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Bridging the Distance: Empowering Remote Indonesian Teachers Through Merdeka Belajar Curriculum Mentoring

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ABSTRACT

This study examines a mentoring program designed to strengthen Merdeka Belajar curriculum implementation among teachers in remote regions of Indonesia. Despite the curriculum's progressive vision of student-centered, contextual learning, significant implementation gaps persist in geographically isolated areas due to limited professional development access, inadequate infrastructure, and contextual adaptation challenges. Through a collaborative action research approach conducted over eight months in three remote districts across Eastern Indonesia, this study documents the design, implementation, and outcomes of an intensive mentoring program involving 45 teachers from 15 schools. Data collection included participatory workshops, classroom observations, teacher reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. Findings reveal three critical dimensions: teachers' evolving pedagogical understanding from transmission to facilitation

models, the development of locally relevant learning materials integrating indigenous knowledge, and the emergence of sustainable peer learning communities. The mentoring program significantly enhanced teachers' confidence and competence in implementing differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and authentic assessment strategies aligned with Merdeka Belajar principles while respecting local cultural contexts and resource constraints.

INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) curriculum represents Indonesia's most ambitious educational reform in recent decades, fundamentally reimagining the relationship between teachers, students, and knowledge in the national education system (Muhsyanur, 2024a). Launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in 2020, Merdeka Belajar emphasizes student agency, contextual learning, competency-based assessment, and teacher autonomy in designing learning experiences responsive to local needs and student diversity (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). This paradigm shift moves away from the standardized, content-heavy curriculum that has historically characterized Indonesian education toward a more flexible framework prioritizing critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and character development. As Fahmi et al. (2021) and Muhsyanur (2024) argue, Merdeka Belajar represents not merely a curriculum change but a fundamental reconceptualization of educational purpose aligned with 21st-century learning demands and Indonesia's diverse cultural and geographic contexts. However, the implementation of such transformative reform faces significant challenges, particularly in remote and underserved regions where educational resources, infrastructure, and professional development opportunities remain severely limited despite decades of equity-focused policy initiatives (Muhsyanur et al., 2021).

Indonesia's geographic complexity—comprising over 17,000 islands with diverse linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic characteristics—creates profound educational equity challenges that curriculum reform alone cannot address. Remote regions, particularly in Eastern Indonesia including Papua, Maluku, and Nusa Tenggara, experience persistent educational disadvantages including teacher shortages, inadequate infrastructure, limited instructional materials, weak internet connectivity, and minimal access to professional development programs (Raihani, 2018). Teachers in these contexts often work in multi-grade classrooms with limited resources, receive infrequent supervisory support, and have few opportunities for pedagogical renewal or collegial learning (Muhsyanur et.al, 2024). According to Bjork (2013), Indonesian educational decentralization policies intended to increase local responsiveness have paradoxically exacerbated regional inequalities (Muhsyanur, 2024b), as districts with limited administrative capacity and fiscal resources struggle to provide adequate support for teachers and schools. In this

context, introducing a curriculum requiring sophisticated pedagogical approaches – differentiated instruction, project-based learning, authentic assessment – without corresponding support systems risks widening rather than narrowing educational disparities between urban and remote areas.

Teacher professional development emerges as a critical mediating factor determining whether curriculum reforms translate into meaningful classroom practice changes or remain superficial policy rhetoric. International research consistently demonstrates that sustainable pedagogical transformation requires ongoing, job-embedded professional learning rather than one-time training workshops (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Effective professional development is collaborative, inquiry-based, focused on student learning, and directly connected to teachers' classroom contexts and challenges. However, traditional Indonesian teacher professional development has been criticized for its top-down, transmission-oriented approach emphasizing compliance with prescribed methods rather than developing teachers' adaptive expertise and professional judgment (Tanang & Abu, 2014). Moreover, geographic barriers make it extremely difficult and expensive to provide remote teachers with the same professional development access available to urban colleagues, creating a professional isolation that limits pedagogical innovation and reinforces traditional teaching practices. As Hardman (2015) notes, addressing educational inequality requires not only curriculum reform but fundamental restructuring of how teachers in marginalized contexts access ongoing professional learning and support.

