculum to create a more effective and efficient learning process. In addition, the independent curriculum lightens the burden and duties of a teacher so that they focus more on creating a learning atmosphere that supports students (Heryanti et al., 2023). The *Merdeka Curriculum* is designed to update the education system to be more adaptive, creative, and centred on student needs. This approach aims to create an inclusive learning environment and support student character-building. In its implementation, the *Merdeka Curriculum* emphasises the importance of a supportive classroom atmosphere, harmonious relationships between teachers and students, and a school culture oriented towards positive values to improve the quality of learning (Wachidah et al., 2024).

Coastal children are defined as children who spend much time at sea. The characteristics of coastal children are generally challenging because, at all times, they are faced with hot coastal climate conditions, loud waves, and strong winds. The characteristics of coastal children are loud voices, dark skin, slightly red hair, simple clothing, stubbornness, and hard work. In their daily lives, those descendants of fishing communities socialise by selling goods to the surrounding community as marine products such as fish, shrimp, and crabs. This makes environmental cleanliness not considered, and children's social patterns are unlimited. They like to play in the sea or join their parents to earn a living, so the desire to go to school is very low because of a lack of parental motivation or encouragement.

However, implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* is not free from challenges, especially for children in coastal areas. Coastal children often face unique social and economic conditions, such as limited access to educational facilities, lack of trained educators, and challenging geographical conditions (Khaeruddin et al., 2022). Many of them grow up in communities dependent on the fishing or marine sectors, where the need to help the family often overrides the priority of formal

education. However, these children have tremendous potential, especially in creativity, adaptability, and local wisdom developed from their interactions with the marine environment.

The Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project is integral to the *Merdeka Curriculum*, which aims to build student character based on Pancasila values. Its implementation uses a project-based approach that harmonises aspects of faith, diversity, independence, and creativity into learning activities. The purpose of P5 is to strengthen students' character through the dimensions of the Pancasila student profile (Lubaba & Alfiansyah, 2022). The Pancasila Learner Profile is designed to form a generation with academic competence and character based on Pancasila's values. These competencies are formulated in six main dimensions that complement and integrate each other. The six dimensions are Belief, Fear of God Almighty, Noble Character, Global Diversity, Teamwork, Independence, Critical Reasoning, and Creativity. These dimensions do not stand alone but rather support and strengthen each other to create a holistic learner profile (Satria et al., 2024).

This research focuses on the challenges of implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* for coastal children at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap. *Merdeka Curriculum* is designed to create meaningful learning by emphasising strengthening Pancasila values through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). In the coastal context, this curriculum faces unique challenges and opportunities, especially in building the dimensions of independence, global diversity, and learner creativity. This research is essential to ensure that the *Merdeka Curriculum* can be a relevant educational transformation tool for children in coastal areas while providing policy input to optimise its implementation.

II. METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design. The research location is State Senior High School 3 Cilacap, located in a coastal area. The research subjects involved teachers who were directly involved

in implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Informants were selected based on the criteria of teachers who have understanding and experience teaching in a coastal environment, namely Teacher (S), Deputy Principal of the curriculum section (DR), and Islamic Religious Education Teacher (AF). The data is collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The data collection technique used the triangulation method to ensure the accuracy and richness of the information obtained. Data validity was guaranteed through matching research findings with the reality observed by researchers in the field. Data analysis was conducted using the thematic method, which enabled the researcher to identify key themes from the interviews and documentation. These themes included the main challenges in teachers' understanding of the curriculum, limited educational resources, and efforts to integrate local potential into learning.

