



Merdeka Curriculum Management in Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the management of the Merdeka Curriculum in strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile at H Moenadi State Vocational School. Employing a qualitative approach with a case study design, the research involved key stakeholders, including the principal, vice principal for curriculum, teachers, students, and parents. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observations, and document analysis, and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has been carried out relatively well across the stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation. Teachers generally understand the curriculum as a flexible and student-centered framework and have integrated project-based learning through the Project for Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) to foster students' character and 21st-century skills. The results also reveal positive impacts on students' cooperation, independence, creativity, critical reasoning, and self-confidence. However, challenges remain in the form of variations in teacher readiness, administrative workload, limited instructional time, and inconsistent reflective documentation. The study concludes that effective curriculum management, supported by continuous professional development, structured collaboration, and systematic evaluation, is essential to ensure the sustainability and quality of Merdeka Curriculum implementation in vocational education.

Introduction

Education plays a strategic role in preparing globally competitive human resources while simultaneously serving as a fundamental instrument for national development (Usman et al., 2024; Widiastuti et al., 2024; Firnanda et al., 2026). Beyond the transmission of knowledge and skills, education contributes significantly to fostering tolerance, mutual respect, and cross-cultural understanding values that are increasingly essential in an era of globalization (A. N. Rohmah et al., 2023). Rapid social, economic, and technological transformations demand that educational systems continuously adapt, particularly through the development of curricula that are relevant, flexible, and responsive to future challenges (Gautami et al., 2023; Wahidah et al., 2023).

In the Indonesian context, the curriculum is legally defined as a structured set of plans and regulations concerning educational objectives, content, learning materials, and instructional methods, as stipulated in Law Number 20 of 2003. The curriculum functions as a central guideline for organizing educational processes in order to achieve national education goals (Widiastuti et al., 2024). Consequently, curriculum quality is a determining factor in educational success, as it provides both direction and a foundational framework for learning implementation at the school level (Fatrah & Pandiangan, 2024). Although Indonesia has revised its national curriculum multiple times from the 1947 Curriculum to the 2013

Curriculum these reforms have not yet resulted in optimal improvements in overall educational quality (Setiawan & Sofyan, 2022; Wahyuni, 2016).

This condition is reflected in Indonesia's performance in international assessments (Ukrimah, 2026; Nurqadriani et al., 2025; Chaniago et al., 2025). The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2019 ranked Indonesia 72nd out of 77 participating countries, placing it among the lowest-performing nations compared to regional neighbors such as Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam (Musdalifah, 2019). These results indicate persistent weaknesses in students' critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and literacy skills. In response to these challenges, the government introduced Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes differentiated learning, project-based learning through the Project for Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile (P5), and character education as core components of educational reform (A. M. Damayanti et al., 2024; Hamzah et al., 2022; L. N. Rohmah et al., 2023).

Philosophically, Merdeka Curriculum is rooted in the educational thought of Ki Hadjar Dewantara, which positions learners as autonomous subjects within an emancipatory learning environment (Chamisijatin et al., 2022; Jaya, 2025; Alwanda & Saputra, 2025). This curriculum adopts a student-centered and contextual learning approach, providing learners with broader opportunities to develop both academic and non-academic potentials (A. M. Damayanti et al., 2024). One of its key features, the Project for Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile (P5), aims to cultivate six core character dimensions: faith and noble character, global diversity, mutual cooperation, independence, critical reasoning, and creativity (Purtina et al., 2024). Through P5, students are expected not only to master academic knowledge but also to acquire essential 21st-century skills relevant to social life and the workplace (Santika & Dafit, 2023).

Despite its conceptual strengths, the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum particularly P5 faces various challenges at the school level (Mellyzar et al., 2025; Firdaus, 2026; Rahmawati et al., 2026). Empirical studies highlight constraints such as limited instructional time, inadequate utilization of technology, low student engagement, and teachers' difficulties in designing and managing project-based learning modules (Santika & Dafit, 2023; Sugiri & Priatmoko, 2020). Furthermore, disparities in infrastructure, teacher readiness, and administrative support across regions have led to inconsistencies in implementation (Damayanti et al., 2023). These issues indicate a gap between the ideal policy design of Merdeka Curriculum and the actual managerial, human resource, and organizational capacities of schools.

