



Nonformal Education and *Merdeka* Curriculum Policy: The Leaders' Perspective

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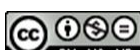
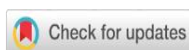
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the perspective of non-formal education leaders in Jambi province, Indonesia on the implementation of *Merdeka* curriculum policies in non-formal education providing equal education service managed by the community. Six leaders were selected using purposive sampling and data was collected through open-ended telephone interviews and one-on-one meetings. The findings revealed that the leaders had interesting experiences implementing the new curriculum, with a focus on providing non-formal education units. However, there were challenges in translating the curriculum structures into the operational curriculum of educational units, especially for students who are not of school age. The leaders suggested socialization, assistance, and training actively pour the curriculum into the operational curriculum. They also recommended support from the government in the form of material and non-material support. Further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the policies and strategies used by non-formal education units in the implementation of the new curriculum, including those managed by the government and community, and to compare the implementation in non-formal and formal education units.

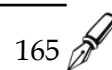


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INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 resulted in significant changes to activities across various fields of life, including education. Many countries shifted their learning activities to virtual spaces, such as India (Agrawal & Kauhsik, 2020; Dubey & Pandey, 2020; Jena, 2020), England (Kidd & Muray, 2020), and the USA (Murphy et al., 2020; Al-Mawee et al., 2021; Catalano et al., 2021). In Indonesia, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology issued circular number 4 of 2020 regarding the Implementation of the Learning from Home (LfM) Policy, followed by implementation instructions in Circular Number 15 of 2020. These Circulars mandated that learning activities be carried out online using various applications suitable for learning media (Latief et al., 2021).

In 2022, the government of Indonesia through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology established a *Merdeka* curriculum policy by way of the Decree of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Number 56 of 2022. As a portion of the policy implementation, formal and non-formal education units were built up to recoup learning results after implementing the crisis educational curriculum policy during the COVID-19 period. The Proclaim of the Head of Education Standards, Curriculum, and Assessment number 34/H /KR/of 2022 at the point recognized 28 non-formal education units in Jambi area, Indonesia, including 25 non-formal education units managed by the community and three



non-formal education units managed by the government to implement the *Merdeka* Curriculum policy.

In Indonesia, education is implemented based on the national education system law No. 20 of 2003, which consists of three educational paths: formal, informal, and non-formal education. Article 13 paragraph 1 of the law states that "the education path consists of formal, non-formal, and informal education that complements and enriches each other". The structure of education in Indonesia is illustrated in Figure 1.