Mentoring represents a potentially powerful but underutilized approach to supporting remote teachers in implementing complex curriculum reforms like Merdeka Belajar (Muhsyanur, 2024a). Unlike conventional training models that position teachers as passive recipients of expert knowledge, mentoring emphasizes collaborative learning relationships where experienced practitioners support colleagues through modeling, observation, reflective dialogue, and joint problem-solving around authentic classroom challenges (Hobson et al., 2009). According to Ingersoll and Strong (2011), well-designed mentoring programs can significantly improve teacher retention, instructional quality, and student learning outcomes, particularly when mentoring is intensive, sustained over time, and focused on specific pedagogical practices rather than general encouragement. In the Indonesian context, several pilot mentoring initiatives have shown promise in improving teaching quality in remote areas, though these programs often struggle with sustainability due to funding constraints, logistical challenges, and limited institutional support (Azis, 2019). The challenge lies in designing mentoring approaches that are contextually appropriate, scalable, and sustainable within Indonesia's resource constraints while remaining true to the collaborative, inquiry-oriented ethos that makes mentoring pedagogically powerful.

The literature on Merdeka Belajar implementation reveals significant gaps between policy aspirations and classroom realities, particularly regarding teacher preparedness and contextual adaptation in diverse Indonesian settings. Preliminary

studies indicate that many teachers struggle to understand the philosophical foundations of Merdeka Belajar and how its principles translate into concrete instructional practices (Saleh & Mujahiddin, 2020). Teachers express uncertainty about implementing differentiated instruction in large, heterogeneous classrooms, designing authentic assessments that capture complex competencies, and balancing curriculum flexibility with accountability pressures. Additionally, the curriculum's emphasis on local contextualization requires teachers to develop materials and learning experiences relevant to students' lives and communities, a capacity that presumes cultural knowledge, pedagogical creativity, and resource access that many teachers in remote areas lack (Widodo et al., 2021). Furthermore, existing research on Merdeka Belajar has predominantly focused on urban or semi-urban contexts, with limited attention to the specific challenges and adaptations necessary for successful implementation in remote, resource-constrained environments. This geographic bias in the research literature perpetuates the marginalization of remote teachers' experiences and needs in educational policy discourse.

This study addresses these gaps by documenting and analyzing a collaborative mentoring program designed to support Merdeka Belajar implementation among teachers in three remote districts of Eastern Indonesia (Muhsyanur and Mustapha, 2023). The research investigates three primary questions: First, how does intensive, context-responsive mentoring influence remote teachers' understanding of and capacity to implement Merdeka Belajar pedagogical principles? Second, what strategies do teachers develop for adapting Merdeka Belajar approaches to local contexts characterized by limited resources, cultural diversity, and geographic isolation? Third, what conditions and mechanisms support the sustainability of pedagogical changes beyond the formal mentoring period? By examining these questions through collaborative action research involving university faculty, district education officials, and participating teachers as co-researchers, this study aims to generate practical knowledge about effective support systems for curriculum implementation in marginalized contexts. The findings contribute not only to understanding Merdeka Belajar implementation challenges and possibilities but also to broader discussions about educational equity, teacher professional learning, and the adaptation of progressive pedagogies to diverse cultural and material contexts in developing nations.

METHOD

This study employed a collaborative action research design implemented over eight months (February-September 2024) in three remote districts: Sumba Barat Daya (East Nusa Tenggara), Buru Selatan (Maluku), and Jayawijaya (Papua). These sites were selected through purposive sampling based on criteria including geographic remoteness, limited educational infrastructure, multi-ethnic student populations, and expressed interest from district education authorities in strengthening Merdeka Belajar implementation. Participants included 45 elementary school teachers from 15 schools across the three districts, selected in collaboration with district education

offices to ensure representation across grade levels, subject specializations, teaching experience, and gender. The mentoring program was designed through participatory needs assessment involving preliminary site visits, focus group discussions with teachers and school principals, and consultations with district education officials to identify specific implementation challenges and contextual factors. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's research ethics committee, and all participants provided informed consent after receiving detailed information about the study's purposes, methods, time commitments, and their rights to withdraw participation. The research team comprised four university faculty members with expertise in teacher education and curriculum studies, three district-level education supervisors, and two experienced master teachers who had successfully implemented student-centered pedagogies in remote contexts.