The complexity of implementation becomes more pronounced in vocational education. As vocational institutions, Vocational High Schools (SMKs) are expected to produce graduates who are not only technically competent but also possess strong work ethics, professional attitudes, critical thinking skills, and collaborative abilities aligned with industry demands. Therefore, strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile through P5 in SMKs requires curriculum management that is well-planned, integrated, and contextualized to the characteristics of vocational education. Effective curriculum management encompassing planning, implementation, and evaluation is thus a crucial determinant of successful curriculum enactment and sustainability (Istiqomah & Fauziah, 2024; Rahayu et al., 2022).

H Moenadi State Vocational School has implemented Merdeka Curriculum since the 2023/2024 academic year in accordance with the Decree of the Head of the National Curriculum and Assessment Standards Agency Number 028/H/KR/2023. With a large student population and extensive partnerships with industry, the school demonstrates significant

potential for effective curriculum implementation. However, preliminary observations indicate that optimizing Merdeka Curriculum implementation still requires strengthened teacher training, enhanced collaboration with industry partners, and systematic curriculum evaluation. Moreover, while previous studies have largely focused on instructional practices and student character outcomes, research specifically examining the management of Merdeka Curriculum particularly in strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile at the vocational level remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the management of Merdeka Curriculum in strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile at H Moenadi Ungaran State Vocational School.

Methods

The study was conducted using a qualitative approach with a case study design to study the management of the Merdeka Curriculum that is used in strengthening Pancasila Student Profile at H Moenadi Ungaran State Vocational School. The selected design was based on the study's objective of understanding the curriculum management practice in a specific school context in relation to planning, implementation, evaluation, and reflection.

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. These included school stakeholders involved in and closely related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and P5, such as the principal, vice principal for curriculum affairs, P5 teachers, students, and parents. The Principal and Vice principal gave their information about curriculum policy, coordination and supervision. P5 teachers shared their information on planning, implementation, assessment and challenges in their projects. Students shared their learning experiences and parents shared supporting information on students' character development outside of school.

In-depth interviews, observations and analysis of documents were used as data collection methods. The interviews covered aspects of school policies, P5 planning, teachers' readiness, planning and implementation, student engagement, evaluation, and enabling and hindering factors. A series of observations were undertaken to explore curriculum meetings, classroom instruction, the implementation of P5 projects, evaluation sessions and school facilities. The curriculum documents, teaching modules, P5 modules, schedules, assessment rubrics, student project documents and other records related to the curriculum were reviewed using document analysis.

The research tools used were semi structured interview guidelines, observation guidelines and document review notes. Means to ensure that the data collected is focused on managing the Merdeka Curriculum and strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile.

Member checks, peer debriefing and triangulation were used to ensure the credibility of the data. Member checking was accomplished by having the interview summaries, observation findings, and initial interpretation checked with the participant. In the debriefing stage, peer debriefing was done by discussion with academic supervisors or other researchers. Triangulation was done between data gathered from interview, observation and documents.

The Miles and Huberman interactive model was used to analyze the data with the four stages that include data collection, data condensation, data display and conclusion drawing. Interviews were transcribed and coded and themes extracted related to understanding the curriculum, planning, implementation, evaluation, student character development, enabling factors, barriers, and coping strategies. Themes were confirmed and reinforced with observation notes and documents.

Results and Discussion

Research Participants and Institutional Context

The findings of this study were derived from participants who were directly connected to the management and implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at H Moenadi Ungaran State Vocational School. As described in the method section, the participants consisted of the principal, the vice principal for curriculum affairs, P5 teachers, students, and parents. These participants were selected purposively because they were considered to have relevant experiences and knowledge regarding the planning, implementation, evaluation, and supporting conditions of the Merdeka Curriculum and the Project for Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile. The data were obtained through in depth interviews, direct observations, and document analysis, while data credibility was strengthened through member checking and peer debriefing as stated in the method section.