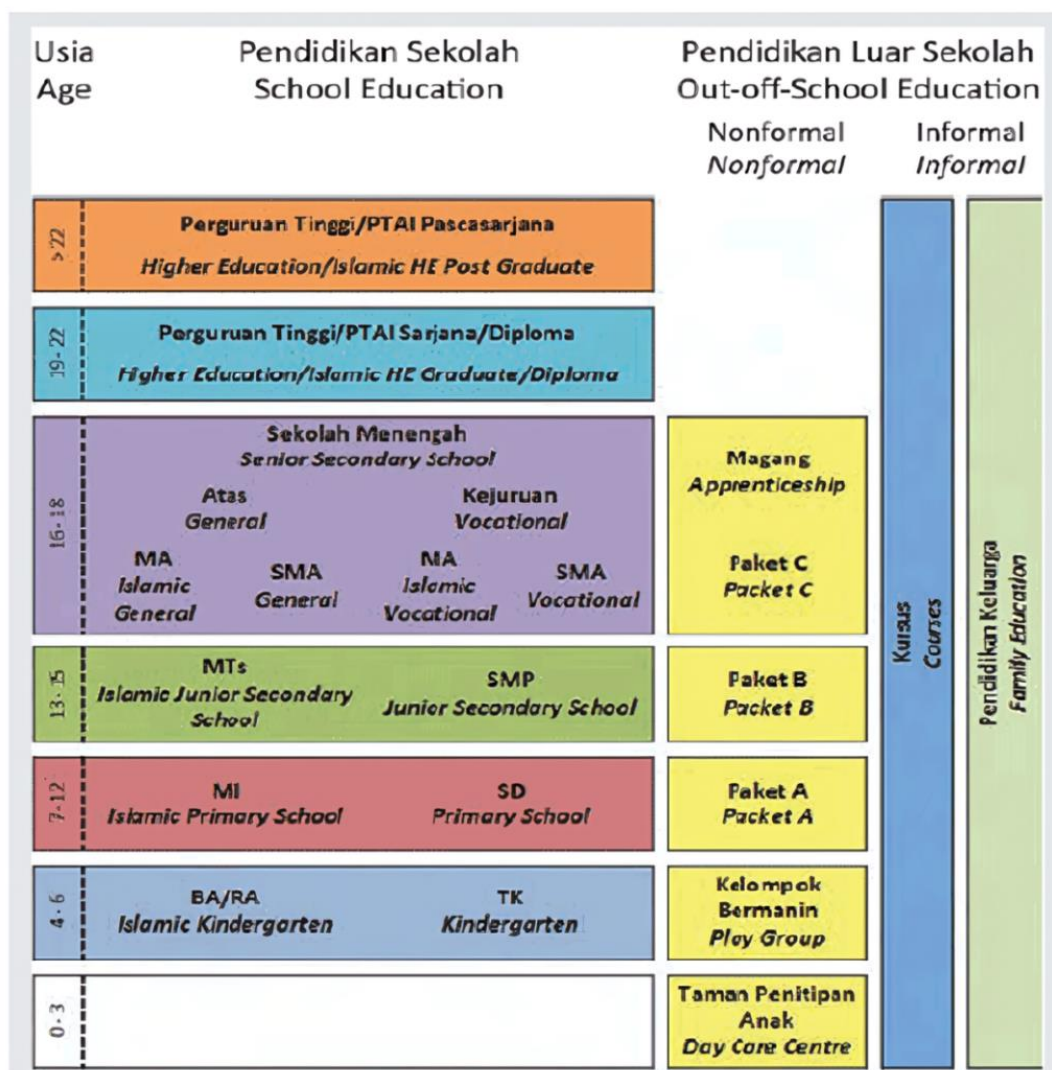


Figure 1. Education structure in Indonesia

Source: Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology, Indonesia

Non-formal education within the meaning of law number 20 of 2003 is a curriculum outside formal education that's carried out in an organized and multi-layered way. This also includes educational activities organized outside the formal education system (schooling). It is designed to respond to society's needs and expand knowledge and skills (Coombs et al., 1973; Romi & Schimida, 2009; Olcott, 2013). Concurring to Yasunaga (2014), non-formal education refers to changes and expansions in the education system not covered by formal education, education that involves preparation and improvements of skills, imaginative education, indigenous education, traditional, religious, and other improvement education programs.

The National Accreditation Board for Early Childhood Education & Non-Formal Education (2023) defines non-formal education as a learning program that is carried out thoroughly by meeting eight national education standards to improve knowledge, skills, and attitudes in

students. It is characterized by short-term goals of functional ability to present and future interest with an emphasis on competence rather than diplomas, relatively short time used, requirements based on needs, interests, and opportunities of students, and curriculum centered on the interests and needs of students.

Non-formal education in Indonesia is also recognized as the provider of general education to elementary school/*Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*, Junior High School/*Madrasah Tsanawiyah*, and High School/*Madrasah Aliyah* including package A program, package B, and package C which is called an equality education program according to the Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia number 7 of 2022.

Equality education programs are organized by the government and society independently with different designations. For the organizers of equality education programs managed by the government, they are named Learning Activity Centers (LAC), while those managed by the community are called Community Learning Activity Centers (CLAC) (Latief et.al. 2022; Pamungkas et al., 2018; Kamil, 2011). Equality education is one of the programs of non-formal education services that provide educational services for children who do not go to school due to poverty, geographical conditions, and diversity (Mulyawan et al., 2020; Ernawati & Sungkowo, 2017; Senjawati & Fakhruddin, 2017; Sutisna, 2016; Hermawan, 2012).

Overall, the non-formal education unit is a unit that provides educational activities managed by the government and the community outside the formal education system (school), as an effort to meet the needs of certain communities to improve knowledge and skills for those who are at school age and not school age. Equality education is one of the programs organized by the non-formal education unit, which aims to provide equivalent education to formal education graduates. Package A is equivalent to basic education, package B is equivalent to junior secondary education, and package C is equivalent to upper secondary education.

