

SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS IN FACING THE INDEPENDENT CURRICULUM AT MTSN 2 MEDAN

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine social studies teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at MTsN 2 Medan, identify the challenges encountered, and explore the solutions applied to overcome these challenges. A descriptive qualitative method was employed, and data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The findings show that teachers generally have positive perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum because it provides greater flexibility in organizing learning activities and promotes student-centered learning. However, differences in teachers' understanding and readiness indicate that adaptation to the curriculum is still ongoing. Several challenges were identified, including limited understanding of curriculum concepts, difficulties in preparing teaching modules, inadequate educational facilities and infrastructure, and students' readiness to adapt to the new learning system. To overcome these challenges, teachers participate in training programs, workshops, MGMP activities, and collaborative discussions with colleagues. The study concludes that the Merdeka Curriculum provides opportunities to improve learning quality and encourage educational innovation. However, continuous professional development, adequate teaching resources, and strengthened infrastructure are essential to support successful implementation. These findings provide implications for schools and policymakers in supporting the sustainable implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

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INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum represents one of the most significant educational reforms in Indonesia. This curriculum was introduced to improve the quality of education by emphasizing essential competencies, character development, and flexible learning practices. Through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), students are expected to develop critical thinking skills, creativity, collaboration, and social responsibility (Maulana et al., 2024). The curriculum also provides teachers with greater flexibility to design learning activities according to students' needs, abilities, and learning characteristics. Teachers play a central role in the successful

implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum because they are directly involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating learning activities. The effectiveness of curriculum implementation largely depends on teachers' understanding, readiness, and perceptions of the curriculum itself. Positive perceptions may encourage teachers to adopt innovative teaching strategies, whereas negative perceptions or limited understanding may create difficulties during the implementation process. In social studies (IPS) education, the Merdeka Curriculum is expected to support meaningful learning experiences that enable students to develop social awareness, critical thinking skills, and an understanding of social values (Nunes et al., 2024).

Social studies subjects have an important role in preparing students to become responsible citizens who are able to participate actively in society while maintaining the values of Pancasila. Therefore, the successful implementation of the curriculum in social studies learning depends greatly on teachers' ability to adapt instructional strategies and learning activities to students' needs. Several previous studies have examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, teacher readiness, and the challenges encountered during its application in schools. Most studies have focused on general curriculum implementation, teachers' competencies, or students' learning outcomes (Sipahutar, 2024). Although these studies provide important information, research specifically examining social studies teachers' perceptions remains limited, particularly in Islamic junior high schools (madrasahs) (Sholeh et al., 2023). Furthermore, studies that simultaneously investigate teachers' perceptions, implementation challenges, and problem-solving strategies in a particular educational context are still relatively scarce.

MTsN 2 Medan provides an important context for this study because the school has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum while continuing to face various challenges related to teacher adaptation, student readiness, and learning resources. Teachers at the school have different experiences and levels of understanding regarding the curriculum, which may influence the effectiveness of its implementation. Investigating teachers' perceptions in this setting is important because teachers' views directly affect classroom practices, instructional decisions, and student learning experiences. In addition, understanding the obstacles experienced by social studies teachers can provide practical information regarding the implementation of the curriculum at the school level. Problems such as limited teaching resources, difficulties in preparing teaching modules, inadequate infrastructure, and students' adaptation to new learning approaches may affect the achievement of curriculum objectives. Identifying these challenges and the solutions applied by teachers may contribute to improving the implementation of the curriculum in similar educational settings. Therefore, this study aims to examine social studies teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at MTsN 2 Medan, identify the challenges encountered during its implementation, and explore the strategies used to overcome these challenges. The findings of this study are expected to enrich the existing literature on curriculum implementation, provide practical recommendations for schools, and contribute to educational policies that support the sustainable implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia (Umar et al., 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Merdeka Curriculum was introduced as an educational reform designed to improve the quality of learning and address the challenges of contemporary education. This curriculum emphasizes flexibility in the learning process, the development of students' competencies, and the strengthening of character education. One of its distinctive characteristics is the integration of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), which aims to develop students' critical thinking skills, creativity, collaboration, independence, and social responsibility (Zuvita et al., 2024). The curriculum also promotes student-centered learning by encouraging teachers to provide learning experiences that are relevant to students' interests, needs, and abilities.