Table 1. The data of Informants

No	Theme	Informant
1.	Understanding and Perspectives on the <i>Merdeka Curriculum</i>	(S)
2.	Implementation of <i>Merdeka Curriculum</i> in the Coastal Context	(DR), (AF), and (S)
3.	Collaboration with External Communities and Institutions to Help Run Activities in the Coastal Zone	(S) and (DR)
4.	Challenges in Implementing <i>Merdeka Curriculum</i> in Coastal Areas	(DR)
5.	Development of Student Independence and Creativity in Coastal Areas	(DR)
6.	Socio-cultural Context in Learning	(AF)

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Understanding and Perspectives on the *Merdeka Curriculum*

An interview with the teacher of State Senior High School 3 Cilacap provides an overview of the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. He explained that this curriculum offers flexibility for students and teachers, encourages creativity and innovation in the learning process, and creates learning experiences that meet students' needs and potential. Here is his statement:

One of the teachers explained that:

"*Merdeka Curriculum* is designed to provide greater flexibility through various intracurricular programs. It gives students freedom in the learning process

and space for teachers to be creative and innovative in designing and implementing learning. This approach aims to create relevant learning experiences according to students' needs and potential." (S, 2024).

According to the researcher, the teacher's statement reflects the *Merdeka Curriculum's* main essence, emphasising the maximum development of student potential. This curriculum allows students to learn according to their interests, talents and needs while opening up opportunities for teachers to be more innovative. This approach not only makes learning relevant to real life but also encourages an education system that is responsive to modern challenges. However, its implementation requires comprehensive support, such as teacher training and adequate learning facilities.

This aligns with Rahayu et al. (2022) that the *Merdeka Curriculum* is a learning framework designed to provide freedom for students and teachers in optimising students' potential, interests, and abilities. This approach creates a learning atmosphere that is more relaxed, fun, and free from complex administrative pressures. The main focus of this curriculum is on deep, flexible learning and developing student competencies through relevant and interactive project-based methods. This statement is corroborated by Iskandar et al. (2023), written in their journal that the *Merdeka Curriculum* is a multidimensional learning plan designed in a multifaceted manner to provide students with adequate time to deepen concepts and hone their skills. In its implementation, teachers have the freedom to choose learning media that suits the needs and interests of students. The curriculum also includes projects aimed at strengthening the learner profile of Pancasila, which are developed based on specific themes set by the government. The projects are not focused on achieving specific learning objectives and are not tied to specific technical content. Merdeka's Curriculum is expected to create a more empowered learning environment, which allows each student to develop optimally and become a positively contributing member of society (Yusdiva & Alam, 2024).

Implementation of *Merdeka Curriculum* in the Coastal Context

An interview with the Vice Principal for curriculum obtained an understanding of implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap in

the context of local potential. In the interview, he explained the learning program at the school and the activities that have been carried out to support the development of coastal areas. Here is his statement:

The deputy principal for curriculum stated that:

"State Senior High School 3 Cilacap does not yet have a learning program specifically tailored to local potentials, such as subjects based on maritime activities. However, there is an implementation of maritime activities that schools have carried out, but these activities are not designed as part of the *Merdeka Curriculum* objectives. These activities existed before the *Merdeka Curriculum* was implemented in the education system in Indonesia." (DR, 2024).

He also stated:

"Activities carried out to support the potential of coastal areas include mangrove tree planting and sports such as healthy walking on the coast. Mangrove planting activities are carried out routinely every one to two months with a flexible schedule, adjusting to conditions and needs." (DR, 2024).

According to the researcher, this statement reflects the potential that has not been fully optimised by State Senior High School 3 Cilacap in systematically integrating the local potential of coastal areas into the curriculum. Although maritime activities, such as mangrove planting and coastal sports, have been implemented, these activities have not been specifically designed as part of the *Merdeka Curriculum* objectives. This suggests a gap between existing activities and opportunities to create learning programs that are more structured and relevant to the local context.

Mangrove planting, which is carried out regularly, is an activity that is very relevant to efforts to preserve the coastal environment. However, these activities still function as extracurricular or additional activities, not an integrated part of learning. With the *Merdeka Curriculum*, there should be more excellent space to develop maritime activity-based subjects that connect theory and practice in the context of nature conservation and environmental sustainability. Such implementation supports local potential-based education and can enrich students' learning experiences while increasing their ecological awareness and practical skills in maintaining coastal ecosystems.

