

Research Article

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Author for correspondence:

Wildan

✉ wildan@uinmataram.ac.id

✉ Fakultas Tarbiyah dan Keguruan,
Universitas Islam Negeri Mataram



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Cultivating Creativity and Responsibility through the Mandalika Friday Program in the Merdeka Curriculum

Wildan^{ID}, L. Agus Satriawan^{ID}, Rahmat A Kurniawan^{ID}

Abstract

Background/purpose. This research explores the implementation of the MANDALIKA Friday Program at State Islamic High School 2 Mataram within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum. The study aims to evaluate how the program fosters creativity, responsibility, and entrepreneurial skills among students and how it aligns with the educational objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in promoting character education and skill development.

Materials/methods. The study employs a qualitative research approach with a case study design, focusing on the MANDALIKA Friday Program. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 29 participants, including policymakers, teachers, and students, along with real-time observations and document analysis. The collected data was analyzed using the interactive model, which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

Results. The survey results indicate that the MANDALIKA Friday Program is highly effective in fostering various aspects of the Pancasila Student Profile. Notable improvements were observed in areas such as character building (81.8%), responsibility (86.4%), and cultural appreciation (81.8%). However, there was room for enhancement in fostering self-reflection and originality, as these areas received slightly lower ratings (59.1%).

Conclusion. The MANDALIKA Friday Program successfully supports the Merdeka Curriculum's goals by enhancing students' creativity, responsibility, and ethical values. Despite some areas for improvement in fostering critical and independent thinking, the program presents a valuable model for integrating experiential learning with national educational objectives. Future research should focus on refining the program to enhance its effectiveness further.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted educational systems worldwide, forcing a rapid shift from traditional classroom instruction to virtual learning environments. This transition, driven by the urgency to maintain learning continuity during lockdowns, led to widespread adoption of online platforms and digital tools (Mishra et al., 2020). While this shift presented opportunities for innovation, it also revealed numerous challenges. Many educators were required to adopt unfamiliar technologies and pedagogical approaches with limited preparation or institutional support (Chatterjee & Chakraborty, 2021).

The impact of this abrupt transition was uneven. While some students adapted well to digital learning, others struggled due to limited access to devices, inconsistent internet connectivity, and low levels of engagement (Suryaningsih & Pamujo, 2021). Several studies have emphasized that the effectiveness of online learning is influenced by multiple factors, including infrastructure, teacher readiness, and student motivation (Bashir et al., 2021; Patricia Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). These challenges were especially pronounced in underserved communities, exacerbating pre-existing educational inequalities (Herring et al., 2020; Ndekwa, 2021). Moreover, as institutions scrambled to support remote teaching, concerns emerged regarding the quality of instruction and long-term learning outcomes (Swanson & Valdois, 2022). Consequently, educational stakeholders began exploring more balanced instructional models—such as blended learning—that combine the strengths of both digital and face-to-face approaches (Yuan et al., 2022; Zhang & Wu, 2022).

In response to learning losses and educational disruptions caused by the pandemic, the Indonesian Ministry of Education introduced the Kurikulum Merdeka (Merdeka Curriculum). This new framework emphasizes experiential learning, character development, and student autonomy. It has been piloted in selected institutions such as Sekolah Penggerak (Activator Schools) and Pusat Keunggulan (Centers of Excellence), which serve as early adopters and demonstration sites. Prior studies have examined the curriculum's theoretical underpinnings and structural design (Wiguna & Trisnangrat, 2022; Hattarina et al., 2022) have affirmed its potential for addressing pandemic-related learning loss (Jojo & Sihotang, 2022). However, concrete evidence on how the curriculum is being applied through localized, school-based initiatives remains limited.

State Islamic High School 2 Mataram was purposefully selected as the case study site for this research due to its official status as a Sekolah Penggerak and its innovative response to curriculum reform. Located in West Nusa Tenggara, the school has been actively involved in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum through its flagship program, MANDALIKA Friday. This program uniquely integrates national curricular goals with local sociocultural elements, emphasizing creativity, responsibility, and entrepreneurship. The school's proactive and structured approach provides an ideal context to examine how the Merdeka Curriculum is operationalized in real-world settings, particularly through student-led, experiential learning.

This study investigates the implementation and outcomes of the MANDALIKA Friday Program at State Islamic High School 2 Mataram. Through a focus on Class X students, the research explores how the program fosters character development and practical skills in alignment with the Pancasila Student Profile. It addresses the central research question: How does the MANDALIKA Friday Program support the Merdeka Curriculum's objectives of promoting student creativity, responsibility, and entrepreneurial competencies? The study's novelty lies in its in-depth analysis of a culturally grounded, school-level initiative, offering a potential model for other institutions seeking to apply the Merdeka Curriculum effectively and contextually.