The institutional context shows that the management of the Merdeka Curriculum was supported by the formal roles of school stakeholders. The principal functioned as the main figure in providing policy direction, supervising implementation, and ensuring that curriculum practices were aligned with the school's educational goals. The vice principal for curriculum affairs coordinated the technical aspects of curriculum planning, teacher coordination, scheduling, and evaluation. P5 teachers were responsible for translating curriculum policy into learning practices and project based activities. Students became the direct participants in learning activities, while parents provided supporting information regarding students' character development outside the school environment.

The interview findings indicate that curriculum management was not understood merely as a matter of completing administrative documents. The school leadership viewed the Merdeka Curriculum as a broader effort to make learning more flexible, relevant, and meaningful for students. The principal emphasized that the curriculum should support both academic learning and character development.

“For me, the Merdeka Curriculum is not only about changing lesson plans or school documents. The more important thing is how we help teachers create learning that is closer to students' needs, so students do not only study the subject matter, but also grow in their character.”

This statement suggests that the school leadership positioned the Merdeka Curriculum as part of institutional improvement rather than merely a policy requirement. The focus was not only on whether teachers had prepared curriculum documents, but also on whether learning activities could respond to students' needs and support the formation of character. This finding is important because curriculum management in this context requires coordination between policy direction, teacher readiness, instructional design, project implementation, and evaluation practices.

Observation data supported the interview findings. Curriculum related activities were visible in school coordination, teacher discussions, classroom learning, P5 project activities, and evaluation sessions. Document analysis also confirmed the availability of curriculum documents, teaching modules, P5 modules, schedules, rubrics, and project related documents. These documents indicate that the school had attempted to provide a formal basis for curriculum implementation. However, the findings also show that some aspects of implementation still depended on the initiative of individual teachers, particularly in the documentation of reflection and follow up actions. This indicates that the school already had a

functioning curriculum management structure, but still needed stronger consistency in documenting and sustaining improvement.

Understanding and Planning of the Merdeka Curriculum

The findings show that school stakeholders generally understood the Merdeka Curriculum as a flexible, contextual, and student centered curriculum. The principal and vice principal for curriculum affairs viewed the curriculum as a framework that gives schools and teachers greater space to adjust learning to students' needs and school characteristics. P5 teachers also understood that the curriculum required them to move beyond conventional teaching practices and design learning experiences that encourage students to participate actively, collaborate with peers, solve problems, and reflect on values.

A P5 teacher explained that the Merdeka Curriculum changed the way teachers approached instruction. Learning was no longer understood simply as finishing the material, but as a process of understanding students and designing activities that could support their growth.

“In this curriculum, we cannot teach only by finishing the material. We have to look at the students first, what they need, how they learn, and how the lesson can help them become more active and responsible.”

This statement shows that teachers had begun to internalize the basic orientation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The emphasis was not only on content coverage, but also on student participation, responsibility, and character formation. In vocational education, this understanding is particularly significant because students are expected to develop not only technical knowledge, but also work related attitudes such as discipline, cooperation, independence, communication, and responsibility.

From the students' perspective, the Merdeka Curriculum and P5 were understood through direct learning experiences. Students did not explain the curriculum in conceptual or policy language, but they recognized that P5 activities were different from ordinary classroom learning because they involved group work, discussion, task distribution, project completion, and presentation.

“In P5 activities, I feel that we are more involved. We discuss with friends, divide the tasks, and then present the result. Sometimes it is not easy, but it makes us more confident because we have to take part.”

This quotation shows that students experienced P5 as a learning space that demanded participation. The value of cooperation was practiced through group discussion and task distribution, while responsibility emerged because each student had to contribute to the group's work. This finding indicates that the Pancasila Student Profile was not merely introduced as a normative idea, but was experienced through concrete learning activities.

In terms of planning, the findings indicate that the school had conducted curriculum preparation through coordination among school leaders and teachers. The vice principal for curriculum affairs played a central role in coordinating planning, while P5 teachers prepared project themes, learning activities, and assessment mechanisms. Document analysis showed that teaching modules, P5 modules, schedules, and assessment rubrics were prepared to support implementation. These documents became evidence that curriculum planning had been formally conducted.