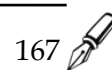
The term "policy" refers to the process by which a group or individual implements a new system. The method by which a group or organization implements a new system is called "planning." In the field of education, a policy is a rule that contains instructions, directions, and guidelines for achieving educational goals in the form of legislation, decrees, programs, and so on. According to Ball (2012), a policy is one of the tools used in research and development, and according to Lasswell (1971), the policy is based on principles and is oriented toward practical practice. One form of policy in the field of education is a policy regarding the curriculum.

According to the Law of the Republic of Indonesia number 20 of 2003, the curriculum is a set of plans and regulations that contain guidelines for the implementation of learning activities in schools and the achievement of educational goals. The curriculum is a set of learning plans that contains structured, programmatic, and planned content and materials and is a collection of values designed in a cognitive, affective, and psychomotor form in the achievement of these values (Nugroho, 2002; Mulenga, 2018; Bahri, 2011)

Curriculum development is a process that aims to carry out learning activities following the social development of society and the demand for global expertise and skills (Hidayah et al., 2021; Santoso, 2021; Djita, 2019). In the history of education curriculum policy, curriculum policy in Indonesia has developed since the beginning of Indonesian independence until now starting from 1948 curriculum to curriculum 13 (Wahyuni, 2016).

Before the COVID-19 virus outbreak spread throughout the world, the education curriculum policy in Indonesia referred to the 2013 curriculum policy, which was abbreviated as K-13. Curriculum 13 is a replacement curriculum for the unit-level curriculum that began to be implemented in 2013. C13 emphasizes learning which refers to the development of attitudes, knowledge, and skills as an effort to prepare quality human resources through a scientific approach (Shelvina et al., 2020).

Entering the COVID-19 period in early 2020, the Indonesian government issued an educational curriculum policy called the emergency curriculum through the decree of the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia number 719/P/2020 concerning guidelines for implementing the curriculum in education units under special conditions



(emergency) using a curriculum that is following the learning needs of students. This curriculum is a form of simplification of C13.

At the beginning of 2022/2023 school year, the Indonesian government announced an education policy to compensate for the learning loss due to COVID-19 by building the *Merdeka* curriculum policy. The securing of the *Merdeka* curriculum is based on the Decree of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia Number 56/M/2022 on guidelines for implementation of the curriculum in the context of learning recovery. Based on the *Merdeka* policy, the curriculum structure of the advanced education program (Package A, Package B, and Package C) includes common study subjects, enrichment, and aptitudes based on the *Pancasila* understudy profile. Table 1 shows the structure of the equality education curriculum based on *Merdeka* Curriculum policies.

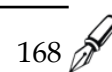
Table 1. Equality education curriculum structure based on *Merdeka* curriculum policy.

Curriculum structures	Details	Activities Form
General Subject Group	Contains subjects that have been prepared following national standards of education (SoF)	According to the subject of formal education level, compulsory subjects
Student Profile of Pancasila-Based Empowerment Group	Contains competencies to foster empowerment, self-esteem, self-confidence, independence, and creativity	Self-development to support the skills chosen by students and in the form of projects to strengthen the profile of Pancasila students.
Pancasila Student Profile-Based Skills Group	According to the potential of regional resources, the needs of learners, and job opportunities	Self-actualization, work, creativity, and productivity in filling public spaces.

Source: The decree of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia Number 56/M/2022 concerning Guidelines for Curriculum Implementation in the Context of Learning Recovery.

Based on the *Merdeka* curriculum the categories in the implementation of the policy consist of *Merdeka* learning, *Merdeka* changing, and *Merdeka* sharing. *Merdeka* learning is the implementation *Merdeka* curriculum by implementing the 2013 curriculum and the implementation of the project to strengthen the profile of *Pancasila* students. *Merdeka* Changing is the implementation of *Merdeka* curriculum following the implementation tools set by the government. *Merdeka* sharing is the implementation of an independent curriculum with tools developed by the education unit.

