Bridging Urban and Rural Contexts: A Comparative Case Study of English Teachers' Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

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Abstract: This study aims to explore and compare the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by English teachers in urban and rural junior high schools in Kolaka Regency, Southeast Sulawesi. A qualitative comparative case study method was employed, involving four English teachers from two schools—one urban and one rural. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using an interactive qualitative analysis framework that included data reduction, data display, within-case analysis, cross-case analysis, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal notable differences in curriculum implementation practices and challenges across the two contexts. Urban teachers demonstrated pragmatic adaptation strategies, primarily focusing on material modification and internal collaboration within schools. In contrast, rural teachers exhibited high levels of pedagogical creativity and relied heavily on external collaborative networks, such as Musyawarah Guru Mata Pelajaran (MGMP). While both contexts faced pedagogical challenges, including low student motivation and limited vocabulary mastery, rural schools additionally encountered significant barriers related to inadequate digital infrastructure. This study underscores the importance of context-sensitive educational policies and targeted professional development programs to support equitable and effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum across diverse school settings.

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Introduction

The Merdeka Curriculum emerges as a response to the need for flexibility and relevance in Indonesia's 21st-century education system. This curriculum is designed with a philosophy to restore learning autonomy to educational units, teachers, and students, emphasizing student-centered, differentiated, and project-based learning (Rahman & Robandi, 2024; Mujiburrahman et al., 2025). Its essence is to provide "freedom" for teachers to innovate and adapt learning to local contexts and students' specific needs (Barlian et al., 2023; Subakti, 2025).

The success of new policy implementation is never detached from context. In Indonesia, geographical contexts create deep disparities between schools in urban and rural areas. Previous studies consistently reveal significant gaps in digital infrastructure access, availability of learning resources, and quality of teacher training (Febriana et al., 2018; Setyowati et al., 2023; Asdar et al., 2025). This gap, often termed the digital divide, substantially shapes the learning ecosystem and teachers' capacity to adopt curricular innovations (Safira et al., 2024; Pratama, 2019). Specific challenges in English language learning in rural areas, such as low student interest, Minimal environmental support, and

vocabulary limitations, have long been identified. The Merdeka Curriculum presents particular changes that add to the difficulties faced by English teachers. It shifts from strict grammatical curricula to an emphasis on practical texts and communication skills, while also eliminating specified content requirements. This dual change requires teachers to be more innovative in finding genuine materials and creating learning experiences that fit the context. This task can differ significantly between areas with many resources and those with few resources (Harlina & Yusuf, 2020).

Several studies have begun examining the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. A systematic literature review by Mujiburrahman et al. (2025) identifies general strategies such as teacher professional development and project-based learning, alongside challenges like pedagogical competence and infrastructure gaps. Case studies at elementary (Subakti, 2025) and secondary school levels (Saragih & Marpaung, 2024) also provide initial pictures of adaptation and constraints in the field. However, most of these studies remain localized and fragmented, or focus on evaluation in single contexts (urban or rural). Thus, there is a critical research gap: no study has systematically compared how significantly different contextual factors between urban and rural settings, such as infrastructure disparities, institutional support, and student characteristics, affect English teachers' practices, challenges, and adaptation strategies in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

Kolaka Regency is an excellent location for this comparative study because of its clear differences in socioeconomic factors and infrastructure. The urban center of the regency has schools that possess fairly good facilities and access, which is common for district capitals in Indonesia. In clear contrast, schools located in nearby coastal and rural inland regions face significant challenges due to a lack of digital infrastructure and educational resources. This distinct division within one administrative area enables a systematic comparison of how the same national curriculum policy is implemented in very different local environments. Thus, Kolaka serves as a legitimate example of the national disparity in education between urban and rural settings.

