The School Readiness in Implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum in Pekanbaru : A Survey of Teachers and Students' Perspectives

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Abstract: This study aims to assess the school readiness in implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum in the Year 2022/2023 at several SMA/SMK in Pekanbaru City. This study used a descriptive quantitative with a survey metod. Data collection techniques are carried out using questionnaires and observations, with a sample of 32 SMA/SMK selected through a purposive sampling technique. Data analysis techniques using descriptive analysis according to the variables that had been determined. Based on the research results show that the school's understanding of the *Merdeka* Curriculum was very high, reaching 94%. In total, 81% of SMA / SMK have met the requirements and have been appointed by the Indonesian Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (*Mendikbudristek*) to implement the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Teachers' competence in supporting the *Merdeka* Curriculum reached 75%. In terms of students' participation in effective learning, it is not optimal since it reached only 16%. It is necessary to improve policy and procedural support, around 62% stated this. However, only 56% of schools use learning modules from the *Mendikbudristek*. Besides, the use of the Minimum Competency Assessment (MCA) and Character Survey also reached 56%, while the use and preparation of independence learning lesson plans reached 62%. In conclusion, a number of challenges remain in the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum in SMA/SMK, especially related to infrastructure, student participation, and policy support, but it has also achieved some level of success in terms of teacher competence and the use of teaching materials.

Introduction

The *Merdeka* Curriculum is an update motivated by the advancement of existing technology and its usage has been highly emphasized during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, this requires various elements of education to adapt to this, giving birth to the New Curriculum, namely the *Merdeka* Curriculum. The *Merdeka* Curriculum acts as a recovery option for learning launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (*Kemdikbudristek*) to announce a regulation on the development of the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Apart from that, this policy aims to restore the current national education system to the essence of the law to give schools independence in interpreting the basic competencies of the curriculum into its assessment (Sherly & Sihombing, 2020). This was also triggered by the declining quality of Indonesian education services and graduates, as well as the declining competitiveness of Indonesian education graduates in markets 4.0 and 5.0 (Sabaruddin, 2022).

The Indonesian Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (*Mendikbudristek*), Nadiem Makarim says that "education reform cannot be done only with

an administrative approach, but must carry out cultural transformation" (Satriawan et al., 2021). Furthermore, the concept of independent learning is acceptable, given the vision and mission of Indonesian education in the years to come for the creation of a qualified human being who is competitive in various fields of life (Sibagariang et al., 2021). By having the *Merdeka* curriculum, it enables students to grow in accordance with their strengths and capabilities as they will receive learning that is critical, excellent, expressive, applicable, varied, and progressive. This new curriculum change requires collaboration, strong communication, determination and real commitment from all parties, so that the profile of Pancasila students can be embedded in students (Sari et al., 2020).

It is necessary to transform the school curriculum and learning to implement the "*Merdeka* Belajar" program; the transformation of national education management and the transformation of regional education management and school autonomy (Sherly & Sihombing, 2020). Unfortunately, in implementing *Merdeka* Belajar, there are still many pros and cons from various parties. The implementation of this new curriculum certainly requires a lot of process, time, readiness, and solidarity. It is not easy to implement *Merdeka* learning, because we know that education in Indonesia is still far behind, so when some systems change, teachers and students will be surprised (Alfurqan & Khairara, 2023).

How it is implemented is determined by the integrity of leaders in educational institutions (Andriani et al., 2018). Besides, Gea (2014) explores that leadership integrity is a growing concern in business and organizations. Indeed, many organizational science experts and practitioners now believe that leadership without integrity really puts organizations in serious danger (Riski et al., 2022). As it is known that the decision of a leader will have a major influence on the organization. If a leader has a way of thinking and acting wisely, it will have an influence on all parts of the organization. On the other hand, when a leader makes a decision or takes a bad action, which usually touches on moral areas, the negative impact will be very large for the organization.

Drawing on Dasmo et al., (2023); Pan et al., (2019) & Triayomi et al., (2022), school readiness is an important factor in the context of high school as it lays the foundation for students' academic, social, and emotional success. Accordingly, when students are adequately prepared for high school, they are more likely to excel in their studies, engage in extracurricular activities, and form positive relationships with peers and teachers (Pan et al., 2019; Rizki & Fahkrunisa, 2022). Similarly, students who enter senior high school with a strong educational background will be better equipped to handle advanced tasks, stay motivated, and achieve higher academic outcomes.

