

## Inhibiting Factors in the Implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in Special Needs Elementary Schools (SDLB) Sragen Regency

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**Abstract:** This study aims to identify and describe the inhibiting factors in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Special Needs Elementary Schools (SDLB) in Sragen Regency. A mixed methods approach with a sequential explanatory design was used. Quantitative data were collected through a 5-point Likert Scale questionnaire involving 48 SDLB teachers and in-depth interviews with six principals and eight teachers. Descriptive analysis revealed four main dimensions of obstacles: teacher competence ( $M = 3.92$ ;  $SD = 0.51$ ), facilities and infrastructure ( $M = 4.15$ ;  $SD = 0.48$ ), curriculum understanding ( $M = 3.86$ ;  $SD = 0.55$ ), and readiness of students with special needs ( $M = 3.67$ ;  $SD = 0.59$ ). The results showed that limited adaptive facilities and technology-based learning resources were the most dominant obstacles, followed by low teacher readiness in designing open modules and formative assessments that were appropriate to student characteristics. Correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between teacher competency and curriculum understanding ( $r = 0.71$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Interviews revealed that most teachers had not received in-depth training. Research implications emphasize the importance of ongoing training policies, the provision of adaptive facilities, and implementation support from local governments. The study confirms that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in SDLB faces structural and competency barriers that need to be addressed through synergistic policies, teacher capacity building, and strengthening of inclusive learning infrastructure.

**Keywords:** Merdeka Curriculum, special needs elementary school, implementation barriers, teacher competence, facilities and infrastructure.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi dan mendeskripsikan faktor-faktor penghambat pelaksanaan Kurikulum Merdeka di Sekolah Dasar Luar Biasa (SDLB) Kabupaten Sragen. Pendekatan mixed methods dengan desain sequential explanatory, data kuantitatif dilakukan melalui angket skala Likert 5 poin yang melibatkan 48 guru SDLB, wawancara mendalam terhadap enam kepala sekolah dan delapan guru. Analisis deskriptif menunjukkan empat dimensi utama hambatan, yaitu kompetensi guru ( $M = 3,92$ ;  $SD = 0,51$ ), sarana dan prasarana ( $M = 4,15$ ;  $SD = 0,48$ ), pemahaman kurikulum ( $M = 3,86$ ;  $SD = 0,55$ ), dan kesiapan peserta didik berkebutuhan khusus ( $M = 3,67$ ;  $SD = 0,59$ ). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keterbatasan fasilitas adaptif dan sumber belajar berbasis teknologi merupakan hambatan paling dominan, diikuti dengan rendahnya kesiapan guru dalam merancang modul ajar dan asesmen formatif yang sesuai dengan karakteristik peserta didik. Analisis korelasi mengungkap adanya hubungan positif signifikan antara kompetensi guru dan pemahaman kurikulum ( $r = 0,71$ ;  $p < 0,01$ ). Wawancara memperlihatkan sebagian besar guru belum memperoleh pelatihan mendalam. Implikasi penelitian menekankan pentingnya kebijakan pelatihan berkelanjutan, penyediaan sarana adaptif, dan pendampingan implementatif dari pemerintah daerah. Penelitian menegaskan bahwa pelaksanaan Kurikulum Merdeka di SDLB menghadapi hambatan struktural dan kompetensial yang perlu diatasi melalui sinergi kebijakan, peningkatan kapasitas guru, dan penguatan infrastruktur pembelajaran inklusif.

**Kata Kunci:** Kurikulum Merdeka, SDLB, hambatan implementasi, kompetensi guru, sarana-prasarana.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The *Merdeka Curriculum* policy, launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) in 2022, marks a paradigm shift in Indonesia's national education system toward a more flexible, contextual, and student-centered learning model. This curriculum grants teachers greater autonomy to adapt materials, teaching methods, and assessments according to the

characteristics and learning needs of their students (Yusa, Yusuf, Rahman, Aniati, & Supriyanto, 2023). Through the principles of *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn), the government seeks to cultivate 21st-century competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and character building aligned with the *Pancasila Student Profile* (Syafriani, Dawolo, Butar Butar, Batubara, & Silitonga, 2024).