2. Literature Review

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has garnered significant scholarly attention due to its transformative design and its role in revitalizing Indonesia's educational system. Recent studies have explored multiple facets of the curriculum, including its emphasis on character education, experiential learning, and the development of 21st-century competencies. For instance, Trisna et al. (2024) discuss the organizational shifts that accompany the curriculum's rollout, particularly the transition from isolated institutional practices toward collaborative implementation. Hunaepi et al., (2023) similarly emphasize the influence of Ki Hadjar Dewantara's educational philosophy in fostering student independence and intrinsic motivation, which are key elements in the curriculum's adaptive design.

The Merdeka Curriculum's responsiveness to learning disruptions—especially those brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic—has also been a focal point in the literature. Its student centered and flexible approach has been found to support educational recovery and equitable engagement across diverse learner populations. A review by Hasibuan et al. (2023) highlights the integration of ethnoscience as a culturally contextualized pedagogical tool under the curriculum's framework. Their findings underscore how such integration enhances both character education and critical thinking—core objectives in the Merdeka Curriculum's effort to promote real-world problem-solving skills and relevance.

Philosophically, the curriculum is rooted in Dewantara's vision of holistic education, as reinforced by Efendi et al. (2023), who critically examined the curriculum's congruence with Indonesian pedagogical traditions. They argue that the curriculum not only supports academic achievement but also cultivates student creativity and ethical development. In the same vein, Kartika (2024) offers practical insights from educators and administrators, affirming that the curriculum successfully bridges top-down policy design with grassroots classroom application through experiential learning and cultural relevance.

Building upon this body of work, the present study applies Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) and Lickona's Character Education Framework (1991) to examine a specific focus of the Merdeka Curriculum: its role in fostering character, creativity, and entrepreneurial competence, particularly as operationalized through the Pancasila Student Profile. These attributes align directly with the goals of the MANDALIKA Friday Program, a school-based initiative that integrates entrepreneurship and cultural expression into routine learning. By grounding this analysis in experiential and character education theories, the study provides a contextualized understanding of how the curriculum's conceptual ideals are enacted in practice at State Islamic High School 2 Mataram, a designated Activator School that is actively piloting this reform.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, as described by Creswell (2011), which is particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena where in-depth understanding is needed. To achieve this, a case study design was selected, allowing for a detailed, contextualized exploration of how the MANDALIKA Friday Program is implemented as part of the Merdeka Curriculum at State Islamic High School 2 Mataram. According to Yin (2009), a case study is appropriate when the research addresses "how" and "why" questions, involves contemporary events, and when the investigator has little or no control over behavioral events. This method allows for a rich, holistic understanding of a bounded system—in this case, the MANDALIKA Friday Program—by drawing on multiple sources of data. The design also facilitates analysis of real-life dynamics within the school setting, where the phenomenon (curriculum implementation) and its

context (the school's organizational culture, policies, and student characteristics) are deeply intertwined. The unit of analysis in this study is the MANDALIKA Friday Program itself, including its implementation processes, institutional strategies, and outcomes. The case is bounded both spatially and institutionally, focusing exclusively on activities taking place within State Islamic High School 2 Mataram and involving actors directly engaged in the program.

3.2. Participant

This study involved 29 participants who were directly engaged with the MANDALIKA Friday Program at State Islamic High School 2 Mataram. These participants represented multiple stakeholder groups critical to the program's planning, execution, and experience. The participant composition was as follows:

- o 2 School Policymakers (program initiators at the institutional level)
- o 1 Head of the Madrasah
- o 1 Deputy Head of Curriculum
- o 5 Teachers involved in facilitating the program across various disciplines
- o 6 Class X Students who actively participated in the program's entrepreneurial and creative activities

The remaining participants were composed of administrative staff and curriculum coordinators who contributed to the program's structure and implementation monitoring. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, a common strategy in qualitative case study research where individuals are chosen based on their relevance to the research objectives. The primary inclusion criteria were:

1. Direct involvement in the planning, facilitation, or participation of the MANDALIKA Friday Program.
2. Willingness to participate voluntarily in the study.
3. Availability for interviews or observations during the data collection period.

This sampling strategy ensured that the data reflected diverse perspectives, including institutional leaders, facilitators, and student participants. It also supported data triangulation by capturing insights across different levels of program involvement, which is essential in case study methodology to enhance the credibility and richness of the findings.