In the implementation of educational policies, teachers play a crucial role because they act as the main agents who translate curriculum objectives into classroom practices. Their understanding, attitudes, and professional competencies greatly influence the effectiveness of curriculum implementation. According to Hardianti et al., (2024), teachers' perceptions toward educational innovation determine their willingness to adopt new instructional approaches and adjust their teaching practices. Positive perceptions may encourage teachers to implement innovative learning methods, whereas limited understanding may reduce teachers' confidence in applying new educational policies.

Within social studies education, teachers are expected to facilitate learning experiences that help students understand social phenomena and develop social awareness. Social studies learning aims not only to transfer knowledge but also to encourage students to think critically, solve problems, and appreciate social and cultural diversity. Under the Merdeka Curriculum, learning activities emphasize contextual experiences, collaborative learning, and active student participation. Consequently, teachers are required to design instructional activities that support meaningful learning and foster students' engagement with real-life social issues (Schunk, 2020).

Teacher readiness has become one of the important factors influencing curriculum implementation. Readiness includes teachers' understanding of curriculum concepts, instructional planning, assessment practices, and the ability to implement differentiated learning. Several studies indicate that teachers often encounter difficulties in adapting to new curriculum policies, particularly in preparing teaching modules, conducting diagnostic assessments, and adjusting learning activities according to students' diverse needs (Aulia et al., 2023). These challenges may affect the effectiveness of classroom instruction and the achievement of educational objectives.

In addition to teacher-related factors, institutional support also contributes significantly to successful curriculum implementation. Adequate facilities, technological resources, internet access, and instructional materials are necessary to support learning activities. Limited infrastructure may hinder teachers' ability to implement innovative instructional methods and utilize digital learning resources effectively (Aulia et al., 2023). Furthermore, students require sufficient time to adapt to learning approaches that emphasize independence, active participation, and collaborative problem-solving.

Several previous studies have examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum from various perspectives. Mustaghfiroh (2020) discussed the philosophical foundations of Merdeka Belajar, while Sumarsih et al. (2022) analyzed curriculum implementation in elementary schools. Other studies have focused on teacher readiness, professional competence, and challenges encountered during curriculum implementation (Sipahutar, 2024; Zahara et al., 2025). Although these studies provide valuable insights, most of them investigate general educational contexts and broader aspects of curriculum implementation.

Research specifically focusing on social studies teachers remains relatively limited, especially in Islamic junior high schools (madrasahs). Existing studies often examine teachers' perceptions or implementation problems separately, whereas investigations that simultaneously explore teachers' perceptions, implementation challenges, and coping strategies in a specific school setting remain scarce (Sholeh et al., 2023). This condition indicates the existence of a research gap that requires further investigation.

Understanding teachers' perceptions is essential because their beliefs and experiences influence classroom management, instructional decisions, and students' learning experiences. Moreover, identifying the challenges encountered during curriculum implementation can provide practical information for improving educational policies and teaching practices. Difficulties related to instructional materials, technological support, infrastructure, and student readiness require continuous attention from schools and policymakers (Sumarsih et al., 2022).

Based on the existing literature, further investigation is needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' experiences in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in social studies education within madrasah settings. Therefore, this study examines social studies teachers' perceptions, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they employ to overcome those challenges. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of curriculum implementation studies and provide recommendations for schools, teachers, and educational policymakers in supporting the sustainable implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Rahmi & Trisnawati, 2024).

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate social studies teachers' perceptions regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because it allows researchers to explore participants' experiences, opinions, and interpretations in depth within their natural educational setting (Hardani et al., 2020). Through this approach, the researcher was able to understand teachers'

perspectives concerning curriculum implementation, challenges, and adaptation processes. The research was conducted at MTsN 2 Medan, which is located in Percut Sei Tuan District, Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra. The school was selected because it has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum and provides a relevant context for examining teachers' experiences during the transition from the previous curriculum to the new educational policy. The school also represents an Islamic junior high school environment where curriculum implementation may present unique challenges and opportunities.

The participants of this study consisted of three social studies teachers who had directly implemented the Merdeka Curriculum in their teaching activities. Participants were selected using purposive sampling because they possessed relevant experiences and actively participated in curriculum implementation. Their involvement in instructional planning, classroom teaching, assessment activities, and curriculum adaptation enabled the researcher to obtain detailed and meaningful information related to the objectives of the study. Data collection was carried out through interviews, observations, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide flexibility for participants to express their experiences, opinions, and perceptions. The interview questions focused on teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, the implementation process, challenges encountered during instruction, and strategies employed to overcome those challenges. Each interview was conducted individually and recorded to maintain data accuracy.