The process of policy implementation involves the execution of policies by the government through the use of rules, programs, and other provisions. This process is crucial in achieving the set goals of policy. Policy implementation is typically incorporated into statutes but may also take the form of significant executive orders or court rulings. Ideally, the solutions identify the problem to be addressed and organize the implementation process in various ways. Jones (1994) suggested that policy implementation involves what he called three activities: organizing, interpreting, and applying. First, organization refers to the formation or reorganization of resources, units, and methods for implementing a program. This activity identifies the key stakeholders or human resources within the organization required to implement the policy. Secondly, interpreting translates the language contained in laws into appropriately acceptable plans and policies. This plays an important role in understanding the programs described in the directive. Finally, applications include implementing policies by providing services and establishing connections between various activities. In summary, policy implementation is a dynamic process that involves organizing, interpreting, and applying organizational resources and human resources to achieve policy objectives.



With the issuance of the Decree of the Head of Standards, Curriculum, and Education Assessment, researchers are interested in exploring the implementation of the new curriculum of post-COVID-19 policies in non-formal education units providing equality education programs managed by the community in Jambi Province. This study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) what is the experience of non-formal education units providing equality education programs managed by the community in implementing *Merdeka* curriculum policies? (2) What problems are encountered in implementing *Merdeka* curriculum policies? And (3) what advice do leaders of non-formal education units give for implementing *Merdeka* curriculum policies?

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses qualitative exploration research, as it provides researchers with the flexibility to explore and understand how the *Merdeka* curriculum policies are being implemented. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research is a research design that aims to investigate a phenomenon from different perspectives and provide detailed information about the problem being studied (Neuman, 2014; Tracy, 2013).

Data collected was carried out using open-ended telephone interviews and open-ended one-on-one interviews techniques (Creswell, 2018). Open-ended telephone interviews were conducted due to some participants being located outside the researcher's coverage area. Data collection occurred from October 28, 2022, to January 6, 2023. Open-ended one-on-one interviews were conducted with participants in the Jambi city area.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants for this study, 6 (six) from non-formal education units that provide an equitable education program managed by the municipality of Jambi province, in accordance with the regulations of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology through the Decree of the Head of Standards, Curriculum, and Education Assessment number 34/H/KR/ the year 2022 on the *Merdeka* curriculum implementation unit for the 2022/2023 academic years covers five areas of providing equality education in Jambi provinces. The districts of Jambi City, namely Jambi City, Tanjung Jabung Barat Regency, Tanjung Jabung Timur, Muaro Bungo, and Tebo both managed by the community and managed by the government. The six participants in this study were heads of non-formal education units providing equality education managed by the municipality of Jambi City and Tebo Districts, while heads of the other local units were not yet able to participate in this study.

Because qualitative research is interpretive research, qualitative data analysis can be performed in a variety of ways, including repeatedly and thoroughly reading and interpreting the data (Creswell, 2018). Data analysis in this study was carried out by deep reading of the available data manuscripts in-depth and validation using source triangulation techniques and theory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section discusses three issues related to the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum policy in non-formal education units offering equality education service programs in Jambi province, Indonesia. These themes are experiences, issues, and challenges in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum. This discussion is based on the curriculum structure and the participants are identified as L1 to L6.

The experience of non-formal education units

The experiences of non-formal education units managed by the community in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum policy that provides an equal education program are discussed in this section. The curriculum structure includes three groups, namely the general subject group, the



Pancasila student profile-based empowerment group, and the *Pancasila* student profile skill group which must be implemented by non-formal education units.

The leaders of non-formal education units who participated in this study acknowledged that the *Merdeka* curriculum policy is a form of refreshment in the distribution of education after the pandemic. However, they also noted that the implementation of education in non-formal education units, whether before, during, or after the pandemic, has no significant differences. This is because the implementation of the equality education packages A, B, and C in non-formal education units is mostly done independently. This is due to the average age of students who are not of school age, have jobs, and live far from the location of non-formal education units.