Qomariyah & Maghfiroh (2022) also explained that implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* in schools allows teachers to utilise local wisdom and regional potential as relevant and practical learning resources. Deep learning through project activities encourages character growth and exploration of real-world problems or local potentials, such as the environment and technology. According to Nurhidayati (2021), integrating local potential into learning significantly improves learners' critical thinking skills, increasing from 47.5% to 75% after incorporating local resources into their learning process. The *Merdeka Curriculum* allows learners to learn from both formal and non-formal education channels. The *Merdeka Curriculum* allows learners to learn from formal and non-formal education channels. This approach provides opportunities for students to learn from various sources relevant to their needs and life context to encourage the development of competencies and character (Hidayah et al., 2023). This is the same as research: activities such as mangrove planting at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap are still included in extracurricular activities and have not been integrated into subjects, so opportunities to maximise their impact have not been fully realised.

Islamic Education (PAI) also shapes student character by implementing an *Merdeka Curriculum* in learning for coastal children. The role that can be done is to support the main program of the school based on the *Merdeka Curriculum* by adjusting the implementation of learning.

Teacher AF in the interview stated:

"No specific program explicitly focuses on maritime culture or economy. However, PAI teachers at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap have a relevant approach for coastal students by considering the characteristics and background of students. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher conducts an initial test, such as a test of the ability to read the Qur'an, to identify students' potential and level of religious understanding. This aims to develop more targeted teaching methods. In addition, implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* encourages teachers to establish a closer and friendlier relationship with students. Teachers provide learning in formal classroom time and through interpersonal approaches, such as inviting students to discuss their feelings or problems." (AF, 2024).

The researcher stated that this statement shows a positive effort from the PAI teachers at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap in adjusting the learning approach to the local context. However, there is no specific program focusing on

maritime culture or economy. A strategy that considers the characteristics and background of coastal students shows an understanding that the local context dramatically influences the way students learn, which can increase the relevance of learning materials.

An initial test conducted by the teacher to identify students' potential and religious understanding is a wise step. In this way, teachers can design teaching methods more suited to students' individual needs, improving learning effectiveness. In addition, implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*, which encourages a closer relationship between teachers and students, is also very positive.

This approach creates a more inclusive and adaptive learning atmosphere, where students acquire religious knowledge and feel supported in their emotional and character development. However, while this approach is already good in bringing teachers closer to students, schools need to consider how more specific programs or materials on maritime culture or economy can be included in PAI lessons. This will further enrich student's learning experience by connecting religious values with relevant local potentials so they can more easily understand and apply the lessons in their daily lives on the coast.

According to Balqis et al. (2024) and Safitri & Alam (2024), this aligns with journal findings that PAI is essential in building religious character in students. This religious character is the main element in shaping individual personality, which comes from spiritual values and religious ethics. Based on the findings, values such as simplicity, justice, and discipline applied through PAI significantly support learners' character-building in facing changing times with strong morality and integrity. In addition, Ariza & Tamrin (2021) revealed that Islamic education that raises local cultural values is expected to help form a strong national character and strengthen a sense of nationalism. Local culture is integral to national cultural identity, with values, expressions, and customs derived from indigenous wisdom. Exploring and utilising local wisdom is essential to restoring the nation's identity, which has begun to be eroded by modernisation and globalisation. This is also in line with the *Merdeka Curriculum*, which provides

opportunities to utilise local potential as relevant learning materials, especially for students in coastal areas.

"Supporting Facilities for Activities Based on Coastal Potential: State Senior High School 3 Cilacap has supporting facilities that were already available before the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, although they were not specifically designed for this curriculum. One of the excellent facilities is the land for mangrove cultivation, which is equipped with a mangrove laboratory. The mangrove cultivation program is the school's flagship, developed through collaboration with various external institutions." (S, 2024).