However, the findings also reveal that teacher readiness was not entirely uniform. Some teachers were able to prepare modules and projects more independently, while others still

needed guidance, especially in connecting learning objectives, project activities, and assessment indicators. The vice principal for curriculum affairs described this condition clearly.

“The teachers already try to prepare the modules and projects, but their readiness is not the same. Some teachers can do it quite smoothly, while others still need guidance, especially when they have to connect the activities with assessment.”

This finding shows that curriculum planning had already been initiated, but its quality depended strongly on teacher capacity. The flexibility of the Merdeka Curriculum provides opportunities for innovation, but it also requires teachers to have sufficient pedagogical understanding. When teacher readiness varies, the implementation of flexible learning can also become uneven. Therefore, curriculum planning should not only focus on the preparation of administrative documents, but also on continuous teacher support, shared understanding, and practical guidance.

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and P5

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum was reflected in learning practices that emphasized student participation, contextual learning, group based activities, and project based learning. P5 teachers reported that their role shifted from being the main source of information to becoming facilitators who guided students during project activities. Teachers monitored group progress, provided feedback, helped students overcome difficulties, and encouraged students to reflect on their learning process. Observation data confirmed that students were actively involved in discussion, task distribution, project preparation, and presentation activities.

A P5 teacher stated that students were generally more enthusiastic when learning activities required them to create something directly and work with their peers.

“Students are usually more excited when the activity asks them to make something directly. They can talk with their friends, share ideas, and show the result. From there, we can see not only their knowledge, but also their cooperation and responsibility.”

This statement illustrates that P5 created a learning process that combined cognitive, social, and character dimensions. Students were not only expected to understand learning content, but also to cooperate, communicate, manage responsibilities, and complete tasks. This is particularly relevant to vocational education because students need practical learning experiences that resemble real work situations. In the workplace, technical competence must be accompanied by teamwork, discipline, initiative, and problem solving. P5 therefore provided a meaningful space for students to practice these competencies in a school setting.

Students also confirmed that P5 activities helped them become more confident. Presentation activities required them to speak in front of others, explain group work, and respond to questions. For students who were previously hesitant to speak, this became an important part of their learning experience.

“At first, I was nervous when I had to speak in front of the class. But after doing several project presentations, I became more used to it. I learned how to explain our group work and answer questions from friends.”

This quotation shows that confidence developed gradually through repeated practice. The student did not describe confidence as something that appeared immediately, but as something built through experience. This makes the finding more convincing because it reflects the actual process of learning. P5 activities gave students opportunities to practice communication, organize ideas, and represent their group’s work in front of others.

Observation findings also showed that P5 activities encouraged cooperation and responsibility. Students worked in groups, divided tasks, discussed ideas, completed project activities, and presented their outcomes. These activities made the values of the Pancasila Student Profile visible in practice, especially mutual cooperation, independence, creativity, responsibility, and critical reasoning. However, the implementation was not entirely free from constraints. Limited instructional time, administrative workload, and different levels of teacher readiness affected the depth of teacher mentoring and student reflection. Some project activities could be completed within the available time, but the reflective process was not always developed deeply.

This indicates that the success of P5 implementation depended not only on the existence of projects, but also on the quality of facilitation. Projects may encourage active learning, but without adequate mentoring and reflection, their impact may remain limited. Therefore, teachers need sufficient time and institutional support to guide students, assess the process, and help them reflect on the meaning of their learning experience.

Impact of P5 on Students

The findings indicate that P5 had a positive influence on students' character development and learning behavior. Based on interviews with P5 teachers, students, and parents, the most visible changes were cooperation, independence, creativity, responsibility, communication, and self confidence. Observation data supported these findings by showing that students participated in group work, discussed project ideas, completed assigned responsibilities, and presented project outcomes.

P5 teachers observed that some students who were usually passive in conventional classroom settings became more involved during project based activities. This happened because each student had a clearer role within the group and was expected to contribute to the completion of the project.