The *Merdeka Curriculum* emphasizes contextual teaching modules, continuous formative assessment, and project-based learning to foster students' holistic development (Wulandari, Munirah, & Yusuf, 2024). However, its implementation in Special Needs Elementary Schools (*Sekolah Dasar Luar Biasa*—SDLB) presents complex challenges. Students with special needs (PDBK) exhibit diverse characteristics, ability levels, and learning barriers, necessitating individualized curriculum adaptations. Therefore, implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* in SDLB requires readiness in human resources, facilities, infrastructure, and policy support specifically tailored to the context of special education (Komarudin & Kaeni, 2023).

Several studies indicate that special education teachers still face difficulties in understanding the structure and core principles of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, particularly in designing differentiated learning and authentic assessment for students with special needs (Rahmi, Rufaidah, Desvianti, & Dalimunthe, 2024). These challenges are often rooted in low pedagogical and professional competence, limited technical training, and insufficient mentoring in the development of adaptive teaching modules. Additionally, the scarcity of learning facilities such as communication aids, interactive media, and technological devices serves as a significant barrier to supporting contextual and project-based learning (Zain, Yoenanto, & Fardana N., 2024).

Another influential factor is students' readiness to engage in *Merdeka Curriculum*-based learning activities. Learners with intellectual, sensory, or physical disabilities require intensive learning support, adaptive media use, and extended learning time (UNESCO, 2021). Teachers' lack of understanding of differentiation strategies often hinders the development of students' independence and active participation (Almujab, 2023). In this context, school principals play a crucial role as instructional leaders who guide, support, and supervise curriculum implementation to ensure alignment with students' individual needs (Syafriani et al., 2024).

Nationally, the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in special schools continues to face a gap between policy formulation and field practice. Although the government has provided guidelines and digital platforms such as *Merdeka Mengajar*, their effectiveness in special education settings remains limited (Yusa et al., 2023). Other studies have also shown that insufficient mentoring from local education authorities, lack of inter-school collaboration, and weak regional policies in resource provision further slow down implementation (Komarudin & Kaeni, 2023; Rahmi et al., 2024).

In Sragen Regency, both public and private SDLBs face similar conditions. Reports from the Sragen District Education Office indicate that most schools are still in the early stages of implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*. The main challenges include limited teacher competence in developing adaptive teaching modules, inadequate facilities for contextual learning, and low understanding of formative assessment. Moreover, the diverse readiness levels of students also affect the effectiveness of instructional implementation.

Considering these complexities, this study is relevant for identifying and describing the inhibiting factors in the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* across SDLB in Sragen Regency. It also aims to provide strategic recommendations for local governments and educational institutions to strengthen curriculum implementation capacity in special education settings. A mixed-methods approach was employed to achieve a comprehensive understanding by integrating quantitative data from teacher and principal surveys with qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews and field observations.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

### 2.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using a sequential explanatory design, wherein quantitative data collection and analysis were conducted first to identify the inhibiting factors in the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in SDLBs, followed by a qualitative phase to deepen understanding of the initial findings. This design was chosen because it enables integration of numerical

and narrative data, providing a more comprehensive depiction of the phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The quantitative strand measured teachers' and principals' perceptions of barriers to *Merdeka Curriculum* implementation across four principal dimensions:

- a. Teacher competence — covering pedagogical skills, understanding of differentiated instruction principles, and mastery of developing adaptive teaching modules.
- b. Facilities and infrastructure — including availability of learning facilities, interactive media, and technological support for contextualized learning.
- c. Curriculum understanding — related to comprehension of learning outcomes (CP), formative assessment, and the project-based principles for reinforcing the *Pancasila Student Profile*.
- d. Readiness of students with special needs (PDBK) — assessing learning independence, ability to engage in project-based learning, and adaptation to the learning environment.

The qualitative strand was designed to explore, in greater depth, teachers' and principals' experiences, perceptions, and adaptive strategies in responding to obstacles encountered during the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in SDLB settings.