The scientific novelty of this study lies in its comparative case study approach that systematically compares Merdeka Curriculum implementation in contrasting urban and rural contexts, specifically focusing on English language teaching. This research integrates theoretical frameworks of teacher agency (Buchanan, 2015) and educational change (Fullan, 2015) with empirical investigation of contextual constraints. Teacher agency serves as a framework to explore how professional abilities are applied in various ways such as through adapting materials in urban schools or engaging in social collaboration in rural schools to effectively manage curriculum requirements. In the meantime, Fullan's change theory serves as the foundation for examining how the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation is ultimately influenced by the distinct local circumstances of urban compared to rural schools. This study aims to explore and compare the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by English teachers in urban and rural junior high schools in Kolaka Regency. The results aim to offer factual support for creating policies that are tailored to specific contexts and for developing professional training programs for teachers that foster fair curriculum implementation. Additionally, this research adds to the theory of curriculum implementation by providing a detailed comparison between urban and rural settings and showing how teacher agency and educational change appear in different resource environments.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative comparative case study design. This design was chosen because it aligns with the research objective to explore in-depth and compare curriculum implementation phenomena within their unique natural contexts of urban and rural schools (Yin, 2018). The case study approach enables researchers to understand implementation process complexity at each location, while the comparative aspect is designed to identify significant patterns of similarity and difference resulting from geographical and institutional context variations.

The research was conducted in two public junior high schools in Kolaka Regency, Southeast Sulawesi. To uphold confidentiality and anonymity principles according to qualitative research ethics, school and participant identities were not specified and pseudonyms were used. The Urban Case (SCHOOL U) is a public junior high school located in the district capital with relatively complete access to educational facilities and technological infrastructure, supported by stable internet networks. Students come from heterogeneous socioeconomic backgrounds. The school has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum for at least one academic year. The Rural Case (SCHOOL R) is a public junior high school located in a rural or suburban area of Kolaka Regency with limitations in learning support facilities. The main constraint is unstable or very limited internet access. Students generally come from more homogeneous backgrounds, mostly from families working in the agricultural sector.

Research participants consisted of four English teachers, two from each school. To protect their identities, participants were coded as Teacher U1 and Teacher U2 (from SCHOOL U) and Teacher R1 and Teacher R2 (from SCHOOL R). Participant selection criteria were: (1) Active English teachers who have used the Merdeka Curriculum for at least one semester; (2) Having more than five years of teaching experience to provide mature perspectives; (3) Willing to participate fully in interviews, observations, and member checking processes.

This study relied on data source triangulation to enhance the depth and trustworthiness of findings. Three main data collection techniques were used: (1) In-depth Semi-structured Interviews with guides covering themes of understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum philosophy, description of differentiated and project-based learning (PjBL) implementation practices, identification of contextual challenges, adaptation strategies, and expectations for system support. Each interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and lasted 45-60 minutes. (2) Non-participant Classroom Observation The guidelines were created by modifying indicators from the Merdeka Curriculum Implementation Guide (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022) and principles of differentiated instruction. The focusing on: (a) the interaction between teachers and students and the teacher's function as a facilitator, (b) the incorporation of media and learning resources, especially adjustments to meet digital limitations, (c) the use of diverse assessment methods, and (d) the variety of student activities as proof of differentiation. Every instructor was observed across 2-3 teaching sessions, with comprehensive field notes taken according to this organized observation form. (3) Document Analysis of Teaching Modules and Student Worksheets (LKPD) developed by participant teachers, focusing on alignment with differentiation principles, project integration, content contextualization, and assessment planning.

Data were analyzed interactively and iteratively following the interactive qualitative data analysis model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2019), consisting of three interrelated activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The process

began with data reduction through repeated reading of raw data and thematic coding using deductive and inductive approaches.

The presentation of data consisted of two organized and consecutive stages. Initially, a separate analysis was performed for SCHOOL U and SCHOOL R. Thorough thematic stories and presentations were created for each case to illustrate the specific implementation environment, which included teachers' philosophical insights, adjustments to teaching principles, challenges faced, and strategies developed.

Following this, the main focus of the comparative design was carried out via cross-case analysis. This stage was deliberately centered on contrasts, mainly aiming to recognize and comprehend the inconsistencies and varying themes between the two situations, as these discrepancies highlight the significant influence of differences in geography and resources. The analysis adhered to a systematic method: (1) Thematic Comparison, which involved aligning essential themes from each case (for instance, "teacher agency expression," "type of digital issues," "main adaptation methods") alongside each other; (2) Development of a Comparative Matrix, which arranged these themes visually, using urban and rural contexts as the contrasting dimensions; and (3) Pattern Recognition, which refined the data into notable differing patterns (for example, material agency in urban educational settings compared to rural ones). social-collaborative organizations in rural educational institutions) and, furthermore, typical trends (for instance, common fundamental teaching difficulties). As illustrated in Figure 1, this was a repetitive process; the first conclusions made could prompt a return to reconsider the thematic comparison or perhaps even the original coding, thus ensuring analytical thoroughness and depth.