Observations were conducted during classroom learning activities to examine how teachers implemented the curriculum in practice (Susanti, 2022). The observation process focused on instructional methods, classroom interactions, student participation, learning activities, and the application of student-centered approaches. Through observation, the researcher was able to compare teachers' statements with their actual teaching practices. Documentation techniques were also employed to support the findings obtained from interviews and observations. Documents analyzed in this study included teaching modules, lesson plans, assessment documents, photographs, and other school records related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. These documents provided additional evidence and strengthened the credibility of the research findings.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model of qualitative data analysis, which consists of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation was organized and categorized according to the research objectives. The researcher then identified themes, patterns, and relationships among the findings to facilitate interpretation and discussion. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study applied both method triangulation and source triangulation. Method triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation, while source triangulation involved comparing responses among participants and supporting documents. These procedures were intended to increase the credibility, consistency, and validity of the research findings.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the objectives and procedures of the study and voluntarily agreed to participate. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed to protect participants' identities, and all information collected during the study was used exclusively for academic purposes (Mutia, 2019). These ethical procedures were implemented to maintain participants' privacy and ensure the integrity of the research.



Figure 1. Research Procedure

Source: Research, 2026

Figure 1 presents the research procedure applied in this study, illustrating the sequence of research activities from the initial stage of data collection to the final stage of data interpretation and conclusion drawing. The procedure includes interviews, observations, documentation, data reduction, data presentation, and triangulation techniques used to ensure the credibility of the findings. The figure provides a clear and systematic overview of the research process and demonstrates how the data were collected, analyzed, and validated. Furthermore, the research procedure serves as a guideline for conducting the study in a structured manner, ensuring that each stage of the investigation was carried out consistently and in accordance with the objectives of the research. Through this systematic process, the findings obtained in this study can be considered reliable and capable of providing a comprehensive understanding of teachers' perceptions regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that social studies teachers at MTsN 2 Medan generally demonstrate positive perceptions regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers perceive the curriculum as an educational policy that provides greater flexibility in organizing learning activities and selecting instructional strategies that are appropriate to students' characteristics, interests, and learning needs. Unlike previous curriculum models that emphasized uniform instructional practices, the Merdeka Curriculum allows teachers to design more contextual, innovative, and student-centered learning activities. Participants stated that the curriculum enables them to modify learning methods according to classroom conditions and encourages students to become more active participants during the learning process. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has also been carried out through differentiated learning, diagnostic assessment, and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), which are considered essential components in supporting students' academic achievement and character development. These instructional components encourage teachers to create meaningful learning experiences that promote critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and social responsibility among students (Sudrajat et al., 2025).

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has gradually changed the learning process in social studies classes. Teachers explained that learning activities are no longer dominated by lectures and teacher-centered instruction but increasingly involve discussions, group work, collaborative projects, and problem-solving activities. Students are encouraged to express their opinions, analyze social issues, and participate actively during classroom

activities. In social studies learning, teachers attempt to relate instructional materials to real social phenomena and issues that students encounter in their daily lives. This contextual approach helps students understand concepts more deeply because they can connect theoretical knowledge with practical situations. The participants also stated that active learning activities increase students' motivation, participation, and responsibility during the learning process. Consequently, the curriculum contributes not only to academic development but also to the development of social awareness and critical thinking skills (Nunes et al., 2024).



Figure 2. Implementation Components of the Merdeka Curriculum

Source: Research, 2026

Figure 2 illustrates the main components implemented by social studies teachers during the application of the Merdeka Curriculum. The figure demonstrates how differentiated instruction, diagnostic assessment, and project-based activities are integrated into classroom learning. The interaction among these components supports the achievement of curriculum objectives and helps teachers provide instructional activities that are responsive to students' diverse learning needs.