According to the researchers, the readiness of facilities at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap before implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* reflects the school's efforts to utilise local potential to support context-based learning. The presence of mangrove cultivation land equipped with a mangrove laboratory is an important strategy to provide students with practical learning experiences. This excellent program is based on the geographical characteristics of coastal areas and contributes to increasing students' environmental awareness and ability to preserve the mangrove ecosystem.

This aligns with the journal Fitri & Buyungi (2024) findings that an area has local potential that can be maximally utilised as material from the learning process. Suppose this potential is used by topics relevant to the area's local potential. In that case, it will provide a variety of activity spaces to provide adequate insight and knowledge for students. In addition, local potential-based facilities can be utilised as a project-based learning medium that encourages students to integrate theory and practice. In their journal project-based learning, Napitupulu & Murniarti (2024) emphasise the connection of material with the real-life faced by students and the environment around them to produce meaningful products or results. In the process, students are invited to solve problems, make decisions, explore ideas or concepts, and develop the skills needed to create products as an output of learning. This approach strengthens students' understanding of the material and trains them in critical and creative thinking.

"The school's location in the coastal area provides potential and opportunities for developing mangrove cultivation programs. The school utilises the available land to manage mangrove cultivation as one of its flagship programs. This program is optimally implemented to support the

preservation of the coastal environment while providing educational value and skills to students in maintaining the mangrove ecosystem." (S, 2024).

In the researcher's opinion, the statement of the teacher of State Senior High School 3 Cilacap shows strategic awareness in utilising the geographical advantages of coastal areas for the development of environment-based education. The mangrove cultivation program managed by the school reflects efforts to conserve the coastal environment and serves as a contextual learning tool that integrates theory and practice. Through these activities, students learn about mangrove ecosystems and develop practical skills and ecological awareness relevant to local needs. The program also has the potential to create a generation that cares more about the environment and can actively contribute to maintaining coastal ecosystems. This approach aligns with the principles of sustainable education that link education, environmental conservation, and community empowerment.

This statement aligns with the findings of a journal written by Noverita et al. (2022), which stated that effective eco-literacy learning can increase students' knowledge and awareness of environmental issues. Hidayati et al. (2021) provide an example of this statement. Research conducted in several coastal schools in Indonesia shows that environmental education programs can increase students' understanding of the importance of coastal ecosystems and ways to protect them. This statement is corroborated by the findings of a journal written by Putri et al. (2022) that mangrove ecosystem management in coastal areas is critical in supporting environmental conservation while providing education to students in a contextual.

Collaboration with External Communities and Institutions to Help Run Activities in the Coastal Zone. To support the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in coastal areas, State Senior High School 3 Cilacap not only relies on internal school activities but also collaborates with external communities and institutions. This collaboration aims to strengthen the implementation of environmental-based programs, especially mangrove cultivation. The following is an explanation given by one of the teachers regarding the partnership:

"Community support in maintaining and preserving mangrove land is excellent, thus contributing positively to the sustainability of the mangrove cultivation program at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap. In addition, the school also collaborates with various institutions, such as the Environmental Agency (BLH), PT Solusi Bangun Indonesia, and PT Pertamina. This collaboration aims to support the success of the mangrove cultivation program. Usually, these institutions provide mangrove seeds." (S, 2024).

In the researcher's opinion, the active community support in maintaining and preserving mangrove land in State Senior High School 3 Cilacap shows a good synergy between the school and the local community. The community's role is essential in the program's sustainability and creating a sense of ownership of the mangrove ecosystem in coastal areas. The school's cooperation with various institutions, such as the Environmental Agency (BLH), PT Solusi Bangun Indonesia, and PT Pertamina, is a strategic step that strengthens the implementation of this program. Assistance in the form of mangrove seed provision by these institutions contributes significantly to supporting coastal ecosystem rehabilitation efforts. This collaboration reflects an effective partnership model between the education, community, and industry sectors in developing locally-based environmental programs. With optimal management, this program can become an example of best practices in environmental conservation and ecology-based education.