“Some students who are usually quiet in class become more active during the project. Maybe because they have a clear task in the group, they feel that they have to contribute.”

This statement shows that P5 encouraged participation through shared responsibility. Students became more aware that their contribution affected the success of the group. This is a significant finding because character development was not only taught through explanation, but experienced through social interaction. Students learned responsibility because they had tasks to complete. They learned cooperation because they had to work with others. They learned communication because they had to share ideas and present results.

Parents also provided supporting evidence that the impact of P5 could be seen outside the classroom. One parent observed that their child became more willing to talk about school activities and showed greater responsibility in preparing assignments.

“After joining the project activities, my child often talks more about school at home. I also see that he is more willing to prepare his assignments by himself, although sometimes he still needs to be reminded.”

This quotation is important because it presents a more realistic picture of student development. The parent did not describe change as complete or perfect, but as a gradual improvement. The phrase indicating that the child still sometimes needed reminders makes the quotation more believable and human. It shows that P5 contributed to positive development, while also acknowledging that character formation is a continuing process.

The findings also suggest that the impact of P5 was not experienced equally by all students. Some students showed strong progress in confidence, responsibility, and participation, while others still needed closer guidance. This means that project based learning should not assume that all students are equally ready to participate. Some students may need clearer instructions, structured roles, and more direct mentoring from teachers. Therefore, the impact of P5 depends on the quality of facilitation, the clarity of group responsibilities, and the consistency of reflection.

Overall, P5 contributed positively to students' character and soft skills development. Its strongest impact appeared in the way students interacted with peers, completed responsibilities, expressed ideas, and gained confidence through project activities. However, to make this impact more evenly distributed, teachers need to provide more differentiated support for students with different levels of confidence, motivation, and readiness.

Evaluation of P5 Implementation

Evaluation of P5 implementation was conducted through assessment rubrics, teacher observation, student reflection, and discussion of project outcomes. The findings show that teachers assessed both the learning process and the final product. The process assessment included participation, cooperation, responsibility, discipline, and problem solving. Product assessment focused on project output, presentation, creativity, and relevance to the project theme. This indicates that evaluation was aligned with the character and competency orientation of P5.

A P5 teacher explained that assessment was not limited to the final product. Teachers also paid attention to how students worked during the process.

“When we assess P5, we do not only look at the final product. We also pay attention to how students work in the group, whether they help each other, whether they are responsible, and how they solve problems during the process.”

This quotation shows that evaluation in P5 was broader than conventional academic assessment. The teacher's attention to the process indicates that character development was treated as part of the learning outcome. Cooperation, responsibility, and problem solving were not viewed as secondary elements, but as essential parts of project based learning. This finding confirms that P5 evaluation attempted to capture both visible products and invisible learning processes.

Document analysis confirmed that the school used rubrics and project related documents to support evaluation. This shows that assessment was not conducted randomly, but had formal criteria. However, the findings also reveal that reflective documentation was not yet fully consistent. Teachers conducted reflection through discussion and informal notes, but not all reflections were written systematically. This limited the school's ability to use reflection as a continuous basis for improvement.

The vice principal for curriculum affairs acknowledged this weakness.

“Reflection is actually done, but sometimes it is still informal. Teachers usually talk about what worked and what did not, but not all of those reflections are written properly. This is something we still need to improve.”

This finding highlights one of the important challenges in curriculum management. Evaluation was already implemented, but the use of evaluation results for systematic improvement still needed strengthening. Reflection is important because it allows teachers and school leaders to identify strengths, weaknesses, recurring problems, and future needs. If reflection is not

documented properly, important lessons from implementation may be lost, and the same problems may reappear in future activities.

Therefore, evaluation should be strengthened not only in terms of rubrics and scoring, but also in terms of documentation and follow up. Teachers need a simple but consistent mechanism for recording reflection results, identifying problems, and linking evaluation findings to the next planning cycle. This would make curriculum management more evidence based and sustainable.