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

In line with Yin's (2009) recommendation to employ multiple data sources for triangulation, the following methods were used:

1. Semi-structured interviews
 - o Interviews were conducted with each participant and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.
 - o Open-ended questions were used to encourage detailed responses about participant experiences, perceptions, and involvement in the MANDALIKA program.
 - o The flexible format allowed probing and clarification, contributing to the depth of data collected.
2. Real-time observations
 - o Observations took place during MANDALIKA Friday activities, including class-based entrepreneurial bazaars and monthly performance events.

- o Observational data captured interpersonal interactions, participation levels, logistical arrangements, and program dynamics, enriching the contextual analysis.

3. Document analysis

- o Relevant school documents, including program schedules, internal policies, meeting records, and evaluation reports, were analyzed.

- o These sources provided institutional context and served as a means to corroborate interview and observational findings.

3.4. Data Analysis Strategy

Data were analyzed using the interactive model by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three iterative stages:

- Data reduction involved coding and organizing information from interviews, observations, and documents to focus on key themes related to the research questions.
- Data display included developing tables and narrative matrices to visualize linkages between program elements and student development outcomes.
- Conclusion drawing and verification entailed identifying emerging patterns and validating findings through triangulation and member checking.

To interpret the findings, the study employed Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) and Lickona's Character Education Framework (1991) as guiding theoretical lenses. These frameworks were used to analyze how the MANDALIKA program fosters creativity, responsibility, and character development among students core goals of the Merdeka Curriculum.

3.5. Data Collection Instruments

Three primary instruments were used to gather qualitative data: semi-structured interview protocols, observation guides, and a document analysis checklist. These instruments were developed collaboratively by the research team, drawing from the theoretical framework (Kolb's Experiential Learning and Lickona's Character Education), existing curriculum implementation literature, and guidelines for qualitative instrument design (Creswell, 2011; Yin, 2009).

1. Interview Protocols

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions tailored to different participant roles (school leaders, teachers, and students). The protocol was designed to explore key areas, including understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, experiences with the MANDALIKA Friday Program, perceptions of its impact on student character, creativity, and entrepreneurship, and challenges encountered in its implementation.

- o Development: Draft questions were based on preliminary document review and aligned with the study's research questions and theoretical framework.

- o Reliability: The protocol was piloted with two teachers and revised for clarity, sequence, and coverage based on their feedback.

- o Validity: Expert review was conducted by two qualitative education researchers to ensure content relevance, and adjustments were made accordingly.

2. Observation Guides

Observations focused on how the MANDALIKA activities were conducted, student engagement, teacher facilitation, and alignment with character and experiential learning goals.

- o Development: The guide included a checklist of targeted behaviors and open note-taking space to record emergent phenomena. It was structured around dimensions such as collaboration, innovation, and responsibility.

- o Reliability: Observations were conducted over multiple sessions to ensure consistency and reduce observer bias.

- o Validity: Triangulation with interview and document data strengthened the construct validity of observed findings.

3. Document Checklist

A structured template was used to analyze program-related documents, including planning reports, internal evaluations, and student work artifacts.

- o Development: The checklist included categories such as objectives, activity structure, assessment methods, and student reflections.

- o Reliability: Multiple documents from different sources (administrative and instructional) were cross-examined.

- o Validity: Documents were analyzed in conjunction with interview and observational data to support confirmability and contextual depth.

By combining multiple instruments and validating them through expert input, pilot testing, and data triangulation, the study ensures that the evidence collected is both credible and trustworthy. The careful design of these tools allows for a rich and systematic exploration of how the MANDALIKA Friday Program functions within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

3.6. Conclusion of Methodological Design

This single instrumental case study not only illuminates how one school operationalizes the Merdeka Curriculum through a localized initiative but also provides transferable insights for similar educational contexts. The use of rigorous qualitative methods grounded in established case study principles ensures that the findings are both contextually rich and theoretically robust.

4. Results

4.1. The MANDALIKA Friday Program as an Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Strengthening Pancasila Student Profile

The survey data includes responses assessing the effectiveness of the MANDALIKA Friday Program in supporting various aspects of the Pancasila Student Profile, such as spirituality, cultural appreciation, responsibility, collaboration, and critical thinking. The survey responses show strong support for the MANDALIKA Friday Program's role in fostering various elements of the Pancasila Student Profile among students at MAN 2 Mataram, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. MANDALIKA Friday Program Survey Results

Aspect	Very Good (%)	Good (%)
Character Building	81.8	18.2
Faith and Piety	81.8	18.2
Religious Morals	77.3	22.7
Environmental Awareness	72.7	27.3
National Ethics	77.3	22.7
Cultural Appreciation	81.8	18.2
Responsibility and Sharing Attitudes	86.4	13.6
Information Processing	77.3	22.7
Self-reflection	59.1	40.9
Generating Original Ideas	59.1	40.9

Table 1 summarizes the results of a survey assessing the effectiveness of the MANDALIKA Friday Program in enhancing key aspects of the Pancasila Student Profile at State Islamic High School 2 Mataram. The responses highlight the program's impact on essential areas such as character building, spirituality, moral values, environmental awareness, cultural appreciation, responsibility, and critical thinking.