This is in line with the statement of Podungge et al. (2020) in their journal that community participation involves the active involvement of the community in various stages, from identifying problems and potentials, choosing solutions, and implementing efforts to evaluating the changes that occur. The community acts as observers and implementers who contribute to decision-making and assessment of the results. This participation is essential to create effective and sustainable solutions. The existence of school collaboration with external institutions contributes significantly to the success of mangrove planting activities in coastal areas, and this is in line with the findings of a journal written by Sukomardojo et al. (2023) that many projects or programs have succeeded in this framework if they involve various external institutions including government, non-governmental organisations such as NGOs, the private sector, and civil society. This collaboration

combines diverse resources, knowledge, and expertise to achieve superior and sustainable results.

Challenges in Implementing *Merdeka Curriculum* in Coastal Areas

Implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap faces several challenges, especially in integrating local potential-based activities into subjects. The main obstacles are teacher busyness and limited understanding of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. The deputy Principal for Curriculum gave his views on this matter. The following is the statement that was delivered:

"*Merdeka Curriculum* is generally implemented optimally by active teachers, such as driving teachers. However, at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap, local potential-based activities, such as those related to coastal areas, have not been specifically integrated into subjects. This is due to some of the main obstacles faced." (DR, 2024).

According to the deputy principal for curriculum:

"High teacher busyness is one of the main obstacles to effectively adopting the *Merdeka Curriculum*. In addition, the teachers' understanding of the *Merdeka Curriculum* is still not fully in-depth, so its implementation in schools tends to run slowly and not optimally."

"In general, the understanding of the *Merdeka Curriculum* does not reach 30% of 100%." (DR, 2024).

In the researcher's opinion, the above statement illustrates State Senior High School 03 Cilacap's challenges in optimally implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Although the *Merdeka Curriculum* offers flexibility for the development of local potential in learning, major obstacles such as high teacher busyness and limited understanding of this curriculum are significant. Teachers' busy schedules, often related to administrative and teaching duties, clearly affect the time and energy allocated to developing local potential-based learning. Despite the great potential for integrating coastal area-based activities into learning, this leads to suboptimal implementation. In addition, the lack of an in-depth understanding of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, as expressed by the deputy principal, indicates the need for more intensive training and mentoring so that teachers can be better prepared and able to implement this curriculum effectively.

In this context, a more systematic effort must be made to increase teacher capacity through training and better planning to integrate the local potential into

subjects so that the *Merdeka Curriculum* can run optimally at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap. A local potential-based approach enriches students' learning experiences and contributes to curriculum development that is more relevant and contextual to the surrounding environment. This is based on the findings of a journal written by Rahayuningsih & Hanif (2024), which stated that negative assessments often arise from a lack of knowledge, understanding, training, and adequate resources. This journal also reveals that excessive workload can affect teachers' negative curriculum assessment. The success of the curriculum comes from the readiness of human resources; a journal written by Karlina et al. (2024) states that teachers must be active, enthusiastic, creative, innovative, and talented to support the independent learning process.

As drivers of independent learning, teachers must not only have the ability to master and teach effectively in the classroom. Still, they must also be able to create a positive learning environment with their learners. The statement is corroborated by the findings written by Qomariyah & Maghfiroh (2022), who said in their research that they had found teachers' challenges in implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*. The first thing that needs to be prepared is adequate resources, such as facilities, infrastructure, and education personnel supporting the learning process. Second, the readiness of the planned program is an important key, so implementing it requires careful preparation from various aspects, not just an experiment. Third, more references are needed to support the study of the program and its practical implementation.

So, in this case, the role of the principal and policymakers at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap is vital. As stated in the journal Saragih & Marpaung (2024), providing thorough and continuous training for teachers is crucial in ensuring a good understanding and implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Consistent and constant teacher development can have a significant impact on improving their professionalism. This professional development helps teachers deal with various obstacles and allows them to take advantage of the opportunities to implement the *Merdeka Curriculum*.