Additionally, collaborative efforts between educators, parents and communities to address potential gaps in school readiness can create a nurturing and supportive environment that maximizes each student's potential and puts them on the path to future success in both education and life Dasmo et al., (2023); Rizki & Fahkrunisa (2022); Triayomi et al., (2022). By prioritizing school readiness in the context of senior secondary school, we can nurture well-rounded and resilient individuals who can thrive academically, socially and emotionally, ensuring they are ready to face the challenges of senior secondary school and beyond with confidence and competence (Retnawati et al., 2016).

Consequently, fostering school readiness in the context of secondary school should not be seen as an endpoint, but rather as an ongoing process (Fransiska et al., 2023; Lestari et al., 2023). Through empowering students with the necessary academic, social and emotional tools, we can foster a generation that is confident and ready to face the challenges of higher education, career and life after high school. On the other hand, those who lack essential foundational skills may struggle, leading to feelings of frustration and the potential for

disengagement from learning. In addition to academic skills, school readiness also includes social and emotional readiness.

Education units or schools become an important object in the implementation of this *Merdeka* curriculum which is traced to the aspects of their readiness to implement it (Suyanto, 2017). Nevertheless, there are still limitations in research on this matter. The *Merdeka* curriculum has limitations in the aspects of coordination and local-based culture where the school's obligation to implement it has reached the final stage of preparation in the national scope. At the same time, education units and schools have the independence to decide and design the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum based on their right to school autonomy.

Broadly speaking, the steps taken by education units and schools in implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum aim to give schools the freedom to develop a curriculum that is expected to lead to their welfare and benefit (Fransiska et al., 2023). The *Merdeka* Curriculum, in its implementation aspect, has minimum standards whose regulations have also been set by the Indonesian Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (*Mendikbudristek*). The reference put forward by the Ministry of Research and Technology underlines that the spearhead of the successful implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum is the principal and teachers, whose school autonomy rights are under their control.

Another conclusion that can be drawn is that the right to school autonomy allows education units and schools to adopt the *Merdeka* curriculum by overriding the limitations of each school. In connection with this, the readiness of education units and schools in the city of Pekanbaru to implement the *Merdeka* curriculum has been explored since it involves the implementation of a new curriculum that can have a major impact on the education system in an area. The *Merdeka* Curriculum is the government's effort to reform education in Indonesia. Therefore, this research is important to evaluate as it would assist in understanding the impact of the curriculum change on education in the region. Moreover, the current study can also be used to evaluate the quality of education in Pekanbaru City. By looking at the extent to which the education units could implement the new curriculum well, we can measure the effectiveness of the education system in achieving the desired educational objectives. With a deeper understanding of the readiness of schools in facing curriculum change, the government and educational institutions can take appropriate measures to support the implementation process including the level of understanding that schools have and the comprehensive implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum.

Research Method

An area of High school level in Pekanbaru City was explored in this study. This was done using a descriptive quantitative research method with a survey approach adapted from (Sugiyono, 2017), as applied in a previous study by Aprima & Sari (2022). It is a method that allows us to reflect on the behavior and characteristics of the population, provide an overview, and make relevant generalizations. To gather data, respondents used survey tools in the form of questionnaires and made observations. Presently, the number of educational institutions at the SMA/SMK level in the city of Pekanbaru is 98 and the 32 SMA/SMK were carefully selected using as samples using purposive sampling technique and it refers to a sample selection approach that was employed by Tarnoto (2020). This research, therefore, carefully selects a sample group based on certain attributes and in accordance with the research objectives. Additionally, the data was then analyzed manually with the assistance of Ms. Excel, in line with the predetermined variables. It was used mainly due to the simple nature of the data and involved a dichotomous scale, where respondents only have two

possible answer options, such as yes-no, good-bad, ever-not ever, and the like, as suggested by Bahrun et al., (2017).

Results and Discussion

The Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology launched the *Merdeka* curriculum as one of the independent learning programs to improve the quality of learning. Furthermore, the *Merdeka* Curriculum emphasizes the essential content and character development of the Pancasila student profile. It implies freedom of thought, creativity, and appreciation or response to changes that occur. However, the goal is to create a pleasant learning condition and atmosphere. Curriculum goals are for teachers, students and parents to have a pleasant atmosphere (Nasution, 2022; Sunarni & Karyono, 2023). Another starting point for designing the *Merdeka* curriculum is the philosophy of *Merdeka* learning, and is based on other educational policies contained in the Indonesian Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (*Mendikbudristek*) 2020-2024 Strategic Plan (Fitriyah & Wardani, 2022).