The mentoring intervention consisted of three interconnected components: intensive workshop sessions, classroom-based coaching, and facilitated peer learning communities. Three five-day residential workshops were conducted at district centers in months 1, 4, and 7, focusing respectively on Merdeka Belajar principles and differentiated instruction, project-based learning and assessment for learning, and curriculum contextualization and sustainability planning. Workshops employed active learning methodologies including case analysis, lesson study, microteaching, and collaborative curriculum design. Between workshops, each teacher received monthly school visits from assigned mentors who conducted classroom observations, co-taught demonstration lessons, facilitated post-lesson reflection conferences, and supported teachers in developing and refining instructional materials. Peer learning communities were established within each district, meeting monthly to share implementation experiences, problem-solve challenges, and provide mutual support. Data collection integrated multiple methods: pre- and post-program surveys assessing teachers' self-efficacy and pedagogical beliefs, video-recorded classroom observations using a structured protocol focused on student-centered practices, teacher reflective journals documenting implementation experiences and challenges, semi-structured interviews with teachers, school principals, and district officials, and analysis of teacher-developed instructional materials and assessment tools. Data analysis followed an iterative coding process combining deductive codes derived from Merdeka Belajar principles and inductive codes emerging from the data, with regular member-checking sessions where participants reviewed and validated preliminary findings, ensuring that interpretations reflected their lived experiences and contextual understanding.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Transformation of Pedagogical Understanding and Practice

Analysis of pre-program data revealed that participating teachers initially conceptualized teaching primarily as knowledge transmission, with the teacher's role being to explain content clearly and students' responsibility to listen, memorize, and reproduce information on tests. This transmission orientation manifested in

classroom practices dominated by teacher talk, whole-class instruction following textbook sequences, and assessment focused on recall of factual information. Teachers expressed uncertainty about how Merdeka Belajar's emphasis on student agency and differentiated instruction could work in their contexts, with common concerns including: large class sizes making individualization impossible, students' low prior knowledge requiring extensive teacher explanation, and parental expectations for traditional teaching focused on examination preparation. One teacher articulated a prevalent view: "How can students learn freely when they don't even know the basics? We must give them the knowledge first, then maybe later they can be independent." This perspective reflects what Freire (1970) critiques as the "banking model" of education, where teachers deposit knowledge into passive student receptacles—a model deeply embedded in Indonesian educational culture despite decades of reform rhetoric emphasizing active learning.

The mentoring program facilitated significant shifts in teachers' pedagogical understanding through carefully sequenced experiences that challenged transmission assumptions while honoring teachers' contextual wisdom. Workshop activities engaged teachers as active learners through problem-based tasks, collaborative inquiry, and reflection on their own learning processes, creating direct experiences of student-centered pedagogy's power. Teachers frequently noted the dissonance between their passive experiences in previous professional development and the active, collaborative learning in these workshops, with several commenting that the workshops modeled the teaching approaches they were learning to implement. Classroom coaching sessions proved particularly powerful in transforming practice, as mentors worked alongside teachers to experiment with new strategies in authentic teaching contexts. Rather than prescribing specific techniques, mentors employed questioning that prompted teachers to analyze student thinking, consider alternative instructional decisions, and develop contextually appropriate adaptations. For instance, when supporting differentiated instruction implementation, mentors helped teachers recognize and build on the informal differentiation they already practiced—such as adjusting explanations for students who struggled or providing extension activities for quick finishers—reframing these intuitive responses as examples of responsive teaching aligned with Merdeka Belajar principles (Ramadhanti et al., 2021).

By program's end, observable changes in classroom practice included increased student talk and participation, more varied instructional formats including small group work and learning stations, incorporation of hands-on activities and local resources, and assessment strategies attending to process as well as products. Post-program observations showed teachers averaging 42% student talk time compared to 18% at baseline, with particularly dramatic increases in questioning and peer discussion. Teachers also demonstrated greater flexibility and responsiveness, adjusting lessons based on student engagement and understanding rather than rigidly following predetermined plans. However, transformation was uneven and contextually variable. Some practices changed more readily than others; for instance,

teachers more easily incorporated collaborative learning activities but struggled with truly differentiating content complexity and assessment criteria. Several teachers noted tensions between Merdeka Belajar approaches and systemic accountability pressures, including standardized testing focused on content coverage and parental expectations for traditional instruction. As one teacher reflected, "I believe in this new way, and I see my students more engaged, but I worry – will they do well on the national exam? Will parents complain that I'm not teaching enough?" These tensions reflect broader contradictions in Indonesian educational policy, where progressive pedagogical rhetoric coexists with unchanged high-stakes assessment systems that privilege content coverage and factual recall (Suryadi, 2020), creating implementation challenges that mentoring alone cannot resolve (Muhsyanur, 2021).