Differentiated learning has become one of the most important instructional strategies applied by teachers. The participants explained that students possess different academic abilities, learning styles, interests, and levels of participation. Therefore, teachers attempt to provide learning activities that accommodate these differences. Students with higher learning achievement are given enrichment tasks and more challenging assignments, while students experiencing learning difficulties receive additional guidance and instructional assistance. Through differentiated instruction, teachers can reduce learning disparities and provide equal opportunities for students to achieve learning objectives. This approach also allows teachers to recognize individual student characteristics and create a more inclusive learning environment. The findings indicate that differentiated instruction contributes significantly to improving student participation and learning outcomes because students receive instructional support that corresponds to their abilities and needs (Ariyanti et al., 2025).

The implementation of diagnostic assessment also plays an important role in supporting effective instruction. Teachers conduct assessments at the beginning of learning activities to identify students' prior knowledge, learning readiness, and potential difficulties. The information obtained from these assessments helps teachers determine

appropriate learning strategies, prepare instructional materials, and provide necessary support for students. Teachers stated that diagnostic assessment enables them to understand classroom conditions more accurately and make instructional decisions based on students' actual needs. As a result, learning activities become more effective and responsive to individual differences. Furthermore, assessment results help teachers evaluate students' progress and make adjustments to instructional strategies throughout the learning process.

Project-based activities implemented through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) have also contributed positively to students' character development and social competence. Teachers explained that these activities encourage students to work collaboratively, communicate effectively, solve problems, and demonstrate responsibility in completing assignments. Through project activities, students are given opportunities to apply their knowledge in real-life situations and develop an understanding of social issues within their communities. Teachers believe that these activities support the achievement of educational goals because they integrate cognitive, affective, and social aspects of learning simultaneously. The findings suggest that project-based learning provides meaningful experiences that strengthen students' critical thinking abilities and social awareness (Maulana et al., 2024).

Although teachers generally expressed positive perceptions regarding the curriculum, differences in understanding and readiness remain apparent. Some participants adapted relatively quickly to curriculum changes because they had previously participated in training programs and professional development activities. However, other teachers experienced difficulties in understanding curriculum concepts, preparing teaching modules, and implementing new assessment procedures. These differences are influenced by teaching experience, access to training opportunities, and individual professional competencies. The findings indicate that successful curriculum implementation depends not only on curriculum policies but also on teachers' readiness and capacity to adapt to educational changes. Therefore, continuous professional development remains necessary to strengthen teachers' understanding and support curriculum implementation Hardianti et al., (2024).



Figure 3. Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

Source: Research, 2026

Figure 3 presents the major challenges encountered during the implementation process. The figure demonstrates that curriculum implementation is influenced by several interconnected factors, including teacher readiness, educational facilities, technological support, instructional time allocation, and students' adaptation to new learning approaches.

One of the major challenges identified in this study concerns teachers' understanding of curriculum concepts and technical implementation procedures. Several participants reported difficulties in preparing teaching modules, conducting differentiated instruction, and implementing diagnostic assessments according to curriculum guidelines.

The preparation of instructional materials requires considerable time, creativity, and understanding of curriculum principles. Teachers also explained that adapting instructional materials to students' needs often becomes challenging because of differences in students' abilities and learning characteristics. These difficulties sometimes reduce teachers' confidence and create uncertainty during instructional activities. Similar findings have been reported by previous studies indicating that teachers frequently experience difficulties during the early stages of curriculum implementation (Novia et al., 2025).

Time management also emerged as an important challenge during curriculum implementation. Teachers reported that several learning activities, particularly project-based learning and differentiated instruction, require more instructional time than is available in the classroom schedule. Consequently, teachers often need to modify learning activities or reduce certain instructional components to fit the available time allocation. This situation affects the implementation of planned learning activities and may reduce the effectiveness of instructional strategies. The findings indicate that appropriate time allocation is essential to support the successful implementation of innovative learning approaches and student-centered instruction. The availability of educational facilities and technological resources significantly influences the implementation process. Several teachers stated that limited internet access, inadequate technological facilities, and insufficient learning media hinder the use of digital resources during classroom instruction. Since the Merdeka Curriculum encourages the integration of digital technology into learning activities, inadequate infrastructure becomes an obstacle to instructional innovation. Teachers explained that stable internet connections, digital devices, and adequate classroom facilities are necessary to support technology-based instruction and improve learning quality. These findings support previous studies emphasizing the importance of educational facilities and technological support in curriculum implementation (Sipahutar, 2024).