In addition, the Minister also issued a Joint Decree and a circular letter, including:

1) Joint Decree of the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia Number 56/M/2022 concerning guidelines for implementing a learning curriculum in the context of learning recovery.

2) Circular letter of the Minister of Research and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, N0. 1919/BIB5/GT.0103/2022 Regarding the Implementation of *Merdeka* Belajar, and

3) Decree of the Head of the Curriculum Standards Agency, and Educational Assessment of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia Number: 034 / H / KR / 2022 Regarding Education Units Implementing *Merdeka* Curriculum Implementation in the 2022/2023 school year.

In relation to this, the categories of schools' level of understanding of the Joint Decree and the circular letter sent by the *Mendikbudristek* can be seen as follows:
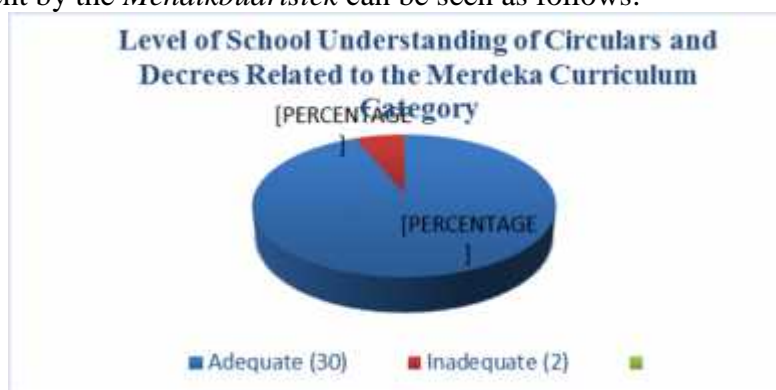

Figure 1. School-level of Comprehension Categories

Based on this data, it is known that the level of school understanding of circular letters and decision letters from the Minister is quite high, namely 94% of the total research sample. However, there are two schools that do not understand, they should have the initiative to improve their understanding, and this has occurred since the *Merdeka* Curriculum is the mandate of minister Nadiem Makarim, who wants education to adopt to the needs of the times and be independent (Faiz et al., 2022). Nadiem Makarim also said that comprehensive skills require curriculum changes to drive educational change (Kholisdinuka, 2020). Apart from the effects of Covid-19, the *Merdeka* curriculum is present to restore learning that was

previously not optimal with a sharper design and easier to implement (Nurzila, 2022) and according to the needs of students in each school (Sumarsih et al., 2022).

Readiness to Implement the *Merdeka* Curriculum

On the aspect of readiness to implement the *Merdeka* Curriculum, it is necessary to first review whether the school has met the requirements set by the *Mendikbudristek*. There are 32 SMA / SMK in Pekanbaru City, have met the requirements and have been appointed by the *Mendikbudristek*, to implement the *Merdeka* Curriculum.
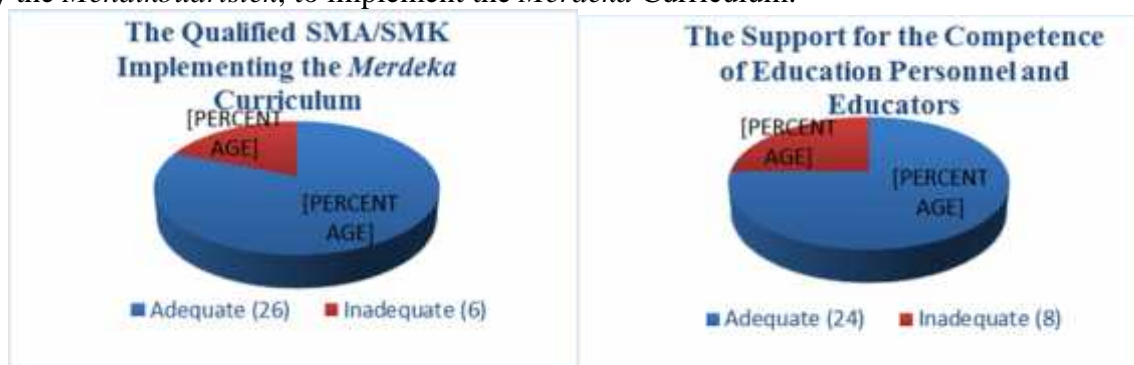