Development of Student Independence and Creativity in Coastal Areas

To encourage the development of independence and creativity of students in coastal areas, State Senior High School 3 Cilacap integrates various essential values in its learning activities. One of the values emphasised is independence, developed through independent task-based assessments. In addition, students are also invited to build cooperation and mutual assistance through activities designed to support their daily lives. The following is a view expressed by one of the teachers:

"The value of independence can be instilled through self-assessment. In addition, there are activities designed to encourage students to develop the value of cooperation and cooperation in everyday life." (DR, 2024).

In the researcher's opinion, the teacher's statement reflects a relevant understanding of the curriculum's purpose, which is still the values of independence, mutual and cooperation that are important for students' character building. Self-assessment is strategic to encourage student responsibility for learning, while cooperation-based activities build essential social skills. The curriculum needs to be systematically designed to integrate these values, not only in the cognitive aspects but also in developing students' character and social skills to optimise this goal.

This aligns with the research journal conducted by Barlian et al. (2022), which states that the *Merdeka Curriculum* has been designed to develop the values of independence, cooperation, and cooperation as an essential part of student character building. The learning process in this curriculum is more often carried out in groups to foster a spirit of cooperation by the profile of Pancasila students. In addition, project-based learning is focused on the result and the formation of attitudes, such as independence, creativity, and critical reasoning skills. In its implementation, long-term projects encourage students to collaborate with friends and parents, reinforcing the value of mutual cooperation (gotong-royong). This approach not only helps students master skills but also builds character that is ready to play a positive role in society.

Socio-Cultural Context in Learning

According to the State Senior High School 3 Cilacap PAI teacher, religious teachers are essential as the first benchmark in shaping students' character, especially in coastal areas. This was conveyed in an interview conducted on November 18, 2024:

"A teacher must have sincere intentions in carrying out their duties, especially in instilling religious values as the foundation of character building. Teachers argue that a person is vulnerable to undesirable behaviour without a strong religious foundation. Family and society also influence character education, and religious teachers have a strategic role in schools to strengthen religious values in students' lives. In the context of coastal children, the learning approach should be done slowly, and language that is easy to understand and based on their background should be used. I think an approach that is too harsh can make students more disobedient. Thus, a softer and more communicative approach is more effective in building students' character with a solid religious foundation." (AF, 2024).

In the researcher's opinion, the statement of the PAI teacher at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap emphasises the crucial role of religious teachers in forming student character, which is the main component of education. Instilling religious values as the basis of character is very important because religious values become moral and ethical guidelines that can guide students in facing various challenges in life. Spiritual teachers who have sincere intentions can be role models for students so that the learning process is not only limited to the transfer of knowledge but also focuses on developing good attitudes and behaviour.

Although family and community are also very influential in character education, religion teachers in schools strategically strengthen religious teachings among students. Especially for students in coastal areas, the learning approach must be adapted to their cultural background and life. Simple language and a gentle, communicative approach are necessary, as overly harsh or authoritarian methods can trigger resistance and hinder the desired character-building process. This inclusive and adaptive approach allows students to understand and absorb the values taught more easily and build better relationships between teachers and students. Therefore, for researchers, it is essential to continue supporting the development of teachers' communication skills to create a positive learning

environment so that religious values can be instilled more effectively and sustainably.

This is in line with the journal written by Judah et al. (2024). PAI teachers are essential in supporting student character development. In addition to functioning as a teacher who conveys knowledge, PAI teachers also act as mentors who help students form the morals, ethics, and religious values needed to become ideal individuals as expected.

"In every lesson, they teach students the importance of living well in society and living as servants of God who respect fellow Muslims. The role of teachers includes moral provision, providing good examples, and not only giving orders but also inviting students to behave positively together." (AF, 2024).

Teacher AF also said:

"Teachers must have an active role in monitoring student behaviour. For example, teachers will give constructive reprimands and directions when students speak harshly or misbehave. This effort is made continuously to shape good character and social behaviour. However, teachers cannot walk alone; the role of parents is vital, especially for children who live in coastal areas. Collaboration between teachers and parents is key to holistically shaping students' morals and social behaviour." (AF, 2024).

