

# Strategic School Management for Curriculum Transformation: Lessons from the Independent Learning Policy Implementation

Samrin<sup>1\*</sup>, Wa Alimuna<sup>2</sup>, Rusdi Awan<sup>3</sup>

Islamic Educational Management Department, Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kendari, Kendari, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia

Email: samrin@iainkendari.ac.id<sup>1</sup>, waalimuna@iainkendari.ac.id<sup>2</sup>, awanrusdi023@gmail.com<sup>3</sup>

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## Abstract:

This study aims to analyze school management and the implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum policy from the perspective of teacher perceptions in public senior high schools. The method used was a qualitative multi-site study with purposive sampling. Data were collected through observation, structured interviews, and document analysis. The results indicate that teachers have a positive perception of the Independent Learning Curriculum policy, particularly regarding flexibility and student-centered assessment. However, challenges that affect the policy's implementation include the diversity of student characteristics, teachers' limited understanding of the curriculum and assessment, low student motivation, and limited technological facilities and infrastructure. The implications of this study indicate that the successful implementation of the policy depends heavily on strategic school management, including instructional supervision, resource allocation, teacher capacity building, and ongoing professional development. Strengthening managerial support systems, increasing access to training, and institutional readiness are important factors in optimizing curriculum implementation.

**Keywords:** *School Management, Independent Learning Curriculum, Professional Development*

## Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis manajemen sekolah dan implementasi kebijakan Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar melalui perspektif persepsi guru di Sekolah Menengah Atas Negeri. Metode yang digunakan adalah penelitian multisitrus kualitatif dengan teknik purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara terstruktur, dan analisis dokumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru memiliki persepsi positif terhadap kebijakan Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar, terutama terkait fleksibilitas dan asesmen berpusat pada peserta didik. Namun, terdapat tantangan yang memengaruhi efektivitas implementasi kebijakan tersebut, antara lain keberagaman karakteristik peserta didik, keterbatasan pemahaman guru terhadap kurikulum dan asesmen, rendahnya motivasi siswa, serta keterbatasan sarana dan infrastruktur teknologi. Implikasi dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa keberhasilan implementasi kebijakan sangat bergantung pada manajemen sekolah yang strategis, termasuk supervisi instruksional, pengalokasian sumber daya, penguatan kapasitas guru, dan pengembangan profesional berkelanjutan. Penguatan sistem dukungan manajerial, peningkatan akses terhadap pelatihan, dan kesiapan institusi menjadi faktor penting dalam mengoptimalkan implementasi kurikulum.

**Kunci:** *Manajemen Sekolah, Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar, Pengembangan Profesional*

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## INTRODUCTION

The development of high-quality human resources is a strategic prerequisite for national competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-driven, technologically complex global landscape. Education systems are therefore required not only to transmit disciplinary knowledge but also to cultivate adaptive expertise, critical thinking, creativity, and socio-emotional competencies aligned with twenty-first-century demands (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). Within this broader transformation, curriculum policy serves as a central regulatory and pedagogical instrument through which states articulate educational priorities, define learning standards, and shape instructional and assessment practices. Curriculum is not merely a technical blueprint of content and objectives; rather, it is an integrated framework that connects educational vision, school management structures, teacher agency, and student learning trajectories (Fauzi, 2021). Consequently, curriculum reform must be understood as both a pedagogical and managerial process requiring coherence between policy design and implementation capacity at the school level.