Figure 2. Readiness to Implement the *Merdeka* Curriculum

The results above show that SMA/SMK that have met the requirements and have been appointed by the Indonesian Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (*Mendikbudristek*), in implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum are quite high, totaling 81% (26 SMA/SMK) and those that do not meet the requirements are 19% (6 SMA/SMK). Compliance with these requirements is supported by the SMA / SMK having competent education and education personnel. Among the schools, 75% (24 schools) stated that their teachers have adequate competence in supporting the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum. However, this means that teachers realize that it is not enough to have experience in using learning tools in the teaching and learning process, teachers need to prepare and improve their professionalism in gaining new experiences in order to update their professional competencies and skills (Rahayu et al., 2022). In addition, the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum must be supported by adequate infrastructure and educational technology readiness and supported by effective and efficient policies, procedures, and funding.
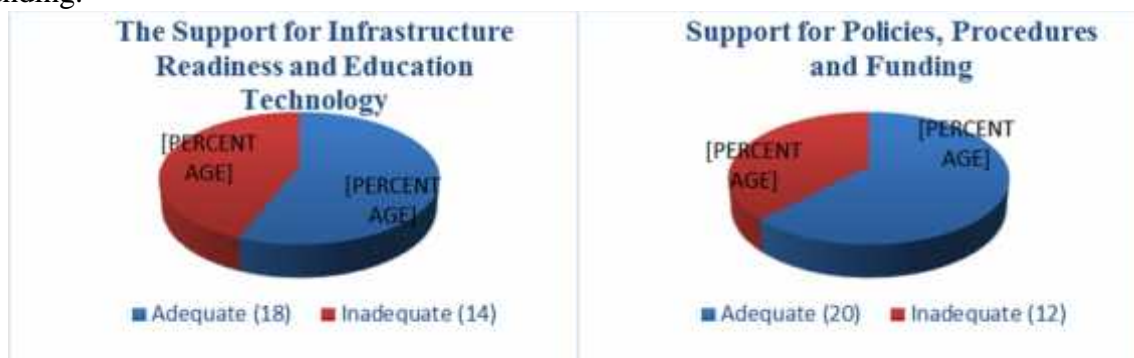

Figure 3. The Level of School Support

Based on this data, it is known that SMA/SMK were supported by adequate infrastructure readiness and education technology and by effective and efficient policies, procedures and funding in the medium category. Support for infrastructure readiness and education technology only amounted to 56% (18 SMA/SMK) which was adequate. Support for effective and efficient policies, procedures and funding amounted to 62% (20 SMA/SMK).

In fact, facilities and infrastructure greatly support learning while fulfilling the Policy in implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum. School facilities and infrastructure must exceed the 2007 *Permendikbud* standards for providing a learning environment and in accordance with the ratio between the number of students and the availability of facilities (Febrianningsih & Ramadan, 2023). Therefore, well infrastructure will support the successful implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum (Nurfitriani et al., 2023). In accordance with the results of the research by Kusyanti (2022) which shows that based on his study, facilities and infrastructure are the main support for the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum.

The Implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum

The implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum is motivated by the decline in the quality of education services and graduates in Indonesia, as well as the weakening competitiveness of Indonesian graduates in markets 4.0 and 5.0 (Sabaruddin, 2022). The implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum is new as an open learning process that can enable further learning experiences without being bound by completion standards and graduation standards (Tiwikrama et al., 2021). For service quality and education, *Mendikbudristek* has provided the *Merdeka Mengajar* platform for educators to get references, inspiration, and understanding to implement the *Merdeka* Curriculum through teaching, learning, and creating activities. Thus, teachers in learning use learning modules that have been prepared by *Mendikbudristek*.
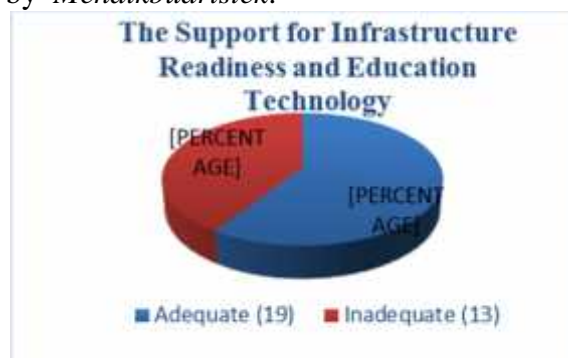