According to the researchers, the statement of the PAI teacher at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap reflects a holistic and comprehensive approach to student character building. Moral guidance and good teacher examples are vital for students to live well in society and respect others. The role of teachers who not only teach but also invite students to behave positively together shows the importance of a participatory and collective approach in educating students in academic matters and social and character aspects.

The reprimand given by teachers when students misbehave is a form of approach based on sustainable character building. This approach is more than just punishment or correction; it gives students a positive understanding and direction. In this case, the teacher acts as a facilitator who not only teaches knowledge but also guides students in the process of internalising moral and social values. The importance of collaboration between teachers and parents is also very relevant, especially for students living in coastal areas who may have their own social and cultural challenges. Cooperation between family and school will create a

supportive environment for students' character building. Therefore, to achieve optimal character building, teachers and parents must communicate and support each other in directing students towards better and responsible behaviour in their social lives.

According to Rahmawati et al. (2020), improving the religiosity of learners requires the involvement of all supporting elements. The role of the family is crucial in building religiosity, as their responsibility and support, along with the community environment, contribute significantly to instilling religious values. Schools cannot fully carry out this responsibility alone, as the school's influence is limited to the time learners are in the school environment. Beyond that, the family as the primary educator and the community as the living environment have greater responsibilities. With the cooperation of all parties, students can grow into individuals with high religiosity. A journal by Sari (2023) emphasises that an educator and teacher are essential in providing examples of ethical behaviour. Their actions, character, and behaviour will be an example for students. In mainstreaming, education provided by teachers and educators not only disseminates information but also acts as role models that influence ethical behaviour and orientation.

The results of the interviews that have been discussed show that the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* needs to pay attention to the geographical conditions of a school. This is necessary to maximise local potential through programs in the *Merdeka Curriculum*. This adjustment will also help build students' character by the norms of the local community; the utilisation of local potential is also the main focus of learning independence. Implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* in coastal areas, especially at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap, has not fully integrated local potential, such as maritime-based activities, into formal learning. Although activities such as mangrove planting and coastal sports have been routinely carried out, these activities are still in the extracurricular realm and have not become a structured part of the subject. This suggests a gap between the available local potential and the opportunity to optimally utilise it through a more contextualised curriculum.

The mangrove cultivation program managed by the school reflects a strategic effort to take advantage of the geographical advantages of coastal areas. With facilities such as mangrove fields and laboratories, students gain theoretical knowledge and practical experience relevant to local needs. The program not only supports the preservation of the coastal environment but also strengthens students' ecological awareness. Integrating local potential into project-based learning can enrich the learning experience and encourage students' character development. Research by Sunendar (2020) shows that implementing project-based learning involving local wisdom helps students explore their potential by connecting local cultural knowledge to make the learning process more meaningful and contextual in daily life.

In addition, in learning PAI, teachers have taken positive steps by adjusting teaching approaches based on the characteristics and backgrounds of coastal students. Initial tests, such as the ability to read the Qur'an, help teachers design teaching methods that are more relevant and appropriate to students' needs. In the journal Rahmat et al. (2024), it is stated that an interpersonal approach that creates an inclusive learning atmosphere also strengthens the emotional connection between teachers and students, supporting their holistic character development. However, the opportunity to develop special programs based on maritime culture or economy in PAI has not been fully utilised. As mentioned by Muis et al. (2024), integrating local potential and wisdom into learning is a method that aims to make the learning process more relevant and appropriate to the context of students' daily lives. This approach strengthens academic skills and helps build character and a positive attitude towards the surrounding environment.