Conclusion drawing/verification included analyzing the identified differing patterns in relation to the theoretical frameworks of teacher agency (Buchanan, 2015) and educational change (Fullan, 2015) to form meaningful conclusions regarding the influence of context on curriculum implementation. The reliability of the data was established by using different sources and methods, confirming findings with participants, providing detailed descriptions of both settings, and keeping a clear record of all analytical choices made.

Results and Discussion
Overview of Research Context

This study was conducted at two locations with different characteristics: SCHOOL U located in the city center with relatively complete facility access, and SCHOOL R located in a suburban area with infrastructure limitations. Both schools have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum, but different geographical contexts and resources create unique implementation landscapes at each location.

Findings in the Urban Context (SCHOOL U)

Teachers at SCHOOL U demonstrated good understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum's essence as a curriculum providing autonomy and flexibility. Teacher U1 stated, "The essence is giving students freedom to explore their interests, while teachers act more as facilitators." This understanding aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum philosophy emphasizing student-centered learning and independence development (Rahman & Robandi, 2024). However, both teachers also highlighted significant changes in language teaching approaches, particularly reduced explicit emphasis on grammar, which they considered a specific challenge for students with weak English foundations.

In practice, SCHOOL U teachers applied Merdeka Curriculum principles with pragmatic and adaptive approaches. Differentiation was more frequently implemented based

on overall class characteristics. Teacher U2 explained, "Each class has its own 'character.' I adjust discussion methods or small projects based on that class's dynamics." This approach shows adaptation to urban student heterogeneity realities, though not fully achieving individual differentiation as idealized in Tomlinson's theory (Barlian et al., 2023). Project-Based Learning (PjBL) implementation was selective. Teachers chose feasible projects like creating "About Me" identity cards and adjusted complexity according to class capabilities. This reflects strategies to accommodate PjBL principles without being burdened by time and resource constraints often challenging in implementation (Kokotsaki et al., 2016).

Observations revealed a digital paradox: despite adequate school facilities, individual student access to devices and internet quotas created new barriers to material distribution. Teacher U2 expressed, "Many students bring phones but don't have data quotas. School Wi-Fi is also limited." This phenomenon represents a micro-level manifestation of the digital divide even in urban areas (Safira et al., 2024). Other main challenges included low learning motivation and limited vocabulary mastery as main obstacles in understanding English texts, consistent with study findings on language learning in various contexts (Harlina & Yusuf, 2020). Teacher-developed adaptation strategies included: (1) Material Flexibility by modifying and printing digital modules into physical materials; (2) Implicit Grammar Instruction despite not being a curriculum focus; (3) Internal Collaboration by relying on principal support and city-level MGMP forums for resource sharing.

Findings in the Rural Context (SCHOOL R)

Interestingly, teachers at SCHOOL R demonstrated surprisingly deep and articulate conceptual understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum. Teacher R1 defined it as "freedom for teachers to innovate, creating learning relevant to students' real lives here." This understanding even included philosophical terms like "meaningful, enjoyable, and mindful learning." This challenges stereotypes about rural teachers' pedagogical backwardness. This good understanding was likely supported by their active participation in Subject Teacher Forum (MGMP) activities functioning as professional learning communities.

Implementation at SCHOOL R showed remarkable creativity and highly structured planning under severely limited conditions. Teachers applied differentiation through initial diagnostic tests to map student abilities, then grouped students homogenously by capability. PjBL was implemented contextually with projects like creating videos of local food preparation procedures or traditional recipes. These projects not only trained English but also elevated local wisdom, showing high learning contextualization (Saragih & Marpaung, 2024). With media limited to projectors and printed materials (LKPD) due to internet constraints, creativity in designing detailed worksheets became substitutes for inaccessible digital resources.