Figure 4. The Level of Module Use Category

According to the data, it appears that only 59% (19 SMA/SMK) use the learning module prepared by the Indonesian Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (*Mendikbudristek*), while 41% (13 SMA/SMK) have not used it on the pretext that the teachers are still in the process of learning the module. Likewise, although teachers are the driving force behind curriculum change, it is normal that they are still stuttering because they are still pioneering the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum. As curriculum implementers, these teachers will certainly continue to strive to create learning activities for their students (Sukmadinata, 2001) in accordance with the demands of the curriculum being implemented. This is due to the fact that, based on research conducted by Hattarina et al., (2022) there are three things that are key to the implementation strategy of the *Merdeka* Curriculum, namely 1) The *Merdeka* Curriculum is a choice, not an obligation; 2) Implementation is a learning process; and 3) support in curriculum implementation is comprehensive and continuous.

Similarly, (Devian et al., 2022) assert that the essence of the *Merdeka* Curriculum is freedom of thought aimed at students and teachers, which can promote character building in independent thinking because students and teachers can absorb information from the environment where current students and teachers learn by referring to material in books or

modules. Thus, in addition to teacher skills and enthusiasm, student participation is also highly expected in their learning.
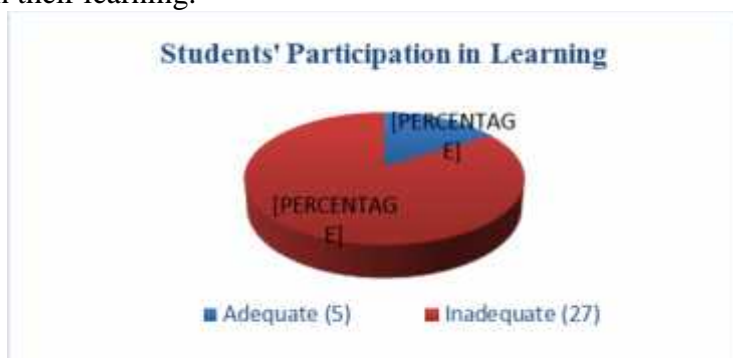

Figure 5. The category of Student Participation Level

After studying the data, it was discovered that only 16% (5 SMA/SMK) stated that student participation in effective learning had been achieved as expected, while 84% (27 SMA/SMK) student participation in learning had not been effective. Indeed, active student participation is an absolute requirement for learning activities to occur in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum. These students participate in a variety of teaching and learning processes, depending on their interests and strengths. Of course, their participation improves their skills and intellectual level.

Currently, the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum will certainly lead to changes in the learning system, one of which is the MCA and Character Survey, as well as the *Merdeka* curriculum version of the lesson plan. MCA and Character Survey as subtitutes for the national stratified test, have assessments consisting of two parts, namely the minimum competency assessment and character survey. The MCA system assesses two cognitive aspects, namely literacy and numeracy. According to Faiz & Kurniawaty (2020) the focus of reading and writing materials is on the ability to understand and analyze reading. So that in addition to being able to read, you must also be able to understand the concepts behind reading or writing. A character survey is conducted to measure emotional learning outcomes that refer to the Pancasila Student Profile.
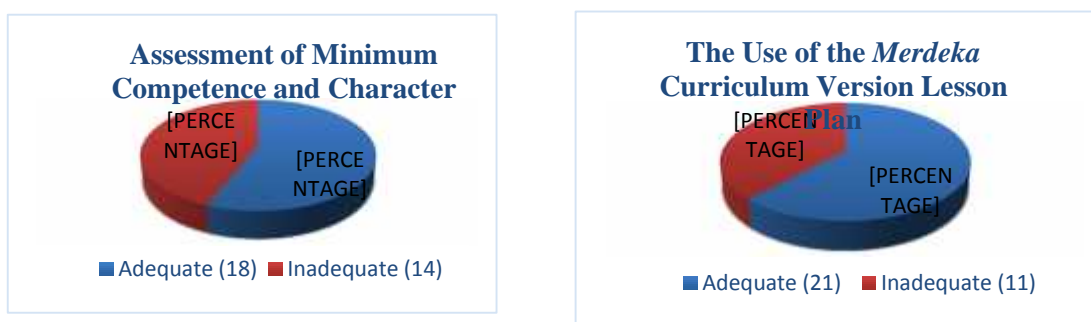

Figure 6. The Level of MCA and Lesson Plan Utilization Category

Regarding the data, only 56% (18 SMA/SMK) stated that the Minimum Competency Assessment (MCA) and Character Survey had been implemented, while 44% (14 SMA/SMK) stated that it had not been implemented. In another aspect, it is known that 62% (21 SMA/SMK) use and prepare *Merdeka* Learning version of lesson plans. For example, teachers simplify the preparation of lesson plans effectively and efficiently, which contains only 3 important components, namely; learning objectives, learning activities, and assessment.