In Indonesia, the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) Curriculum was introduced as a transformative response to systemic challenges, including learning loss, rigid content overload, and assessment systems overly dominated by summative evaluation. Institutionalized through the Decree of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology No. 56 of 2022, this reform promotes flexibility, differentiated learning, project-based instruction, and holistic assessment grounded in the Profil Pelajar Pancasila framework. Conceptually, the reform aligns with global competency-based education movements that emphasize formative feedback, learner agency, and growth-oriented evaluation (Black & Wiliam, 2018; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). By granting teachers greater autonomy in designing assessment strategies, the policy reflects a paradigmatic shift from compliance-oriented accountability toward professional trust and decentralized curriculum governance (Spillane et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, international scholarship consistently demonstrates that the success of curriculum reform depends less on policy articulation and more on how teachers interpret, negotiate, and enact reform within classroom contexts (Honig, 2021; Coburn, 2021). Teachers are not passive implementers; they function as policy actors whose beliefs, professional identities, and contextual understandings shape the depth and direction of reform realization (Hsieh, 2024). This dynamic becomes particularly salient in the domain of assessment, where reform requires a transition from exam-centered traditions to formative, diagnostic, and feedback-driven approaches that support continuous learning improvement (Panadero et al., 2019). Without adequate assessment literacy, instructional leadership, and institutional alignment, autonomy risks generating fragmentation rather than pedagogical innovation (Abu-Tineh, 2025).

Although a growing body of Indonesian scholarship has explored various dimensions of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum – ranging from teacher perceptions to implementation constraints – most existing studies remain fragmented, school-specific, or limited to descriptive accounts. Empirical research rarely situates teacher perceptions within a broader policy implementation and school management framework, particularly at the senior high school level, where assessment complexity increases due to academic specialization and certification pressures. Moreover, limited attention has been given to district-level analyses that capture cross-school dynamics within decentralized governance structures. This indicates a significant research gap in understanding how teachers' normative acceptance of assessment reform interacts with managerial readiness, professional development systems, and institutional capacity in real implementation settings.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines teachers' perceptions of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum policy in public senior high schools (SMAN) in Konawe District, with particular emphasis on the assessment domain. By integrating teacher perception analysis with contemporary policy implementation theory, this study conceptualizes assessment reform not merely as a technical adjustment but as a systemic organizational transformation that requires alignment among autonomy, accountability, professional competence, and school leadership. The research seeks to explore how teachers interpret assessment-related policy principles, identify the structural and pedagogical challenges they encounter, and analyze the extent to which school-level management conditions support or constrain effective implementation.

Through this comprehensive district-level investigation, the study contributes to international discourse on curriculum decentralization and teacher agency in the development of education systems. It provides empirical evidence on how policy aspirations for flexible and student-centered assessment are negotiated within everyday school realities. Furthermore, the findings offer policy-relevant insights for district and provincial education authorities in strengthening institutional capacity, professional development structures, and instructional leadership practices necessary for sustaining meaningful curriculum transformation. In doing so, the study positions teacher perception not as an isolated variable but as a central mediating factor in the complex relationship between curriculum policy design and classroom enactment.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative multiple-site study design to explore teachers' perceptions of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum policy, particularly in relation to assessment practices, and to examine the contextual factors influencing its implementation in public senior high schools (Sekolah Menengah Atas Negeri/SMAN) in Konawe District. A descriptive qualitative approach was adopted because the study aimed to understand meaning construction, professional interpretation, and policy enactment within natural school settings rather than to test causal relationships. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate for examining curriculum reform, as policy implementation is shaped

by contextual negotiation, institutional culture, and actors' beliefs (Spillane et al., 2021; Honig, 2021).

The research was conducted in Konawe District, Southeast Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. The study population included teachers from 24 public senior high schools distributed across 29 sub-districts. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure the selection of information-rich cases that were directly engaged in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Schools were selected based on their adoption of the curriculum through the Independent Path (Jalur Mandiri), which offers three implementation schemes: Mandiri Belajar (Independent Learning), Mandiri Berubah (Independent Transformation), and Mandiri (Fully Independent). These implementation pathways reflect varying levels of institutional readiness and autonomy in curriculum enactment (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Five SMAN that had formally implemented the Merdeka Curriculum under one of these schemes were selected as research sites. From each school, two teachers were identified as key informants, yielding a total of 10 participants. Selection criteria included: (1) active involvement in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in classroom practice, (2) direct engagement with assessment design and reporting under the new curriculum framework, and (3) willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. This sampling strategy ensured alignment between research objectives and participant expertise (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data collection employed methodological triangulation through structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis. Structured questionnaires were used to capture baseline perceptions concerning assessment flexibility, formative orientation, and policy acceptance. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore teachers' interpretative frameworks, perceived challenges, adaptive strategies, and reflections on institutional and managerial support. Interviews enabled probing and clarification, capturing nuanced perspectives on assessment reform, consistent with qualitative best practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Observations were undertaken to contextualize classroom assessment practices and teacher-student interactions. At the same time, document analysis focused on lesson plans, assessment instruments, student report formats (e-report), and school-level curriculum guidelines. The use of multiple data sources enhanced credibility through triangulation and cross-validation of findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Data analysis followed an interactive qualitative model consisting of three interconnected stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2014). In the data reduction phase, interview transcripts, field notes, questionnaire responses, and documents were systematically coded using thematic analysis. Coding combined inductive identification of emergent themes with deductive categorization informed by policy implementation theory and assessment literature. During the data display stage, categorized data were organized into thematic matrices and narrative syntheses to facilitate pattern