## 2.2. Participant

Participants consisted of SDLB teachers and principals in Sragen Regency. Teacher respondents were active classroom teachers instructing grades I–VI and representing diverse special needs categories, including visual impairment (tunanetra), hearing impairment (tunarungu), intellectual disability (tunagrahita), physical disability (tunadaksa), and autism. Participating principals were heads of schools directly responsible for overseeing *Merdeka Curriculum* implementation at their respective institutions.

Sampling was conducted purposively with the following criteria: (1) the school is registered on the *Merdeka Mengajar* platform and has implemented the *Merdeka Curriculum* for at least one semester; (2) teachers and principals consented to participate in the questionnaire and in-depth interviews; and (3) the school focuses on special-needs education (SDLB), not a regular inclusive school.

## 2.3. Research Instruments

The quantitative instrument comprised a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire developed from implementation theory on the *Merdeka Curriculum* and prior studies (Komarudin & Kaeni, 2023; Syafriani et al., 2024; Yusa et al., 2023). The questionnaire covered the four main dimensions: teacher competence, facilities and infrastructure, curriculum understanding, and PDBK readiness. The instrument demonstrated validity of 0.824 and reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.914.

Qualitative instruments included a semi-structured interview guide and a non-participant observation sheet. Interviews with teachers and principals sought to elicit experiences, perceived barriers, and adaptive strategies in implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*, while observations focused on classroom practice and the learning-support environment in SDLB.

**Tabel 1.** Research Instruments

Variable	Key Indicators
Teacher Competence	Understanding of differentiated instruction principles. Ability to design adaptive teaching modules. Implementation of formative assessment.
Facilities and Infrastructure	Availability of learning facilities. Support of technological media. Access to learning resources.
Curriculum Understanding	Understanding of learning outcomes (CP). Understanding of curriculum structure. Application of <i>Pancasila Student Profile</i> projects.
Readiness of Students with Special Needs	Learning independence of PDBK. Ability to participate actively. Adaptation to contextualized learning.

## 3.

### 3.1. *Technique Analysis Data*

Data analysis proceeded in stages:

- a. Quantitative analysis — descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and percentages) were used to portray respondents' perceptions of each inhibiting factor.
- b. Quantitative analyses were performed using SPSS version 26.
- c. Qualitative analysis — thematic analysis following (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was applied, including transcription, coding, theme identification, and data interpretation. Integration (mixing) — results from quantitative and qualitative strands were integrated at the interpretation stage to identify convergences and divergences between findings, yielding comprehensive conclusions.

## 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. *Result*

Descriptive analysis of the respondents (SDLB teachers) revealed that the barriers to implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* in Special Needs Elementary Schools across Sragen Regency fall into four main dimensions: teacher competence, facilities and infrastructure, curriculum understanding, and readiness of students with special needs.

**Tabel 2.** Mean Scores of Barriers to *Merdeka Curriculum* Implementation in SDLBs across Sragen Regency

No	Dimension of Barriers	Mean	SD	Category of Barrier
1	Teacher Competence	3.92	0.51	High
2	Facilities and Infrastructure	4.15	0.48	Very High
3	Curriculum Understanding	3.86	0.55	High
4	Readiness of Students with Special Needs	3.67	0.59	Fairly High
	Overall Mean	3.90	—	High

The findings indicate that facilities and infrastructure constitute the most dominant barrier, with the highest mean score ( $M = 4.15$ ), followed by teacher competence ( $M = 3.92$ ). This suggests that the limited availability of adaptive facilities and technology-based learning resources serves as the primary obstacle to implementing differentiated instruction and the Pancasila Student Profile project.