Realising independent and creative coastal students requires a learning approach that systematically integrates the values of independence and mutual cooperation. The interview with teacher D shows that self-assessment is an effective strategy for instilling students' responsibility for their learning process. By evaluating their abilities independently, students are invited to understand their strengths and weaknesses, ultimately building an independent attitude in facing academic challenges and daily life. In addition, work-based activities, such as

those implemented in the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), have contributed to fostering the value of mutual cooperation and students' social skills (Rohmah et al., 2024). These activities strengthen interactions between students and equip them with the ability to work in teams, which is crucial in coastal communities that often rely on community cooperation. For these values to be optimally internalised, the curriculum must be designed to make self-reliance and cooperation an integral part of formal learning, not just an additional activity. As explained in the journal Qomarrullah et al. (2024), the *Merdeka Curriculum* has emphasised project-based learning, which is student-centred, so that it can help students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Thus, coastal students can grow into individuals who are independent, creative, and ready to actively contribute to the preservation of the environment and the development of their communities.

Collaboration with communities and external institutions is very important in supporting the success of environment-based programs, such as mangrove cultivation at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap. Collaboration between the principal, teachers, parents, and the community plays an important role in realising the program. Through good collaboration, various resources and ideas can be combined to create a more effective and relevant learning environment, especially in supporting environment-based programs that require the active involvement of all stakeholders. Community support in maintaining and preserving mangrove land contributes greatly to the sustainability of this program, as they are an integral part of the coastal ecosystem. Community involvement reflects the spirit of mutual cooperation, which is the main foundation of sustainable environmental conservation.

In addition, cooperation with external agencies, such as the *Badan Lingkungan Hidup (BLH)*/Environmental Agency, PT Solusi Bangun Indonesia, and PT Pertamina, is a key factor that strengthens program implementation. These institutions not only provide mangrove seeds but also technical support and resources necessary for the program's success. Schools can overcome internal limitations, such as limited funds or facilities, with this collaboration so the

program runs more effectively. This kind of collaboration also supports the goal of environment-based education by involving various parties while providing long-term positive impacts for students and the surrounding community.

Every implementation of a curriculum or education program, including the *Merdeka Curriculum*, is always faced with obstacles and challenges that must be overcome to succeed. The results of interviews with the deputy principal for the Curriculum of State Senior High School 3 Cilacap revealed that one of the main obstacles in adopting the *Merdeka Curriculum* is the high level of environment-based education by involving various parties while providing long-term positive impacts for students and the surrounding community. In addition, teachers' low understanding of the *Merdeka Curriculum* is a significant challenge. The deputy principal for the Curriculum stated that the general teacher's understanding of this curriculum only reached around 30%. This shows the need for intensive training and ongoing assistance to increase teacher capacity. This challenge is normal in the transition process or introducing new policies. Therefore, a planned and comprehensive strategy is needed to overcome the challenges of implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*. One of the main steps is to conduct a training program for teachers specifically designed to support the implementation of this curriculum. The training should be conducted regularly to ensure that teachers can continuously improve their knowledge and skills. In addition, collaboration between schools, government, and communities is essential to create a conducive learning environment and support the successful implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. This collaborative approach ensures that all parties realise quality and relevant education (Fadhilah et al., 2024). Overcoming these obstacles will pave the way for a more optimal implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, especially in utilising local potential as a learning resource.

IV. CONCLUSION

Implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* at State Senior High School 3 Cilacap shows great potential to support local-based education in coastal areas. Programs such as mangrove cultivation significantly benefit student character building and

increase environmental awareness. However, the implementation is still faced with challenges, including low teacher understanding of the curriculum, high teacher busyness, and lack of integration of local potential into formal learning. Intensive teacher training, supporting facility development, and closer collaboration with external institutions and the community are needed. With a more systematic approach, the *Merdeka Curriculum* can be an effective and relevant educational transformation tool for coastal children, supporting the formation of an independent, creative, and competitive generation to overcome these obstacles. Local potential-based approaches, such as mangrove ecosystem management, have so far not been fully implemented in structured specialised learning. While these activities support environmental conservation and strengthen students' character and practical skills, the program is still in the realm of supplementary activities. Pancasila values, such as cooperation and mutual cooperation, remain important, but their integration into the formal curriculum requires more careful planning. With comprehensive support, the *Merdeka Curriculum* can transform into an effective educational approach to create students who are independent, creative, and concerned about preserving the coastal environment.

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