recognition and cross-case comparison among schools implementing different Independent Path schemes. The final stage involved drawing conclusions and verifying interpretations through iterative comparison across data sources. Member checking was conducted with selected participants to ensure interpretive credibility and alignment between the researcher's analysis and participants' meanings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to established qualitative rigor criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement, triangulation of data sources, and member validation. Transferability was supported through thick contextual descriptions of schools and participants. Dependability and confirmability were maintained through systematic documentation of analytic procedures, coding frameworks, and reflexive memos, thereby creating an audit trail of the research process (Nowell et al., 2017). Ethical principles were upheld by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality by anonymizing school and participant identities, and ensuring voluntary participation throughout the study. Through this methodological framework, the study provides a rigorously grounded qualitative account of how assessment reform under the Merdeka Curriculum is interpreted, negotiated, and enacted within decentralized secondary education contexts.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

Based on the observations, five public senior high schools in Konawe Regency were selected as the study's sample, all of which have implemented the *Merdeka Belajar* (Independent Learning) curriculum. These schools are SMAN 1 Soropia, SMAN 1 Kapoiala, SMAN 1 Unaaha, SMAN 2 Unaaha, and SMAN 1 Sampara. This study aims to explore teachers' perceptions of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum policy regarding assessment and to identify the inhibiting factors in its implementation in the assessment domain in public senior high schools in Konawe Regency. The findings of this research are presented in the following sections.

### School Management and Teachers' Perceptions of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in Assessment

Based on the research findings, the description of teachers' perceptions regarding the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum policy in terms of assessment can be identified from responses to the question posed, using the predetermined indicator: "What is your perception of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum policy in terms of assessment in your school?"

Mr. Indra is a teacher at SMAN 1 Soropia. The interview was conducted on August 2, 2024, at SMAN 1 Soropia, Konawe Regency. According to Indra, in response to the interview question: "The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum policy is a very good initiative, as it provides freedom for both teachers and students in the learning process. It also makes it easier for teachers to assess the strengths of each learning activity in order to improve quality in the future." Based on this response,

it can be concluded that the policy grants autonomy to both teachers and students in classroom instruction and facilitates the identification of strengths and weaknesses within the learning process. Then Mr. Taufik is a Physical Education and Health teacher at SMAN 1 Soropia. The interview was conducted on August 2, 2024. He stated, "The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum allows flexibility for both students and teachers in determining the learning process. Teachers act as facilitators, while students are encouraged to develop their talents. Evaluation and reflection within the curriculum are essential in helping teachers assess the strengths and weaknesses of each prepared lesson." From this response, it is evident that the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum promotes autonomy for both students and teachers to tailor the learning process to their needs and potential. Moreover, ongoing evaluation and reflection are crucial for continuously refining the learning and assessment process to meet educational objectives better.