The survey findings indicate that the MANDALIKA Friday Program effectively supports the development of the Pancasila Student Profile. A significant portion of respondents rated the program as “Very Good” in enhancing character building (81.8%), faith and piety (81.8%), and cultural appreciation (81.8%), suggesting that it successfully instills fundamental values like spirituality, respect for cultural diversity, and moral integrity. High ratings were also observed for fostering responsibility and collaboration (86.4%) and national ethics (77.3%), underscoring the program's role in preparing students to be responsible, empathetic citizens in alignment with the Merdeka Curriculum.

While the program received strong support in developing critical thinking and information processing skills (77.3%), slightly lower ratings were noted for self-reflection (59.1%) and originality (59.1%). These findings suggest that while the MANDALIKA Friday Program is valuable for promoting character education and collaborative skills, further enhancements could deepen students' self-reflective practices and creativity. Overall, the program aligns well with the Merdeka Curriculum's goals, effectively preparing students to become well-rounded, responsible, and culturally aware individuals.

These results underscore the alignment of the MANDALIKA Friday Program with the Merdeka Curriculum's objectives, as evidenced by high ratings across multiple dimensions. The program's success in character education and skill-building provides an effective model for experiential learning, supporting both academic and moral development to prepare students as responsible, culturally aware, and ethically grounded citizens. Following this alignment, State Islamic High School 2 Mataram proactively prepared for curriculum implementation by engaging in socialization activities led by the school leadership, including the Head of the Madrasah and the Deputy Head of Curriculum. The official process of designating State Islamic High School 2 Mataram as a Merdeka Curriculum implementer followed the Ministry's guidelines. This involved assessing the school's resources and submitting a proposal to the Ministry of Religious Affairs of West Nusa Tenggara Province. Upon

verification, the Ministry recommended the school for curriculum implementation, which was subsequently approved by the Director General of Islamic Education.

To support the Merdeka Curriculum, the school developed a comprehensive implementation plan centered on the MANDALIKA program. While the program is still evolving, efforts to refine its structure and formalize documentation are ongoing. Additionally, a P5 teaching module, themed "Local Wisdom," was introduced, emphasizing the cultural heritage of West Nusa Tenggara's indigenous tribes (Sasak, Samawa, and Mbojo) and aligning with the Pancasila Student Profile.

4.2. The Impact of Implementation on the MANDALIKA Friday Program in Cultivating Creativity and Responsibility

State Islamic High School 2 Mataram is one of the schools implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Mataram City through the MAN DUA Literacy Innovation Creativity and Action program, also known as the MANDALIKA program. As shown in Figure 1, the program emphasizes key character traits and skills such as creativity, empathy, responsibility, and collaboration.

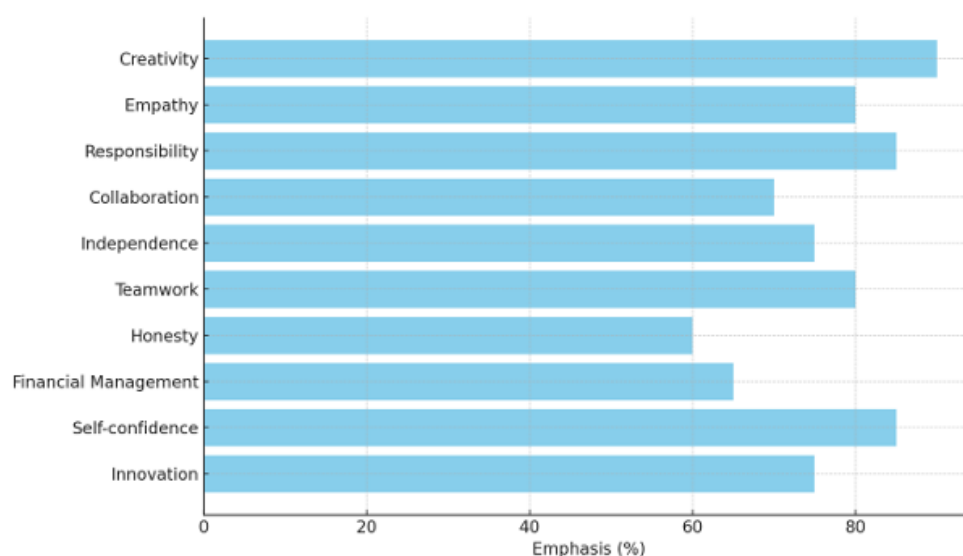


Figure 1. Emphasis on Character Traits and Skills in the MANDALIKA Friday Program