Participants shared their experiences in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum policy based on the curriculum structure that has been set. They found the implementation to be not difficult as the curriculum has been implemented by non-formal education units. The head of the non-formal education unit in Tebo Regency L1 (6 January 2023) shared his experience that the *Merdeka* curriculum policy is a curriculum that is in line with the principles of providing nonformal education. The head of the non-formal education unit in Jambi City (L6, 28 October 2022) also found the learning activity process to be more flexible and enjoyable. L4 (2 November 2022), the leaders of the non-formal education unit in Jambi city, and L3 (19 December 2022), another participant, both agreed that the *Merdeka* curriculum policy is aligned with the principles of non-formal education, which is to liberate teachers and students.

L1 further stated that the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum policy provided an interesting experience in which the learning activities were adjusted to local wisdom. This was done by raising the theme of the activity to local wisdom in making wrenches instead of vows derived from grains growing in the forest, considering that the educational unit he manages is from the *Orang Rimba* Community- a term for indigenous tribes in Jambi Province. L1 also acknowledges that *Merdeka* curriculum helped the unit he leads in accelerating the achievement of its vision, mission, and goals

The implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum policy has made the theme of learning activities more focused for L1, as he managed to adjust the learning themes carried out to local wisdom in the unit area under the grouping of curriculum structure set by the government.

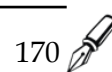
Problems faced in implementing the new curriculum of post-COVID-19 policy

The leaders of the no-formal education unit in this study face similar problems when implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum policy, particularly related to the grouping of curriculum structures. The main challenge is how to formulate the three groups of curriculum structures into the operational curriculum at the non-formal education units level, especially in the empowerment and skills groups.

Different non-formal education units have varied interpretations regarding the activities in the empowerment groups and skill groups, making it unclear how to incorporate these groups into the operational curriculum they manage. Although the government has issued operational guidelines for implementing the new curriculum, the leaders of non-formal education units in this study suggest that there is a need for socialization and training to ensure a common understanding and effective implementation of the policy.

The participants in this study, including L1 (January 6, 2023), L2 (January 8, 2023), L5 (November 30, 2022), and L6 (October 28, 2022), identified the challenges of adapting the curriculum to suit the student's needs and surrounding environments in their respective units. Additionally, L1 highlighted the lack of socialization and government assistance, leading to the need for independent learning through the government's platform and non-formal education unit forums.

The main problem related to implementing the three groups of curriculum structures is the financial constraints and the students' condition in non-formal education units. L1 and L5 both



acknowledged the difficulties in implementing *Merdeka* curriculum due to the condition of their students, financial capabilities, and teacher readiness.

Overall, the leaders of non-formal education units in this study face several challenges in implementing *Merdeka* curriculum policy, such as formulating the three groups of curriculum structure, adapting the curricula to the student's needs, and addressing financial and teacher readiness issues.

Advice from non-formal education unit leaders in implementing the *Merdeka* policy

According to participants in this study, the implementation *Merdeka* curriculum policy appeared suddenly. When the curriculum policy changed previously, during the implementation of curriculum 13, the government conducted socialization, training activities, and workshops to prepare for the change. In contrast, the non-formal education units received information on *Merdeka curriculum* policy slowly through the internet (L1, January 6, 2023)

The head of the L6 non-formal education unit mentioned that they lack knowledge and experience related to the *Merdeka* curriculum, which led them to create independent learning models and tutorials using learning contracts tailored to the student's needs. Therefore, L6 suggested that the government provide full facilitation for the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum, to ensure all non-formal education units have a clear understanding of the curriculum structure (L6, 28 October 2016).

The government leaders of non-formal education also agreed to suggest that budget assistance be provided for the management of non-formal education units run by the community independently. This way, the programs designed by non-formal education units can align with the empowerment and skill-building in the curriculum structure.

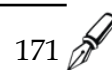
L4 recommends involving various parties, such as the education office, non-formal education unit forums, and others, to reinforce understanding and provide support in material and non-material forms. This participation is very important to enable the non-formal education sector to optimally implement the new curriculum and contribute to improving the quality of human resources and education. Governments need to allocate balanced resources to both formal and non-formal education sectors to ensure equitable education (L4, November 2, 2022).