According to the question, Mr. Ardan is a Mathematics teacher at SMAN 1 Kapoiala. The interview took place on August 3, 2024. He stated: "The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum encompasses several aspects, such as learning flexibility, creativity, character development, and implementation challenges. In practice, there are specific stages and strategies needed to prevent these challenges from hindering the learning and assessment process." This statement indicates that the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum fosters flexibility that enhances creativity and character building. However, attention must be paid to emerging challenges, and specific strategies must be implemented to ensure a smooth, effective implementation. Then Mr. Huda is an Islamic Education teacher at SMAN 1 Unaaha. The interview was conducted on August 23, 2024. He expressed: "The *Merdeka Belajar* policy emphasizes student independence in learning and encourages teachers to focus on instructional quality by designing lessons that meet students' needs. The assessment process aims to measure understanding, attitudes, and skills comprehensively." From this, it is understood that the curriculum promotes learner autonomy while enabling teachers to design more relevant instructional strategies. Assessment under this curriculum is deeper and multidimensional, capturing students' holistic development.

Mr. Dedi is a Biology teacher at SMAN 1 Unaaha. The interview was conducted on August 23, 2024. He remarked: "It is less effective, particularly concerning the teaching materials provided in textbooks. The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum still requires evaluation, especially regarding teaching delivery and assessment." His response suggests that although the curriculum is being implemented, the limited availability of suitable textbooks poses challenges to instructional delivery and assessment, necessitating further evaluation to enhance teaching quality. Then Ms. Reski is a Mathematics teacher at SMAN 1 Sampara. The interview was held on August 24, 2024. She noted: "Teachers are granted the freedom to plan instructional strategies according to student needs. The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum is grounded in constructivist learning theory and effectively nurtures students' potential and character. The assessment approach ensures fairness among students. In conclusion, the policy is good, although it is still relatively new and undergoing evaluation by educators, students, and parents." Her statement highlights that the policy empowers teachers to tailor instruction,

enhances student development, ensures fair assessment, and requires ongoing evaluation to achieve optimal educational outcomes.

The interviews with Ms. Mina and Mr. Geri highlight different perspectives on the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, which is designed to offer flexibility and student-centered learning. Ms. Mina views it as a dynamic policy that encourages students to explore their interests and talents. However, she also points out that, as a new policy, it faces implementation challenges and requires continuous evaluation to meet its objectives. This suggests that, while the policy is seen as beneficial, its success depends on ongoing adjustments and stakeholder feedback.

Mr. Geri's comments further emphasize the positive aspects of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, such as its focus on student autonomy through project-based and thematic activities. However, he also addresses the challenges teachers face, particularly with assessment methods. He highlights several key issues, including the clarity of evaluation standards, teacher assessment competence, and the role of technology in evaluation. These challenges suggest that while the policy is welcomed, practical implementation difficulties need to be addressed to ensure its effectiveness.

Both teachers agree that flexibility is a core strength of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, but the complexity of implementing comprehensive and equitable assessments remains a significant challenge. This reveals a common concern among educators regarding how to balance the freedom granted to students with the need for consistent, fair, and effective evaluation methods. The varying perspectives on these challenges underscore the importance of continued support, professional development, and refining the policy to align with the evolving needs of both teachers and students.

### **Teachers' Challenges in Implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in Assessment**

Based on the research findings, the description of the challenges experienced by teachers in applying the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum—particularly in the assessment aspect—can be derived from responses to the question aligned with the predetermined indicators about “What obstacles or challenges have you faced in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum policy in terms of assessment at your school, and how have you addressed them?”

According to Mr. Indra, “The diverse characteristics of students pose a challenge, requiring teachers to exert extra effort in selecting appropriate teaching methods. Moreover, teachers are still not fully familiar with student-centered learning and the assessment process within the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum.” This indicates that teachers find it difficult to determine suitable instructional methods due to students' varied learning characteristics. Additionally, many teachers lack a thorough understanding of the assessment practices aligned with the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, largely because they are expected to learn these independently. In addressing this issue, Mr. Rudi Hartono suggested: “Participating in training or mentoring through the PPG (Pre-Service Teacher Professional Education) program.” Thus, it is evident that teachers require structured training programs such as PPG to deepen their understanding of the curriculum, particularly in assessment. Then Mr. Taufik explained: “Some teachers find the concepts of

flexibility and autonomy in the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum to be abstract and quite different from previous curricula, requiring time to grasp the changes fully. There is a lack of training, especially in technical areas such as alternative assessment methods, project-based learning, or differentiated lesson planning. The curriculum encourages the use of technology, yet not all teachers are proficient in digital tools, particularly in regions with limited technological infrastructure. Implementing *Merdeka Belajar* requires time for planning, evaluation, and deep student feedback, but teachers are often burdened with administrative tasks.