Figure 1 displays the emphasis percentages for various character traits and skills cultivated in the MANDALIKA Friday Program at State Islamic High School 2 Mataram. The highest emphasis is placed on creativity and responsibility at 90% and 85% respectively, underscoring the program's focus on encouraging students to develop original ideas and take ownership of their actions. Empathy and self-confidence are also strongly emphasized, each receiving 80-85%, reflecting the program's goal to build students' social awareness and self-assurance through interactive and student-led activities.

Financial management and honesty are moderately emphasized at 60-65%, which are cultivated through hands-on entrepreneurial experiences where students handle sales, manage funds, and demonstrate integrity. Collaboration and teamwork each receive 70-75%, indicating that the program values cooperative learning and mutual support among students. Finally, innovation and independence are emphasized at 75%, preparing students to think critically and work autonomously on projects.

The results of the program indicate a strong alignment with the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes the integration of cultural values and 21st-century skills in education. This alignment is particularly significant as it reflects the program's focus on responsibility, collaboration, and moral integrity, which are essential components of character education in Indonesia. The structured activities and thematic modules of the program can serve as a model for other educational

institutions aiming to incorporate similar values into their curricula. Research has shown that design thinking can be effectively utilized in educational settings to foster creativity and problem-solving skills, which are critical for nurturing self-aware and innovative students (McLaughlin et al., 2019; Wolcott & McLaughlin, 2020). To address identified areas for improvement, such as self-reflection and creativity, educators can implement tailored activities like journaling, peer evaluations, and design-thinking workshops. These activities not only enhance students' reflective practices but also encourage collaborative learning and innovation. The design thinking framework, which emphasizes co-creation and stakeholder engagement, has been shown to facilitate creative problem-solving in various educational contexts (Billings et al., 2022; Wolcott et al., 2021). By integrating these methodologies, educators can better prepare students for real-world challenges, particularly through the inclusion of entrepreneurial activities that emphasize practical life skills, such as financial management (Ramaswamy et al., 2019). Moreover, the program's success presents an opportunity for policymakers to promote similar initiatives at a national level. By emphasizing experiential learning and cultural appreciation, policymakers can foster a more holistic educational approach that aligns with national educational goals. The evidence suggests that aligning school-based activities with broader educational objectives can create a replicable framework for effective curriculum implementation (Roberts, 2024; Stanulis & Guenther, 2020). This approach not only supports the development of essential skills but also nurtures a generation of students who are equipped to navigate complex societal challenges.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is broken down into a structured series of steps, each contributing to the curriculum's success in fostering student-centered learning and skill development. The pie chart (Figure 2) below provides a visual representation of the stages involved in implementing the curriculum, based on the practical example of the MANDALIKA Friday Program at State Islamic High School 2 Mataram.

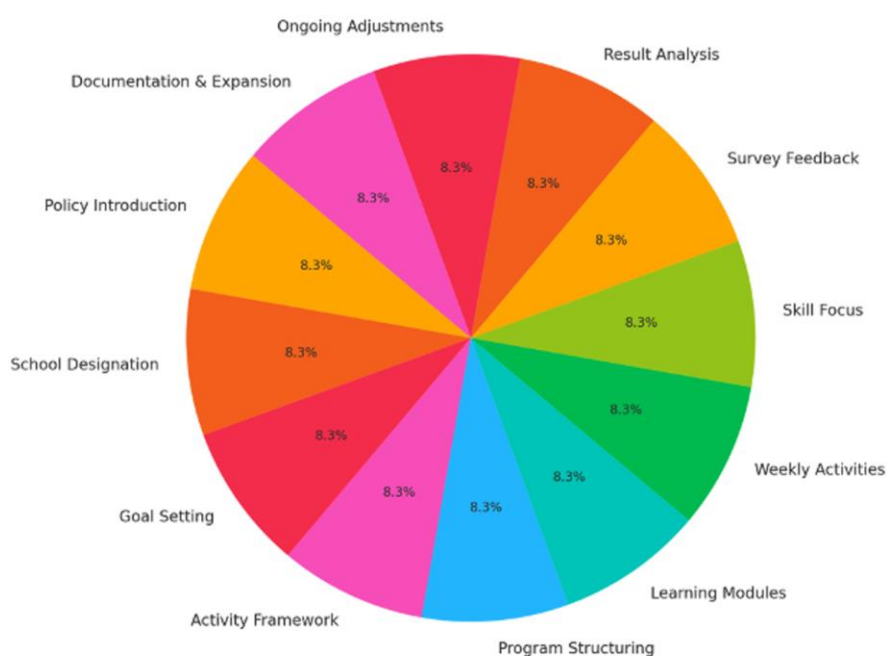


Figure 2. Merdeka Curriculum Implementation Process Breakdown

The Merdeka Curriculum implementation process is structured into twelve stages (Figure 2), each contributing equally (8.3%) to ensure a balanced and holistic approach to curriculum development. This balanced approach emphasizes that every phase is critical to the curriculum's success, with each stage building on the previous one to foster a comprehensive learning environment.