Main challenges were structural-infrastructural: poor or non-existent internet access directly limited teachers' and students' exploration of digital learning resources and complicated platform-based learning administration. These findings strongly align with studies on extreme digital divide between urban and rural schools (Safira et al., 2024; Pratama, 2019). Other challenges similar to urban settings included vocabulary and motivation limitations, but exacerbated by minimal English exposure environments outside school (Harlina & Yusuf, 2020; Nasir et al., 2025). Teachers' main adaptation strategies were collaborative and contextual: (1) MGMP Network as Backbone for sharing modules, ideas, and moral support; (2) Content Contextualization by designing materials and projects closely related to rural students' daily lives; (3) Limited Resource Optimization by alternating use of available devices and relying on printed teaching materials.

Comparative Analysis and Discussion

Cross-case analysis revealed a "double disparity" pattern. First, both contexts faced the same pedagogical disparities: low vocabulary mastery and student learning motivation. Second, and more determining, SCHOOL R faced much deeper infrastructure and environmental disparities. Paradoxically, urban schools grapple with individual access problems while rural schools contend with basic infrastructure absence. Consequently, supportive policies cannot be one-size-fits-all. Rural schools require basic interventions (internet infrastructure, devices), while urban schools need solutions for equitable student-level access (quota assistance schemes, device sharing) (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Teacher agency capacity was expressed through different channels (Buchanan, 2015). At SCHOOL U, agency was more manifested in material space: ability to select, modify, and utilize available digital resources. Meanwhile at SCHOOL R, despite material limitations, agency flourished in social-collaborative spaces. MGMP networks and inter-teacher collaboration became critical social capital for creating resilience, sharing resources, and gaining professional legitimacy. This finding strengthens the importance of collaborative teacher forums as curriculum implementation support systems, especially in disadvantaged areas (Suhandoko et al., 2024).

The Contradiction of Limitations and Innovation

A significant discovery is that rural teachers (SCHOOL R) exhibited not only a profound philosophical comprehension but also more organized and recorded practices of PjBL in comparison to their urban colleagues. This unexpected result can be understood by considering innovation that is limited by available resources. Significant restrictions in digital infrastructure and educational resources did not hinder innovation; rather, they encouraged greater creativity in teaching and careful organization. The lack of simple digital tools compelled teachers to depend on deep content contextualization, comprehensive printed worksheets (LKPD), and diagnostic evaluations to guarantee effective learning. This occurrence corresponds with the idea of "frugal innovation," where limited resources inspire creative and situationally appropriate solutions. Additionally, their strong involvement with MGMP networks created an essential framework, changing isolation into a benefit of collaboration. This discovery greatly enhances implementation theory by questioning the common negative view associated with rural education. It underscores that certain limitations can, in an unexpected way, encourage unique types of professional excellence and well-documented reflective practices.

Table 1. Comparative Synthesis of Merdeka Curriculum Implementation

Analysis Aspect	Urban School (SCHOOL U)	Rural School (SCHOOL R)
Teacher Understanding	Pragmatic, focusing on autonomy and role change	Deep and articulate, covering philosophy and contextualization
Core Practice (PjBL & Differentiation)	Selective and adaptive; differentiation based on class	Structured and documented; differentiation based on ability with diagnostics; contextual PjBL
Dominant Challenges	1. Motivation & basic student ability 2. Individual student digital access disparity	1. Motivation & basic student ability 2. Absence of basic digital infrastructure (internet) 3. Minimal language exposure environment
Main Adaptation Strategies	1. Material modification 2. Internal school collaboration	1. External collaboration (MGMP) 2. Extreme content contextualization 3. Limited resource optimization
Form of Teacher Agency	Material Agency: manipulating & utilizing available resources	Social-Collaborative Agency: building networks & sharing knowledge
Policy Needs	Solutions for student-level access disparities; heterogeneous classroom management training	Provision of basic infrastructure; MGMP capacity strengthening; context-based training for limitations

These findings provide valuable input for Teacher Professional Development (TPD) design. Effective training must be contextualized (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). For urban teachers, focus could be on managing differentiation in highly heterogeneous classes and inclusive technology integration. For rural teachers, training should emphasize creative pedagogical strategies with limited resources, local material utilization, and strengthening MGMP as communities of practice. One-size-fits-all TPD approaches risk overlooking different root problems in each context (Annisa et al., 2024).