Additionally, there is insufficient peer collaboration and support, which hampers the effective implementation of the curriculum." This response reveals multiple challenges: understanding curriculum concepts, limited training, technological barriers, time constraints, assessment difficulties, and a lack of collegial support. As a solution, he added: "Attending intensive training, including online workshops provided by the government, and joining peer learning groups or discussion forums to exchange knowledge and experiences."

Mr. Ardan noted: "The diversity of student characteristics presents a challenge. Teachers must work harder in choosing effective instructional methods. Many are still unfamiliar with student-centered learning. The solution lies in joining training and mentoring sessions through teacher working groups." From this, it is clear that understanding and implementing appropriate learning strategies, as well as assessment aligned with *Merdeka Belajar*, remain difficult due to student diversity and limited teacher familiarity with the curriculum. Mr. Huda stated: "Some students exhibit low motivation and lack independence in their learning under the *Merdeka Belajar* framework."

The interviews with Mr. Dedi, Ms. Reski, and Ms. Geri highlight significant challenges in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, particularly in assessment, clarity of literacy content, and infrastructure. Mr. Dedi points out that the literacy content often lacks clarity, particularly in understanding the instructional models and assessment techniques specific to each subject. This indicates a gap in teachers' understanding of the curriculum, hindering its effective implementation. The need for targeted training to enhance teachers' understanding of subject-specific instructional methods and assessments is clear.

Ms. Reski emphasizes the challenges posed by insufficient classroom space, lack of laboratories, limited textbooks, and other learning resources. She also identifies human resource limitations, including students' readiness and inconsistencies in government policies, as major obstacles. These issues point to a multifaceted problem where infrastructural deficiencies and policy inconsistencies impede the full realization of the curriculum's goals. A combined effort involving better government funding, professional development for teachers, and a more collaborative school community is necessary to address these barriers.

Furthermore, Mr. Geri notes that perceptions of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum differ among teachers, students, and parents. This reflects a broader issue of misalignment and misunderstanding of the curriculum's goals, which can lead to challenges in its application. The varying interpretations among stakeholders highlight the importance of continuously revisiting and clarifying the curriculum's objectives to ensure that everyone involved is on the same page.

The responses from all the teachers point to a central issue: the need for ongoing, structured teacher training, especially in assessment practices. A lack of deep understanding of the curriculum's assessment concepts and differing perceptions among key stakeholders are preventing optimal implementation. The solution lies in regular professional development and training workshops to enhance teacher competence in designing and implementing assessments aligned with the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum.

## Discussion

### School Management and Teachers' Perceptions of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in Assessment

Teachers in public senior high schools in Konawe Regency generally hold positive perceptions toward the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, particularly in the assessment domain. This positive perception indicates normative alignment between policy objectives and teachers' professional values. Teachers view the curriculum as providing greater autonomy to design assessments that respond to students' individual needs, potentials, and learning paths, which is important, as policy implementation research emphasizes that success depends on implementers' beliefs and professional acceptance (Spillane et al., 2021).

From a school management perspective, the flexibility embedded in the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum signifies a shift from compliance-based assessment toward professional trust and pedagogical discretion. Teachers reported that the curriculum enables them to more comprehensively evaluate students' strengths and reflect on the effectiveness of their instructional strategies. This aligns with contemporary research highlighting the importance of formative, feedback-oriented approaches in improving teaching quality and student achievement (Black & Wiliam, 2018; OECD, 2020).

Teachers also recognized that the curriculum strengthens their role as facilitators rather than mere content deliverers. This perception reflects a shift toward student-centered pedagogy, in which learners are granted greater autonomy to explore their interests and develop competencies aligned with their individual capacities (Pilo, 2024; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). When teachers see themselves as facilitators, assessment practices are more likely to focus on growth, reflection, and process-oriented evaluation.