1. Policy Introduction (8.3%): This initial stage involves aligning curriculum policies with Indonesia's national education goals. By introducing the policy framework, all stakeholders—teachers, administrators, and policymakers—gain a shared understanding of the curriculum's objectives, setting the stage for successful implementation. This foundation follows educational change theories, ensuring alignment across the educational system.

2. School Designation (8.3%): Selected schools, often called pilot or model schools, are designated for the initial implementation based on their readiness in terms of resources and infrastructure. This stage follows Roger's Diffusion of Innovations Theory, which suggests piloting new initiatives in controlled environments to assess effectiveness before broader implementation.

3. Goal Setting (8.3%): This stage involves establishing specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals for the curriculum. These goals focus on student-centered outcomes, such as character building, critical thinking, and skill development, ensuring that the curriculum aligns with real-world needs and students' future competencies.

4. Activity Framework (8.3%): Developing an activity framework helps outline the types of learning experiences that will support the curriculum's goals. This stage relies on Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, which emphasizes learning through social interaction. The Merdeka Curriculum promotes hands-on, collaborative activities that allow students to learn by engaging directly with peers and real-world scenarios.

5. Program Structuring (8.3%): This step involves defining the structure of specific curriculum activities, including the roles and responsibilities of both teachers and students. Using Bloom's Taxonomy as a guiding framework, activities are organized from foundational knowledge to more complex tasks, fostering cognitive development and ensuring that students are progressively challenged.

6. Learning Modules (8.3%): Learning modules are thematic, contextual lessons designed to bring relevance to students' learning experiences. For example, modules on local cultural heritage help students understand and appreciate their environment and community. Situated Learning Theory supports this stage, as it suggests that knowledge is best acquired in contexts where it can be applied practically.

7. Weekly Activities (8.3%): Regular, consistent activities, such as the MANDALIKA Friday Program, reinforce learning and provide students with hands-on practice. This stage aligns with Spaced Repetition Theory, which enhances long-term retention, and Dewey's Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasizes learning through experience.

8. Skill Focus (8.3%): This stage emphasizes the development of critical skills, including teamwork, creativity, financial management, and problem-solving. The Merdeka Curriculum aligns with 21st-century skills frameworks, recognizing that these competencies are essential for success in a modern, globalized world.

9. Survey Feedback (8.3%): Collecting feedback from students, teachers, and other stakeholders provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of the program. Feedback loops are essential for adapting and refining the curriculum, allowing educators to assess whether the program meets its goals and addresses students' needs.

10. Result Analysis (8.3%): The feedback gathered is systematically analyzed to evaluate the program's impact. This stage aligns with data-driven decision-making principles, allowing for evidence-based adjustments to improve instructional effectiveness.

11. Ongoing Adjustments (8.3%): Based on the results of the feedback and analysis, continuous improvements are made to the curriculum. This stage is inspired by the Kaizen approach, which emphasizes incremental and continuous improvement to meet evolving educational needs.

12. Documentation & Expansion (8.3%): Successful elements of the program are documented to serve as a model for other schools. This step aligns with Diffusion Theory, which promotes the sharing and scaling of successful innovations across educational institutions, facilitating broader adoption and consistency in educational quality.

Together, these twelve stages ensure that the Merdeka Curriculum is systematically implemented with equal focus on planning, execution, evaluation, and improvement. The process emphasizes experiential learning, cultural appreciation, skill-building, and adaptability, preparing students to be responsible, culturally aware, and self-directed learners. This balanced implementation model ensures that the curriculum remains flexible and responsive, continually refined to meet both local and global educational standards.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is structured around a systematic model where each stage contributes equally to achieving curriculum objectives. Key stages such as policy introduction, school designation, goal setting, and activity framework development are critical for establishing a robust educational framework. Practical implementation strategies, including thematic learning modules, weekly activities, and skill-focused exercises, are essential for fostering a student-centered learning environment. Research has shown that learner-centered approaches significantly enhance student engagement and achievement, as they allow students to take ownership of their learning (Derting & Ebert-May, 2010). Feedback loops and ongoing adjustments are integral to the curriculum's design, ensuring that it remains flexible and responsive to evolving educational needs. Studies indicate that regular feedback from students about their learning environment is crucial for continuous improvement and strategic planning in educational institutions (Nahar et al., 2011).