Correlation analysis among dimensions showed a significant positive relationship between teacher competence and curriculum understanding ( $r = 0.71$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), implying that improving teacher competence could enhance understanding of the principles and structure of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Interviews with six principals and eight SDLB teachers confirmed the quantitative findings. Several key issues emerged:

a. Limited Teacher Competence and Training

Teachers reported that not all educators had received specialized training in differentiated learning and formative assessment for students with special needs. One teacher stated:

“We are still adjusting to the new terms and approaches in the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Not all of our teaching modules can be adapted to the conditions of our special needs students.”

b. Inadequate Facilities and Infrastructure

Some schools lacked sensory facilities, adaptive aids, and digital devices to support project-based learning. This shortage hinders the application of flexible and contextual learning principles.

c. Limited Curriculum Understanding

Several teachers admitted having difficulty understanding *Capaian Pembelajaran* (Learning Outcomes) and integrating the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) projects into classroom instruction.

d. Readiness of Students with Special Needs

The independence and communication skills of students with special needs vary widely, requiring teachers to invest more time and adaptive strategies to apply new learning models effectively.

The convergence between quantitative and qualitative findings underscores that facilities and infrastructure and teacher competence are the most critical barriers. The lack of adequate training support, adaptive teaching modules, and technology-based learning infrastructure has prevented optimal implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in SDLBs.

The success of this curriculum's implementation depends heavily on human resource readiness and the availability of appropriate learning facilities. Moreover, Komarudin & Kaeni (2023) emphasize that inclusive education in Indonesia continues to face significant gaps in both infrastructure and teachers' adaptive instructional skills.

#### 4.2. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the main inhibiting factors in the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in Special Needs Elementary Schools (SDLB) throughout Sragen Regency encompass four dimensions: teacher competence, facilities and infrastructure, curriculum understanding, and the readiness of students with special needs.

Quantitatively, barriers in the teacher competence dimension scored high ( $M = 3.92$ ;  $SD = 0.51$ ). Interview data supported this finding, as most teachers admitted that they had not yet fully mastered the concepts of differentiated instruction and formative assessment appropriate for students with special needs. Teachers also reported that technical training related to the *Merdeka Curriculum* remains limited. These findings are consistent with those of (Mukhibin & Nafidhoh, 2023), who found that teachers still experience difficulties in understanding the paradigm shift toward project-based learning and formative assessment. Similarly, Komarudin & Kaeni (2023) emphasized that low competence among inclusive education teachers is a key barrier in implementing the new curriculum policy.

This finding implies the need for continuous professional development for SDLB teachers, focusing on adaptive learning module development, differentiated learning design, and authentic assessments tailored to the characteristics of students with special needs. Without such capacity-building interventions, the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* risks becoming merely administrative rather than producing a meaningful pedagogical transformation.

Furthermore, the facilities and infrastructure dimension showed the highest barrier score ( $M = 4.15$ ;  $SD = 0.48$ ). Teachers reported that schools lack sensory devices, digital assistive tools, and adaptive media facilities that support project-based learning or *Pancasila Student Profile* (P5) activities. This finding aligns with Rumiati, Ayuni, Wulandari, Saputri, & Monica (2024), who concluded that infrastructural limitations are a major obstacle in implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* in elementary schools. In the context of inclusive education, Isnawati, Zakaria, & Pratomo (2025) also found that the lack of adaptive facilities hinders the contextual learning process for students with special needs.

Therefore, the facilities and infrastructure factor is not merely a technical obstacle but also directly affects teachers' ability to adapt instructional models and assessments. Policy recommendations include the provision of adaptive learning aids, training in educational technology, and dedicated regional budget allocations to support *Merdeka Curriculum* implementation in SDLBs.

In the curriculum understanding dimension, the barrier score was also high ( $M = 3.86$ ;  $SD = 0.55$ ). Teachers reported difficulties in understanding learning outcomes and the steps for designing formative assessments. This barrier is supported by findings from Gunawan & Bahari (2024), who explained that teachers face challenges in interpreting the principles of differentiation, especially during planning and project integration stages. Likewise, Seftiani, Shyafitri, Rupiani, Anggraini, & Anggraini (2024) found that limited references and adaptation time contribute to the low level of teacher understanding of the *Merdeka Curriculum*.