MCA is specifically designed to measure students' thinking or reasoning skills when reading data and text (literacy) and when solving problems that require knowledge of mathematics or numeracy (Mansyera et al., 2023; Ramadansur et al., 2023). Therefore, as stated by Herdi et al., (2022); Mahanal (2019); Masitoh (2020) and Rizky & Zainil (2021), apart from testing reading and math skills, MCA also improves students' High Order Thinking Skills (HOTs). A Minimum Competency Assessment (MCA) is an assessment of the basic skills that all students need to develop their own skills and participate positively in society (Abdullah, 2021; Marlina, 2019). On the other hand, the Character and Learning Environment Survey is used to measure more social-emotional learning outcomes, as well as the quality of learning in each school (Wandira et al., 2022). Despite this, many teachers and prospective teachers are not familiar with the concept of national assessments. Therefore, early assessment is needed to react to the policies implemented, so that there are no obstacles to the fulfillment of these principles in the future (Anisah & Amreta, 2023; Raini et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, to the extent that schools in Pekanbaru understand and implement the concept of Merdeka Curriculum, both conceptually and practically, this research provides a deeper understanding of the extent to which schools in Pekanbaru understand and implement the concept of the *Merdeka* Curriculum. These outcomes can assist researchers and policy makers in developing a better conceptual understanding of the *Merdeka* Curriculum implementation. Besides, Anisah & Amreta (2023) and Sunarni & Karyono (2023) suggest that by providing a basis for developing will impact more effective implementation models. It also reveals that infrastructure and education technology remain a challenge, which can be used as a basis for authorities to allocate resources, improve school infrastructure and increase access to education technology as initiated by (Kusyanti, 2022; Suardana et al., 2022; Triayomi et al., 2022). Consequently, the compulsory need to improve policy and procedural support may encourage authorities to design more appropriate policies and more effective procedures to support the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Thus, what this study found can be used as a guide for policy makers, schools, teachers and researchers to improve the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum in Pekanbaru and other areas, as well as a source of information for further development of educational concepts and practices in Indonesia.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the research and discussion above, the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum in SMA / SMK has met the requirements and was appointed by the Indonesian Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (*Mendikbudristek*), is quite high, reaching 81% of the total SMA / SMK involved. The competency of teachers at SMA / SMK is also sufficient to support the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum in as many as 75% of the schools surveyed. The readiness of infrastructure and educational technology, however, still needs to be improved, only reaching 56%. At the same time, support for policies, procedures, and funding also still needs to be improved, which amounted to 62%. The level of use of modules provided by the *Mendikbudristek* in SMA/SMK reached 59%.

However, the contribution of students to effective learning is still not optimal, reaching only 16%. The use of the Minimum Competency Assessment (MCA) and Character Survey in 56% of schools, while the use and preparation of Merdeka Learning lesson plans reached 62%. Even though the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum in SMA / SMK still faces several challenges, especially related to infrastructure, student participation, and

policy support, it has also achieved some level of success in terms of teacher competence and the use of teaching materials.

Recommendation

Reflecting the findings presented, we recommend that the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (*Mendikbudristek*) continue to focus on improving the infrastructure and readiness of educational technology in SMA/SMK institutions. This will be crucial to ensure the effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. In addition, it is also important to address the low level of student participation in effective learning by emphasizing the importance of empowering educators with adequate training on learning concepts and methods aligned with this curriculum. In addition, we must also ensure that there are adequate, relevant and inspiring learning resources to support active and creative approaches to learning. In addition, the positive aspects of teachers' competencies and the use of teaching materials should be maintained and further developed and, hence, form the basis for continuous improvement. Hence, the Ministries and the schools should collaborate to create a comprehensive plan that addresses these challenges and capitalizes on existing strengths to ensure the success of the *Merdeka* Curriculum in SMA/SMK institutions.

Acknowledgment

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