Contextual Adaptation and Integration of Local Knowledge

One of Merdeka Belajar's core principles – contextualizing curriculum to local conditions and student experiences – proved both highly relevant and challenging in remote settings. Teachers recognized that many textbook examples and learning materials featured urban contexts, middle-class lifestyles, and Javanese cultural references disconnected from their students' lived realities. Students in Sumba encountered mathematics word problems about shopping malls they had never seen, science lessons about ecosystems they had never visited, and social studies content about national monuments they would likely never experience. This cultural and experiential disconnect contributed to student disengagement and reinforced perceptions that school knowledge was irrelevant to their lives, a phenomenon that Ladson-Billings (1995) identifies as cultural incongruence between curriculum and students' community-based knowledge. However, teachers initially struggled to envision how to contextualize curriculum, interpreting it narrowly as replacing textbook examples with local equivalents rather than more fundamentally reconceptualizing learning around community knowledge, problems, and resources. The mentoring program needed to build teachers' capacity for curriculum contextualization as creative, intellectually demanding work requiring deep understanding of both disciplinary concepts and local contexts (Muhsyanur, 2023).

Through the mentoring process, teachers developed increasingly sophisticated approaches to curriculum contextualization that honored local knowledge systems while maintaining academic rigor. Teachers in Sumba designed mathematics lessons using traditional weaving patterns to explore geometric concepts, integrating content knowledge with culturally significant practices that students observed in their daily lives. A teacher in Buru created science units investigating local marine ecosystems that students directly experienced, transforming abstract ecological concepts into concrete investigations of their own environment. In Jayawijaya, teachers collaborated with community elders to document traditional agricultural knowledge, creating integrated learning projects where students studied the mathematics, science, and social organization embedded in farming practices while contributing to cultural preservation. These examples illustrate what Moll et al.

(1992) term "funds of knowledge" approaches—recognizing and leveraging the cultural knowledge and practices embedded in students' households and communities as legitimate curriculum resources. Teachers reported that contextualized learning generated higher student engagement, deeper understanding, and stronger connections between school and community. As one teacher observed, "When we use examples from their world, students become the experts. They teach me about their culture, and I help them see the science and mathematics in what they already know."

However, curriculum contextualization raised complex questions about knowledge hierarchies, cultural preservation, and educational equity that require ongoing negotiation. Some teachers worried that focusing too heavily on local contexts might disadvantage students by not preparing them for national examinations or further education that privileges standardized, decontextualized knowledge. Others expressed concern about romanticizing traditional knowledge while ignoring students' rights to access global knowledge and opportunities. Several teachers noted tensions when local cultural practices conflicted with national educational values, such as when traditional gender roles contradicted curriculum content promoting gender equality. These dilemmas reflect broader debates in postcolonial education about balancing respect for indigenous knowledge with students' entitlement to powerful knowledge that provides access to broader opportunities (Young, 2013). The mentoring program addressed these tensions by framing contextualization not as replacing standardized content with local content but as using local contexts as entry points for engaging with broader concepts and competencies. Teachers learned to design learning progressions moving from familiar local examples to increasingly abstract or distant applications, building conceptual bridges that honored students' starting points while expanding their horizons. This approach aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development concept, using cultural tools and social mediation to scaffold learning from current understanding toward more complex knowledge (Kartini and Muhsyanur, 2025).

Development of Sustainable Professional Learning Communities

A critical challenge for professional development in remote areas is sustainability—ensuring that pedagogical improvements persist after external support ends rather than reverting to previous practices once facilitators depart. This study intentionally embedded sustainability mechanisms into the mentoring design, particularly through establishing and nurturing professional learning communities among participating teachers. Initially, teachers in each district reported professional isolation, with limited opportunities to observe colleagues, discuss instructional challenges, or collaboratively solve problems. School structures provided minimal collaboration time, and geographic distances made inter-school interaction rare. Teachers described making instructional decisions alone, relying primarily on textbooks and occasional workshops for pedagogical guidance. This isolation limited

teachers' opportunities for the sustained collegial interaction that research identifies as essential for instructional improvement (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). The mentoring program aimed to interrupt this isolation by creating structured collaboration opportunities and developing norms, protocols, and leadership to support ongoing collective learning beyond the formal program period.