This study enhances current theories regarding educational change and the role of teachers by showing how these concepts vary depending on the specific context. Initially, it supports Fullan's (2015) theory that the local environment is crucial; however, it elaborates that "context" functions through a two-fold difference—fundamental educational challenges combined with specific barriers related to infrastructure or access in that context. Secondly, it enhances Buchanan's (2015) framework of teacher agency by empirically recognizing its two separate forms: material agency (utilizing available resources) in environments with sufficient resources and social-collaborative agency (utilizing professional networks) in environments lacking resources. This dual aspect provides a more detailed analytical instrument for comprehending teacher resistance and adaptation. For policymakers and educational leaders, this study highlights the essential requirement for tailored support systems. A consistent national support strategy will certainly be unsuccessful. Suggestions include:

1) For Rural Areas: Place importance on essential digital infrastructure and reliable internet access as a fundamental necessity. At the same time, make MGMP forums a permanent and robust part of the system with financial support and assistance, acknowledging them as essential environments for innovation and adaptability, rather than just places for training.

2) For Urban Settings: Change the emphasis from improving school infrastructure to addressing digital inequalities among students by implementing device-sharing initiatives and internet support programs. Professional development should focus on enhancing advanced abilities in managing diverse classrooms and pursuing a comprehensive understanding of technology integration, rather than solely a technical approach.

3) For Teacher Professional Development (TPD): Shift firmly away from uniform training methods. Create training modules tailored to specific contexts: 'low-tech/no-tech teaching methods' for teachers in rural areas and 'differentiated instruction for varied classrooms' for teachers in urban settings. Sharing sessions across different contexts within TPD could promote mutual learning and help dismantle stereotypes.

Conclusion

Based on research results and discussion, it can be concluded that Merdeka Curriculum implementation by English teachers in Kolaka Regency shows significantly different characteristics between urban (SCHOOL U) and rural (SCHOOL R) schools. These differences extend beyond infrastructure readiness to encompass forms of teacher agency and developed adaptation strategies. Urban implementation was pragmatic and adaptive. SCHOOL U teachers utilized relatively complete digital facilities to implement group differentiation and selective Project- Based Learning (PjBL), adjusting to class characteristics. Main challenges emerged at micro- level individual student digital access disparities (internet quotas, device ownership), along with classic problems of low motivation and vocabulary mastery. Rural implementation was characterized by creativity and resilience within constraints. Amid severe digital infrastructure challenges, SCHOOL R teachers demonstrated deep philosophical understanding and high pedagogical creativity through contextual PjBL and diagnostic-based differentiation with structured planning. Their main adaptation strategies relied on strong collaborative networks through MGMP and material contextualization with local life, making social capital substitutes for material limitations. Challenges and adaptation strategies formed a "double disparity" pattern. Both locations faced the same core pedagogical challenges (vocabulary, motivation). However, the second layer of challenges differed greatly: urban grappling with access problems while rural contending with basic infrastructure absence. Adaptation strategies developed uniquely: urban relying more on material adaptation and internal school support, while rural depending on external collaboration and content contextualization.

Recommendation

Based on findings, this study recommends context-sensitive policy approaches. First, District education offices should design differentiated support programs: prioritizing basic digital infrastructure provision (stable internet, devices) and quality printed material access for rural schools, while focusing on solutions for student-level access disparities and heterogeneous classroom management training for urban schools. Second, MGMP forums have proven to be critical safety nets and innovation engines, particularly for rural teachers. Local governments need to support these forums' institutional and operational aspects with adequate funding and facilitation, encouraging cross-regional (urban-rural) experience and resource exchange to break knowledge isolation.

Third, Teacher Professional Development (TPD) must be contextualized. Teacher training design should consider their teaching contexts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Training for rural teachers should emphasize creative low-tech/no-tech pedagogical strategies and local resource utilization, while urban teacher training could focus on deep technology integration and complex differentiation assessment. Lastly, Potential barriers influencing research results include limited participant and school numbers, which may affect findings generalizability. Future research should expand scope with larger, more representative samples across provinces, employ mixed-methods approaches (quantitative to measure challenge distribution and qualitative to deepen meaning), incorporate multi-stakeholder perspectives (students, parents, supervisors), and conduct intervention and program evaluation studies to test effectiveness of context-sensitive mentoring models, urban-rural collaboration schemes, or contextual teacher training programs in improving implementation quality.

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