In the context of special education, Oktasari, Karnati, & Arbah (2025) reported that SDLB teachers face a dual challenge: understanding the substance of the curriculum while adapting it to the specific needs of their students. Therefore, it is recommended that adaptive implementation guidelines for the *Merdeka Curriculum* in SDLBs be developed, alongside direct mentoring from the local education office to ensure more consistent teacher understanding and practice.

The final dimension, student readiness, showed an average score ( $M = 3.67$ ;  $SD = 0.59$ ). The cognitive, social, and sensory diversity among students leads to varying levels of adaptability to new

learning approaches. This finding is consistent with Fadillah, Rahayu, Panjaitan, & Wulandari (2024), who highlighted the importance of teacher assistants and parental involvement in enhancing student readiness in inclusive schools. Similarly, Isnawati et al., (2025) found that the learning readiness of inclusive students is strongly influenced by environmental support and the availability of learning facilities.

Correlation analysis among dimensions revealed a significant positive relationship between teacher competence and curriculum understanding ( $r = 0.71, p < 0.01$ ), indicating that improvements in teachers' pedagogical abilities correspond with better comprehension of the structure and principles of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. This supports Komarudin & Kaeni (2023) assertion that barriers in implementing inclusive education are systemic and interrelated, involving human resources, facilities, and school policies.

By integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, it can be concluded that the barriers to implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* in SDLBs are structural and multidimensional. Therefore, strategies to enhance implementation effectiveness should be holistic, encompassing: (1) practice-based teacher training, (2) provision of adaptive facilities, (3) development of specialized SDLB teaching modules, and (4) policy supervision based on field data. These strategies align with the recommendations of (Syafi'e, Faadiyah, Nugrahaini, Shalihah, & Pratiwi, 2025), who emphasized the importance of synergy among teacher training, policy support, and infrastructure provision to ensure the successful implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study aims to identify and describe the internal inhibiting factors in the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* at Special Needs Elementary Schools (SDLB) across Sragen Regency using a mixed-methods approach with a sequential explanatory model. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data revealed that the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in SDLBs continues to face various systemic and interrelated barriers.

First, teacher competence emerged as the most influential factor affecting the success of curriculum implementation. Most teachers still lack adequate understanding and skills in applying differentiated instruction, formative assessment, and the development of adaptive teaching modules for students with special needs. The limited availability of training and technical assistance has hindered teachers from fully interpreting the essence and objectives of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in a contextualized manner within the SDLB environment.

Second, facilities and infrastructure proved to be the most dominant barrier with the highest score. Most special needs schools in Sragen Regency do not yet possess sufficient sensory aids, educational technology media, or facilities to support Pancasila Student Profile (P5) projects. These limitations obstruct the implementation of key principles such as flexibility, contextualization, and experiential learning.

Third, curriculum understanding remains relatively low. Teachers still experience difficulties in comprehending learning outcomes, formative assessment structures, and the integration of P5 values into the learning process. This obstacle highlights the urgent need for continuous curriculum mentoring and the development of adaptive curriculum implementation guidelines specifically designed for SDLB.

Fourth, the readiness of students with special needs (PDBK) presents its own unique challenges. The wide variations in cognitive, social, and emotional abilities among students require far more personalized and flexible learning strategies compared to regular schools. The lack of sufficient time, special education assistants, and family involvement further slows the adaptation process to the new curriculum.

Overall, the findings of this study affirm that the successful implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in SDLBs highly depends on the synergy between human resource readiness, the availability of adequate facilities, and policy support that responds to the specific needs of inclusive education. A comprehensive intervention strategy is required through:

- a. Continuous professional training for teachers in adaptive learning and formative assessment;
- b. Provision of appropriate learning aids and facilities for students with special needs (PDBK);

- c. Strengthening curriculum understanding through technical mentoring by the local education office and higher education institutions;
- d. Collaboration among schools, parents, and inclusive education communities to build a supportive learning environment.

This research contributes to the empirical understanding of the challenges in implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* within the context of special education, providing a foundation for formulating more adaptive and evidence-based inclusive education policies. Future studies are recommended to explore the effectiveness of teacher training programs and the impact of regional policy support on improving the quality of *Merdeka Curriculum* implementation in special education institutions

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