Monthly peer learning community meetings evolved from initially awkward, mentor-directed sessions into genuinely collaborative spaces where teachers increasingly drove the agenda, shared innovations, troubleshoot challenges, and provided one another substantive feedback. Teachers developed protocols for examining student work, analyzing video-recorded lessons, and conducting collaborative lesson planning that focused attention on student learning rather than teacher performance evaluation. Several teachers emerged as informal leaders who facilitated discussions, organized additional meetings, and supported colleagues between formal sessions. Teachers reported that peer community meetings became highlights of their professional lives, providing rare opportunities for intellectual engagement with colleagues who understood their contexts and challenges. One teacher described the community as "my oxygen—where I can breathe and remember why I became a teacher." The communities also developed practical resource-sharing systems, including joint development of instructional materials, sharing of successful lesson plans, and collective problem-solving around common challenges like managing multi-grade classrooms or assessing complex competencies. This collaborative resource development proved particularly valuable in contexts where commercial materials were scarce and individual teachers lacked time and expertise to create comprehensive resources independently.

Evidence suggests these professional learning communities developed sufficient momentum and internal ownership to continue after formal mentoring concluded. Follow-up data collected three months post-program indicated that all three district communities maintained regular monthly meetings, with attendance averaging 82% despite absence of external facilitators or financial incentives. Teachers reported continued collaborative lesson planning, peer observation exchanges, and joint development of contextualized learning materials. Several communities initiated new activities including mentoring of non-participating teachers, advocacy for school-level collaboration time, and engagement with district education offices around policy barriers to Merdeka Belajar implementation. However, sustainability remained fragile and contingent on continued district-level support, particularly regarding meeting spaces, modest transportation allowances for inter-school travel, and protection of meeting time from competing demands. Communities struggled when key teacher-leaders transferred to other schools or when district officials changed and new leadership questioned the communities' value. These sustainability challenges reflect broader institutional factors affecting teacher professional development in Indonesia, where systemic underinvestment in ongoing teacher learning, frequent policy changes, and competing reform initiatives create unstable environments for sustaining localized improvement efforts (Raihani,

2018). Ensuring long-term sustainability requires not only strong professional communities but also supportive institutional structures, policies, and resources that recognize ongoing professional learning as essential rather than optional.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that intensive, contextually responsive mentoring can significantly strengthen remote Indonesian teachers' capacity to implement Merdeka Belajar curriculum principles, transforming pedagogical understanding from transmission to facilitation models, developing contextually relevant instructional approaches that honor local knowledge, and establishing sustainable professional learning communities that support ongoing improvement. However, the research also illuminates persistent challenges requiring systemic attention beyond individual professional development initiatives, including contradictions between progressive pedagogical expectations and unchanged accountability systems privileging content coverage, resource constraints that limit teachers' capacity to implement materials-intensive student-centered approaches, and institutional structures providing minimal time and support for ongoing teacher collaboration and learning. Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge: First, professional development for curriculum implementation in remote contexts must be sustained, job-embedded, and collaborative rather than following traditional one-time workshop models. Second, mentoring programs should explicitly address curriculum contextualization as sophisticated pedagogical work requiring support for teachers to develop both deep content understanding and cultural knowledge of their communities (Mulyana et al., 2021).

Third, building sustainable professional learning communities requires not only facilitation skills but also institutional commitment to providing time, space, and resources for ongoing teacher collaboration. Fourth, successful Merdeka Belajar implementation requires policy coherence, particularly aligning assessment and accountability systems with curriculum's student-centered, competency-based vision. Fifth, scaling effective mentoring approaches to reach Indonesia's vast population of remote teachers requires creative delivery models potentially including distance mentoring, cascade mentoring where program participants support broader teacher networks, and technology-enhanced collaboration where infrastructure permits. Finally, further research should investigate how curriculum contextualization affects student learning outcomes, examine effective models for scaling teacher professional development in geographically dispersed contexts, and explore how teachers in remote areas navigate competing policy demands and cultural expectations while implementing progressive pedagogical reforms.

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