Furthermore, teachers emphasized that the curriculum promotes creativity and character development alongside academic achievement (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2022). This holistic orientation aligns with international discourse on twenty-first-century competencies, integrating cognitive and non-cognitive skills within curriculum frameworks (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020; Achadah et al., 2022). Multidimensional assessment thus supports a comprehensive understanding of student development.

However, the findings also reveal tensions within implementation practices. Some teachers expressed concerns about schools' readiness to operationalize the curriculum (Fauzi, 2021) fully. Student autonomy, while theoretically empowering, could reduce structured teacher-student interaction

(Shaked, 2025; Ryan & Deci, 2020). This illustrates a common paradox in learner-centered reforms: increased autonomy requires equally strong pedagogical scaffolding.

Assessment management systems are another critical issue, particularly centralized processing of final grades (Lumban Gaol, 2023). While teachers provide formative and process-based evaluations, final grades are often compiled through centralized digital systems, potentially weakening teachers' ownership of summative outcomes. Policy literature suggests that such structural gaps can create accountability ambiguity and reduce coherence between instructional practice and evaluation systems (Honig, 2021).

The relative novelty of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum contributes to transitional challenges. Some schools have implemented it for only one or two years, so instructional and assessment processes remain in an adjustment phase. Limited access to official guidelines forces teachers to rely on online tutorials and informal networks. While teacher initiative demonstrates professional commitment, reliance on fragmented sources risks uneven policy interpretation.

Despite these transitional constraints, teachers continue to fulfill their responsibilities as frontline implementers. Their generally positive perceptions are a foundational asset for sustainable reform. Effective implementation depends on the quality of teacher-student interactions, communicative and reflective pedagogical practices, and pedagogically integrated assessment systems. E-report systems providing descriptive feedback on strengths, weaknesses, and learning progress represent a promising step toward holistic reporting.

### **Teachers' Challenges in Implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in Assessment**

Based on the research findings, several challenges were identified in the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum policy, particularly in the assessment aspect, as follows: The findings of this study reveal that the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum policy in the assessment domain is not merely a pedagogical issue but a systemic managerial challenge. The difficulties encountered by teachers reflect a structural gap between macro-level policy design and school-level implementation capacity. Consistent with contemporary policy implementation literature, educational reform succeeds only when organizational capacity, leadership coherence, and professional competence align (Honig, 2021; Spillane et al., 2021). Thus, assessment-related challenges must be interpreted within the broader framework of school management and institutional readiness.

One of the central challenges identified is the diversity of student characteristics. The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum emphasizes differentiated, student-centered learning and requires formative, flexible, and responsive assessment practices. However, teachers experience tension between maintaining objectivity and accommodating individual differences. Formative assessment, when properly implemented, significantly enhances student achievement through continuous feedback and adaptive instruction (Black & Wiliam, 2018). Empirical evidence further indicates that differentiated instructional strategies improve engagement and learning outcomes, particularly in heterogeneous classrooms (Graham et al.,

2020). Nevertheless, without structured instructional supervision and collaborative professional cultures, teachers may revert to standardized, exam-oriented assessment practices that are administratively convenient but pedagogically misaligned.

The limited understanding of the philosophical foundations of *Merdeka Belajar* among teachers indicates weaknesses in school-level change management strategies. Curriculum reform fundamentally requires paradigm shifts rather than procedural compliance. Fullan (2020) argues that sustainable educational change depends on leadership that fosters shared vision, professional trust, and collaborative cultures (Chen & Bos, 2023). Similarly, Harris and Jones (2020) emphasize that school leadership serves as a mediating factor between policy mandates and classroom enactment. School leadership plays a pivotal role in strengthening school management effectiveness and organizational coherence (Harris, 2023). In the absence of coherent leadership and sustained professional dialogue, teachers may struggle to translate student-centered principles into authentic assessment practices.