Supporting Factors, Constraints, and Strategic Responses

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and P5 was supported by several factors, including school leadership, teacher collaboration, student enthusiasm, and the availability of curriculum documents. Interview data showed that the principal and curriculum team provided institutional direction and support. Teachers also collaborated in preparing and facilitating P5 activities, although the consistency of collaboration varied. Students generally showed enthusiasm because P5 activities were more active, practical, and participatory than conventional classroom learning.

At the same time, several constraints affected implementation. The most frequently identified constraints were limited instructional time, administrative workload, varied teacher readiness, and inconsistent reflection documentation. These constraints influenced the depth of project implementation, the quality of teacher mentoring, and the consistency of evaluation. A P5 teacher explained that P5 had clear benefits, but teachers needed enough time to guide students properly.

“P5 is useful for students because they can learn character and skills at the same time. The problem is that teachers need enough time to guide them. If the time is too limited, the project can be finished, but the reflection is not always deep.”

This quotation captures an important distinction between completing a project and achieving meaningful learning. A project may be finished as an activity, but its deeper educational value depends on mentoring, discussion, and reflection. If time is too limited, P5 may still produce visible outputs, but the process of internalizing values may not be sufficiently developed. This finding suggests that P5 requires not only project design, but also careful time management and reflective facilitation.

The strategic responses identified from the interviews included regular coordination, continuous teacher development, simplification of administrative tasks, and stronger documentation of reflection and follow up. These strategies are needed to ensure that curriculum implementation becomes more consistent and sustainable. The findings suggest that school leadership should continue strengthening teacher support, not only through policy direction, but also through practical assistance in planning, implementation, assessment, and reflection.

The data also indicate that P5 should be managed as an integrated school program rather than a separate activity. Stronger coordination among school leaders, curriculum staff, and teachers is needed to ensure that project themes, learning activities, assessment, and reflection are connected. Without this coordination, P5 may continue to be implemented, but its transformative potential may not be fully realized.

Data Validation through Member Checking and Peer Debriefing

As stated in the method section, data credibility was ensured through member checking and peer debriefing. Member checking was conducted by confirming interview summaries,

observation findings, and preliminary interpretations with participants. This process helped ensure that the findings reflected participants' actual experiences and perspectives. Peer debriefing was conducted through discussion with academic peers or supervisors to review thematic consistency, interpretation, and the alignment between data and conclusions.

The validation process strengthened the credibility of the findings because the results were not derived from a single source of data. Interviews provided participants' perceptions and experiences. Observations showed how curriculum practices appeared in actual school activities. Document analysis confirmed the existence of curriculum planning, P5 modules, schedules, rubrics, and project related documents. Through this triangulation, the findings became more trustworthy because they were supported by multiple forms of evidence.

Member checking also helped clarify that stakeholders generally shared a similar understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, although their technical readiness varied. Participants confirmed that teacher collaboration existed, but it still needed stronger consistency. They also confirmed that P5 had positive effects on students' cooperation, responsibility, independence, communication, and confidence, while acknowledging that reflection documentation remained an area for improvement.

Peer debriefing supported the analytical process by helping ensure that the themes were not exaggerated beyond the available data. The major themes that emerged from the analysis included understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, curriculum planning, P5 implementation, student development, evaluation practices, supporting factors, and implementation constraints. These themes were consistent with the research focus and the data collection techniques described in the method section.

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and the Project for Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) at H Moenadi Ungaran State Vocational School has progressed relatively well across the stages of understanding, planning, implementation, and evaluation. This result aligns with Yusuf et al (2024), who argue that the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in vocational schools depends on the active involvement of all school components. The shared understanding among respondents regarding the Merdeka Curriculum as a flexible, student-centered, and contextual curriculum supports previous studies highlighting a paradigm shift in teachers' roles from content transmitters to learning facilitators (Aisyah et al., 2023; Sa'diyah et al., 2023). This shift is consistent with the philosophical foundation of Merdeka Belajar, which emphasizes autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking to prepare learners for the challenges of Society 5.0 (Dian et al., 2023). However, as also reported by Sa'diyah et al (2023), this shared understanding remains stronger at the conceptual level than at the technical level of classroom practice.