Figure 4. Strategies for Overcoming the Challenges

Source: Research, 2026

Figure 4 illustrates the strategies employed by teachers and schools to overcome the challenges encountered during curriculum implementation. These strategies include teacher collaboration, institutional support, technological integration, and continuous professional development.

Collaboration among teachers has become one of the most effective strategies for supporting curriculum implementation. Through regular discussions, experience sharing, lesson studies, and professional learning

communities, teachers are able to exchange ideas and identify solutions to classroom problems. Collaborative activities enable teachers to learn from one another's experiences and improve their professional competencies. Teachers reported that discussions with colleagues often help them overcome difficulties related to instructional planning, assessment, and classroom management. Such collaboration contributes significantly to improving teachers' understanding of curriculum implementation and strengthening professional relationships within the school environment (Sumarsih et al., 2022).

The utilization of digital technology has also contributed to improving learning activities. Teachers increasingly use educational applications, online learning platforms, digital teaching materials, and multimedia resources to create more engaging and interactive learning experiences. Technology facilitates access to information, supports independent learning, and enables teachers to provide instructional materials more efficiently. The integration of digital technology is therefore considered an important factor in improving instructional quality and supporting curriculum implementation. These findings are consistent with previous studies that emphasize the role of technology in modern educational practices (Zahara et al., 2025).

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that teachers' perceptions significantly influence the success of curriculum implementation. Teachers who possess positive attitudes toward the curriculum tend to be more willing to adopt innovative instructional methods, adjust learning activities according to students' needs, and participate actively in professional development programs. Conversely, limited understanding and inadequate preparation may reduce teachers' confidence in implementing educational changes. Therefore, continuous support from schools, educational authorities, and policymakers remains essential to strengthen teachers' competencies, improve educational facilities, and ensure the sustainability of curriculum implementation. Through these combined efforts, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is expected to contribute to improving the quality of teaching and learning in social studies education.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that teachers at MTsN 2 Medan generally have positive perceptions toward the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers perceive the curriculum as providing greater flexibility in designing learning activities, selecting instructional strategies, and creating learning environments that are more engaging, interactive, and student-centered. The implementation of the curriculum has encouraged teachers to become more innovative in organizing classroom activities and to provide learning experiences that accommodate students' diverse needs and characteristics. However, differences in teachers' understanding and readiness indicate that the adaptation process is still ongoing for several teachers.

The findings also reveal that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at MTsN 2 Medan has been carried out through several approaches, including curriculum adjustment, the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), differentiated learning, and the use of diagnostic assessments at the beginning of instruction. Teachers have demonstrated progress in applying these approaches through collaboration with colleagues and participation in various professional development activities. The support provided through MGMP activities, seminars, workshops, and training programs offered by the Merdeka Teaching Platform has contributed to improving teachers' understanding and teaching competencies.

Despite these positive developments, several challenges remain in the implementation process. The major obstacles identified in this study include teachers' limited understanding of the concepts and principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, difficulties in developing teaching modules, and discrepancies between instructional time allocation and planned learning activities. In addition, inadequate educational facilities and infrastructure continue to limit the effectiveness of teaching and learning activities. Student readiness also represents a significant challenge, as many students require time to adapt to the new learning system and instructional approaches introduced by the curriculum.

To overcome these challenges, teachers and the school have undertaken several practical efforts. Continuous participation in professional development programs, collaborative discussions among teachers, and active involvement in MGMP activities have helped improve teachers' knowledge and instructional skills. Furthermore, the

use of learning resources such as textbooks, worksheets, and digital learning media has supported more interactive and meaningful learning experiences. The integration of technology in teaching practices has become increasingly important, although its effectiveness depends on adequate facilities, technological resources, and stable internet access.

The findings of this study provide important implications for schools and educational policymakers. Schools need to strengthen continuous professional development programs, provide adequate instructional support, and improve educational facilities and infrastructure to support curriculum implementation. Educational authorities and policymakers should also ensure the availability of relevant teaching resources, sustainable mentoring programs, and technological support to assist teachers in adapting to curriculum changes. Practical training programs that focus on teachers' real classroom needs are essential to improve their competencies and confidence in implementing the curriculum.

In conclusion, the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires continuous collaboration among teachers, schools, and educational stakeholders. Ongoing evaluation, sustained professional support, and improvements in infrastructure are necessary to ensure that the curriculum can be implemented effectively and consistently. These efforts are expected to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and to support the achievement of educational goals in accordance with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum.

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