The findings also indicate insufficient teacher competence in curriculum-aligned assessment, primarily due to limited access to structured professional development. Research consistently demonstrates that effective professional development must be continuous, practice-based, and collaborative to produce measurable improvements in instructional quality (Sims et al., 2021). Sporadic training initiatives or reliance on self-directed online learning risk generating fragmented interpretations of policy expectations. This variability undermines consistency in assessment implementation and may compromise the equity goals embedded in the curriculum reform (Hallinger & Kovacevic, 2021). Another significant challenge is low student motivation for learning, which constrains the realization of learner autonomy promoted by the *Merdeka Belajar* framework. According to Self-Determination Theory, intrinsic motivation flourishes when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Assessment practices that emphasize reflection, constructive feedback, and student agency can strengthen these motivational dimensions (Panadero et al., 2019). The emergence of system leadership reflects a strategic shift toward collaborative and distributed models of school governance (Gorman, 2025). Therefore, assessment should not function solely as a measurement tool but as a mechanism for empowering learners. School management plays a crucial role in cultivating academic climates that support such motivational conditions.

Infrastructure limitations and unclear literacy components further highlight the importance of institutional capacity in policy implementation. International evidence suggests that curriculum flexibility yields positive outcomes only when supported by adequate material resources, technical guidance, and organizational coordination (OECD, 2020; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). In resource-constrained contexts, policy flexibility may inadvertently produce ambiguity and inconsistent classroom practices. This finding reinforces the argument that curriculum reform must be accompanied by strategic resource allocation and institutional support systems.

Teachers' difficulties in conducting diagnostic assessments underscore a gap in assessment literacy. Diagnostic assessment is foundational to differentiated instruction because it informs tailored pedagogical decisions based on students' readiness levels. Empirical studies confirm that systematic use of diagnostic and formative assessment improves instructional alignment and student achievement (Van der Kleij et al., 2019). Without adequate competence in this domain, the personalized learning aspirations of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum remain aspirational rather than operational. The proposed solutions—proactive information seeking by teachers, participation in independent professional development, provision of instructional resources by schools, and structured professional learning programs—reflect a dual responsibility model. While teacher agency is essential, policy implementation cannot rely solely on individual initiative. Spillane et al. (2021) conceptualize policy enactment as an interactive process shaped by actors, contexts, and resources. Accordingly, school management must assume a strategic role in orchestrating planning, capacity building, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms that sustain reform efforts.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on curriculum reform in decentralized educational systems by demonstrating that positive teacher perceptions alone are insufficient to guarantee successful implementation. Effective enactment of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in the assessment domain requires systemic managerial coherence, sustained professional development, instructional leadership, and adequate institutional capacity. Without these interdependent elements, assessment reform risks remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum policy in the assessment domain reflects a dynamic interplay between normative acceptance and structural complexity. Teachers in public senior high schools in Konawe Regency generally perceive the policy as professionally empowering, particularly because it provides flexibility in designing student-centered and formative assessment practices. This positive perception indicates a strong alignment between the reform's philosophical foundations and teachers' pedagogical values. However, the study reveals that such normative support does not automatically translate into optimal enactment. Managerial coherence, assessment literacy, instructional leadership, and institutional capacity remain decisive factors in determining whether assessment reform evolves into substantive pedagogical transformation or remains at the level of symbolic compliance. The shift toward autonomy and differentiated evaluation requires not only professional trust but also systemic alignment between policy mandates, school governance structures, and classroom practices.

Furthermore, the challenges identified, including limited professional development, diverse student characteristics, infrastructural constraints, low student motivation, and fragmented assessment management systems, underscore that curriculum reform is fundamentally a systemic change process rather than a purely technical adjustment. The *Merdeka Belajar* framework

demands a reconfiguration of assessment culture, moving from centralized, compliance-oriented evaluation toward reflective, growth-based, and diagnostically informed practices. For such transformation to be sustainable, school management must strategically integrate capacity-building programs, collaborative professional cultures, transparent reporting mechanisms, and supportive leadership structures. In this regard, the study contributes to the broader discourse on decentralized curriculum reform by affirming that effective assessment innovation depends on the coherence of autonomy, accountability, institutional support, and professional competence. Only through such multidimensional alignment can the aspirations of holistic, student-centered assessment embedded in the *Merdeka Belajar* policy be fully realized.

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