In terms of curriculum planning, teacher involvement from the initial stages through curriculum meetings, internal workshops, and P5 facilitation teams reflects collaborative curriculum management practices. This finding corroborates research by Midiaty et al (2024) and Napitupulu et al (2023), which emphasize cross-role collaboration as a prerequisite for effective Merdeka Curriculum planning. The strategic role of productive vocational teachers in aligning P5 themes with industry-relevant competencies also supports studies by Erawan et al (2024) and Kusumaningrum et al (2024). Nevertheless, similar to Febriani et al (2024), this study found that collaboration often remains situational and administratively driven rather than deeply embedded in pedagogical co-design processes. This suggests that curriculum management structures have not yet been fully institutionalized to sustain consistent collaborative practices.

The development of teaching modules and learning objective pathways aligned with official learning outcomes demonstrates the flexibility promoted by the Merdeka Curriculum framework. This finding supports Fitriyanti & Sholeh (2023), who identify adaptive instructional tools as a key factor in successful curriculum implementation. The integration of Pancasila values through active learning strategies, attitude indicators, and reflective activities also aligns with earlier studies (Febriani et al., 2024). However, consistent with Kusumaningrum et al (2024), this flexibility has resulted in uneven instructional quality across teachers, particularly in the depth of character value integration. Such variation reflects broader challenges reported in the literature, where differences in teacher readiness and professional capacity affect the consistency of curriculum enactment (Budiyanti et al., 2023; Khairunnisa et al., 2025).

The implementation of P5 through thematic, project-based learning has proven effective in enhancing student engagement, creativity, and independence, supporting findings by Damayanti et al (2024) and Yusuf et al (2024). Instructional strategies such as project-based learning, problem-based learning, simulations, and field observations align with the innovative approaches promoted within the Merdeka Curriculum policy (Sugiri & Priatmoko, 2020). Nevertheless, this study confirms concerns raised by Napitupulu et al (2023) and Vinaya et al (2025) that project-based learning risks becoming procedural or symbolic when constrained by limited time and insufficient mentoring. Additionally, although teachers have adopted facilitator roles, heavy administrative workloads continue to limit their capacity to provide intensive guidance, echoing findings by Febriani et al (2024).

Regarding outcomes, the positive impact of P5 on students' cooperation, independence, creativity, critical reasoning, and self-confidence reinforces findings from Aisyah et al (2023), Midiaty et al (2024), and Damayanti et al (2024). However, as noted by Erawan et al (2024), these impacts are more evident among highly motivated students, indicating that character development through P5 is not uniformly experienced. Evaluation and reflection practices using process- and product-based rubrics align with Erawan et al (2024) and Fitriyanti & Sholeh (2023), yet reflective practices have not fully evolved into a documented learning culture, as also reported by Sa'diyah et al (2023). Overall, this study confirms that while the Merdeka Curriculum and P5 offer a strategic framework for strengthening character and employability skills in vocational education, their success is highly dependent on teacher readiness, effective curriculum management, institutional support, and consistent implementation. Without systematic management and sustained professional development, P5 risks remaining at the level of policy discourse rather than becoming a deeply transformative educational practice.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and the Project for Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) at H Moenadi Ungaran State Vocational School has been carried out relatively effectively across the stages of understanding, planning, implementation, and evaluation. The curriculum has been understood by school stakeholders as a flexible, student-centered, and contextual framework that supports both academic learning and character development. Collaborative planning practices, the use of adaptive teaching modules, and the application of project-based learning have contributed positively to students' development of key Pancasila values, including cooperation, independence, creativity, critical reasoning, and self-confidence, which are essential competencies for vocational education and the world of work.

However, the findings also indicate that the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum and P5 is not yet evenly distributed across all aspects of practice. Variations in teacher readiness, administrative workload, limited instructional time, and inconsistencies in reflective documentation remain significant challenges. Therefore, strengthening curriculum management through continuous professional development, institutionalized teacher collaboration, systematic evaluation, and adequate resource support is essential to ensure the sustainability and depth of implementation. Without such strategic management, the Merdeka Curriculum and P5 risk remaining at the level of policy intention rather than becoming a consistently transformative practice in vocational education.

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