This iterative process not only enhances the quality of education but also aligns with the principles of experiential learning and cultural appreciation, which are increasingly recognized as essential for developing self-directed and culturally aware learners. The Merdeka Curriculum's commitment to incremental improvement and cross-school collaboration reflects its alignment with both local and global educational standards. Collaborative approaches to curriculum development have been shown to improve educational outcomes by fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility among educators (Kohli & Dhaliwal, 2013). Furthermore, the integration of cultural values into the curriculum is vital for promoting cultural appreciation and understanding among students, preparing them to meet future challenges as responsible and engaged citizens (Bao, 2024).

4.3. Comparison Study

Table 2 provides a summary of this comparison, highlighting key metrics and outcomes from similar studies. By examining these results, we aim to identify trends, validate our approach, and understand how our study aligns with or differs from others research in the field.

Table 2. Comparison study from other study

Reference	Key Findings	Comparison with MANDALIKA Program Results
(Desmawanti & Sulong, 2024)	Identifies teachers' limited readiness and the challenge of adapting to Merdeka Curriculum due to unfamiliarity with new pedagogical requirements.	MANDALIKA Program shows successful curriculum alignment with positive impacts on character building and responsibility, suggesting adequate readiness at MAN 2 Mataram.
(Mamuaja et al., 2023)	Examines Merdeka Curriculum implementation challenges in Tomohon, particularly in teacher training and resource availability.	Similar challenges likely faced in MANDALIKA Program implementation but addressed through experiential, practical activities that engage students directly.
(Reviandy Azhar Ramdhani et al., 2024)	Analyzes teacher perspectives on curriculum feasibility, with positive feedback on its potential for student-centered learning if adequately supported.	MANDALIKA results align with these findings, showing high ratings in responsibility and character building, validating feasibility when resources and support are in place.
(Ridwanulloh et al., 2024)	Describes the transition challenges from K-13 to Merdeka Curriculum, including the need for time to adapt to new instructional practices.	The successful implementation in MANDALIKA Program suggests that MAN 2 Mataram has effectively managed the transition, focusing on student skills like critical thinking.
(Rochmat et al., 2023)	Discusses Merdeka Curriculum's role in preparing students for Society 5.0 with an emphasis on holistic education.	MANDALIKA's focus on character and skills development (e.g., creativity and empathy) supports readiness for Society 5.0, in line with Rochmat's vision.
(Sephiawar dani & Bektiningsih, 2023)	Reviews teacher readiness, noting mixed levels across schools in adapting to curriculum changes.	MANDALIKA Program's high rating in responsibility and moral values suggests strong readiness at MAN 2 Mataram compared to other institutions.
(Taufik & Rindanigsih, 2024)	Evaluates the positive impact of teacher training on curriculum implementation in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah.	The high program ratings imply that MAN 2 Mataram's staff received adequate training, enabling successful Merdeka Curriculum execution.
(Yunita & Widodo, 2023)	Studies Merdeka Curriculum application in Islamic education, observing challenges in maintaining engagement and relevance.	MANDALIKA Program maintains high engagement through culturally relevant, experiential activities, overcoming common challenges in Islamic education contexts.
(Yunitasari et al., 2023)	Addresses the implementation challenges in primary schools, focusing on resources and adaptation struggles.	MANDALIKA Program shows adaptability and structured support, suggesting an effective resolution to resource-related challenges common in primary education.

In conclusion, while the references identify common challenges such as teacher readiness, resource limitations, and thematic design issues, the MANDALIKA Friday Program at MAN 2 Mataram demonstrates effective implementation and alignment with Merdeka Curriculum goals. High survey ratings in areas like character building (81.8%) and responsibility (86.4%) reflect successful adaptation and provide a potential model for overcoming similar challenges in other schools.