Discussion

The discussion part of this study began by highlighting the experiences of leaders in the non-formal education sectors who organized the *Merdeka* curriculum policy. This new policy is based on the Decree of the Head of Standards, Curriculum, and Education Assessment (number 34/H/KR/2022), which states that implementing units to use three curriculum structures for non-formal education units provide educational services to out-of-school children, adolescents, and adults of non-school age who are not served by formal education, as defined by Yasunaga (2014), NAB ECE & NFE (2023), and the National Education System Law (2003). The policy aimed to focus more on equality education programs by providing three curriculum structures in packages A, B, and C. The first structure is general subjects, which followed the formal education path and met the national education standard. Then, empower students by focusing on self-development and self-esteem through projects based on *Pancasila* students' profiles. Lastly, *Pancasila* students' profile-based skills allowed students to follow their potential and the availability of regional resources, needs, and job opportunities.

Non-formal education leaders generally praised the *Merdeka curriculum* policy, as it aligned with their principle of providing non-formal education. However, they faced challenges implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum policy. Some of the problems mentioned by the leaders of non-formal education units were: 1) the technical implementation of *Merdeka* curriculum policy, and 2) the financial and infrastructural constraints faced by non-formal education units.

To overcome these problems, the central and local governments provided support through training, mentoring, and guidance on how to translate the *Merdeka* curriculum policies into operational curricula at the non-formal education unit level. Non-formal education units also



sought information about the *Merdeka curriculum* policy by consulting experienced formal education teachers, attending Zoom meetings, visiting independent learning platforms, or inviting speakers who understand the *Merdeka curriculum* policy.

Moreover, the financial conditions, students, educators, and infrastructure of non-formal education units differed depending on whether they were managed by the government or the community. For non-formal education units are educational units managed by the government, funding, infrastructure, and educators are provided under government policies. In contrast, non-formal education units managed independently by the community faced financial constraints, limiting their ability to design activities in the curriculum structures.

Overall, this study showed that the implementation of the *Merdeka curriculum* policy in non-formal education units relied on three pillars of policy implementation activities, as defined by Jones (1994), readiness, access, and quality.

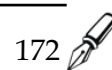
CONCLUSION

Successful implementation of the *Merdeka curriculum* policy in the non-formal education sectors by ensuring human resources preparation for non-formal education. The staff preparation stage is very important to the implementation of the *Merdeka curriculum* policy. However, there are challenges in integrating the *Merdeka curriculum* into the operational curriculum at the non-formal education unit level, especially for students below the average school age. At the interpretation stage, the limited knowledge of leaders and managers in non-formal education units and the lack of government support in socializing the *Merdeka curriculum* are major challenges. Thus, leaders in these education units must independently conduct training by inviting resource persons and referring to instructions from the learning independent web platform. Finally, at the implementation stage, activities under the *Merdeka curriculum* policy must be adjusted to fit the budget and infrastructure of each education unit. To ensure successful implementation, participants in this study suggest that the government provide non-material or material support to non-formal education units.

To effectively implement the *Merdeka curriculum* in non-formal education units providing equality education in packages A, B, and C, the government needs to play an active role at both central and regional levels. This can be achieved by organizing activities that promote a better understanding of the new curriculum and ensuring that all stakeholders have a common perception of the objectives of the policy. Additionally, the government should establish a program that focuses on developing skilled teachers in non-formal education units, similar to the program in formal education.

The implementation of *Merdeka curriculum* in non-formal education units has limitations. First, the ability of non-formal education unit leaders to implement curricula, especially the *Merdeka curriculum* is not widespread, and the challenges faced by the average in incorporating the curriculum into the unit's operational curricula may not apply to non-formal education that has educators working in formal education units. Secondly, this study is an interpretative study with purposive sampling of participants, and although the participants provided in-depth information that contributed to the generalization of results, the study is limited to educational units that participated in this study. Therefore, readers must be careful when interpreting the results, as they cannot be generalized to other non-formal education units that were not part of this study.

Further research is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of the *Merdeka curriculum* policy in non-formal education units, including the challenges faced, in different regions. This can be achieved by collecting data through questionnaires and mixed research methods to examine the strategies used by non-formal education units in implementing the new curriculum. Additionally, future research should compare the implementation of the *Merdeka curriculum* in non-formal education units managed by the government and those managed by the community, as well as compare it with formal education units. Such research will provide a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the



Merdeka curriculum policy in non-formal education units and help develop appropriate measures to improve its effectiveness.

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