5. Discussion

The MANDALIKA Friday Program at State Islamic High School 2 Mataram aligns with the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum by emphasizing the holistic development of students. The program supports key aspects such as creativity, responsibility, and character, which are essential for the Pancasila Student Profile. Survey results indicating that 81.8% of respondents positively rated outcomes such as character building, faith and piety, and cultural appreciation corroborate this initiative's contribution to instilling core values. This is consistent with findings that have linked curriculum innovations with improvements in students' moral integrity and cultural identity (Fauzan et al., 2023). Moreover, the integration of Islamic principles within the curriculum supports the preservation of both indigenous knowledge and national cultural heritage, as noted in research examining Islamic teachers' implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Jasiah et al., 2024). The program's focus on responsibility and collaboration is underscored by an 86.4% positive response, reflecting the shift in educational paradigms from solely academic content to include the cultivation of soft skills. The emphasis on engaging students in entrepreneurial activities, such as class-based bazaars, facilitates practical learning experiences in financial management, teamwork, and problem-solving. This practical approach aligns with the broader Merdeka Curriculum objectives, which advocate for experiential learning to prepare students for real-world challenges and societal engagement (Yasir et al., 2023). Such experiences provide a platform for developing socio-emotional skills while fostering an environment for collaborative learning, mirroring recommendations from character education research (Jasiah et al., 2024).

Despite these achievements, the survey reveals areas requiring further development, including self-reflection and originality, illustrated by lower ratings (59.1% each). These dimensions are critical for advancing critical thinking and independent learning. Research on reflective practices suggests that structured activities could bridge these gaps (Sendall & Domocol, 2013). Incorporating methodologies like design thinking and reflective journaling may enhance students' capacities for self-directed learning and innovative thinking, providing a robust response to the demands of an evolving global landscape.

In summary, the comprehensive design of the MANDALIKA Friday Program integrates elements that advance the Merdeka Curriculum's focus on blending academic knowledge with essential character and soft skill development. By effectively promoting responsibility, cultural appreciation, and practical entrepreneurial experiences, the program has made significant strides toward molding well-rounded citizens. Future enhancements focusing on structured reflective practices may further solidify educational outcomes by nurturing critical self-reflection and originality among students.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how the MANDALIKA Friday Program, as implemented at State Islamic High School 2 Mataram, supports the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in promoting student creativity, responsibility, and entrepreneurial competencies. Drawing on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Lickona's Character Education Framework, the research examined how this localized initiative aligns with the development of the Pancasila Student Profile. The findings demonstrate that the MANDALIKA Friday Program significantly contributes to the Merdeka Curriculum's vision by offering structured, experiential learning opportunities that cultivate not only cognitive skills but also moral and socio-emotional development. High student engagement in

activities such as class-based bazaars and creative performances reinforced attributes like collaboration, cultural appreciation, and financial literacy. Notably, the program showed strong outcomes in fostering character building (81.8%), responsibility (86.4%), and cultural appreciation (81.8%), affirming its alignment with national educational goals. However, areas such as self-reflection and originality, both essential for independent learning and critical thinking, were identified as requiring further enhancement. These findings point to the need for intentional pedagogical strategies such as journaling, peer feedback, and innovation challenges—to support deeper levels of reflection and creativity among students. In conclusion, the MANDALIKA Friday Program serves as a valuable model for contextualizing the Merdeka Curriculum through school-based initiatives. By integrating character education and entrepreneurship into routine instruction, the program offers a replicable framework for cultivating holistic, future-ready learners. Further research could explore long-term outcomes of such initiatives and assess their scalability across different educational settings.

7. Suggestion

To enhance the MANDALIKA Friday Program, it is recommended to focus on improving self-reflection and originality, as these aspects received lower ratings (59.1%), by incorporating structured reflective practices such as journaling and guided self-assessment activities. Additionally, strengthening creativity through design thinking workshops would foster problem-solving and innovation, while increasing collaboration with real-world stakeholders, such as local businesses, could provide valuable feedback and practical experience for students. Further, providing ongoing training for educators on experiential learning and creativity integration would ensure continued success, and longitudinal studies should be conducted to assess the long-term impacts of the program. Expanding evaluation metrics to assess leadership, innovation, and critical thinking would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the program's effectiveness, and utilizing more visual aids like charts and graphs could enhance clarity in presenting survey results. These steps would help refine the program and further support the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Declarations

Author Contributions. Wildan: supervision, conceptualization, overall quality assurance; L. Agus Satriawan: literature review, data collection and interpretation, writing manuscript; Rahmat A Kurniawan: guidance on data analysis, final manuscript review.

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About the Contributor(s)

Wildan, is a lecturer at Fakultas Tarbiyah dan Keguruan, Universitas Islam Mataram, His research interest include curriculum, teaching methodology.

Email: wildan@uinmataram.ac.id

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2535-0830>

L. Agus Satriawan is a Lecturer (Faculty of Education and Teacher Training). His research interest included Islamic studies, and multiculturalism

Email: la_satriawan@uinmataram.ac.id

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9487-4128>

Rahmat A Kurniawan is a Lecturer in Social Science Education. His research interest included science economic, analytical management.

Email: rahmat_a_kurniawan@uinmataram.ac.id

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-0453-3678>

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