



**Teachers' Perceptions of the Impact of the Independent Learning Policy  
Regarding Teaching Professionalism  
(Case Study at SDN Gekbrong 1 Elementary School, Cianjur Regency)**

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**ABSTRACT**

The Merdeka Belajar policy is a strategic effort by the government to transform the national education system to be more adaptive to the needs of students and developments of the times. Therefore, it is important to examine teachers' perceptions of the impact of the Merdeka Belajar policy on their teaching professionalism in primary education units. This study aims to describe and analyze teachers' perceptions of the impact of the Merdeka Belajar policy on teaching professionalism, as well as to identify the supporting and inhibiting factors for its implementation in the context of education quality management. This policy is considered capable of improving the professionalism of teachers, especially in the aspects of learning planning, the application of innovative learning methods, formative assessment, learning reflection, and the use of digital technology. In addition, the results of the study reveal that school principal leadership plays a significant role in the successful implementation of Merdeka Belajar through instructional supervision, teacher mentoring, and strengthening a culture of collaboration. Factors supporting implementation include the commitment of school principals, the existence of teacher learning communities (PLCs), and access to learning resources through the Merdeka Mengajar Platform. Meanwhile, the inhibiting factors that are still encountered include limitations in technological infrastructure, variations in teachers' digital literacy, and the burden of learning administration. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the Merdeka Belajar policy has made a real contribution to improving the professionalism of teachers and the quality of learning, although it still needs to be strengthened in terms of ongoing assistance and infrastructure support.

**Keywords:** *Independent Learning, Education Policy, Teacher Professionalism, Education Quality Management, Teacher Perceptions*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Education quality management is a strategic approach that aims to ensure that the education process runs according to standards and creates continuous improvement. According to Sallis (2012), Total Quality Management (TQM) in education emphasizes the importance of quality improvement that focuses on students, improving teacher performance, and continuous learning through a systematic evaluation cycle. Why is quality management important? Because the quality of education is highly dependent on the quality of the learning process, including the competence of teachers as the main actors. How is quality management implemented? Through process control, monitoring, supervision, and continuous improvement of teacher capacity (Mukhtar & Maisah, 2014).

In the context of educational transformation, the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom of Learning) Policy is a fundamental reform aimed at addressing the challenges facing the quality of education in Indonesia. The Minister of Education and Culture (2019) stated that Merdeka Belajar aims to "provide flexibility to educational units and teachers to innovate in order to improve the quality of learning." This policy is reinforced in Permendikbud No. 22 of 2020 concerning Standards for Primary and Secondary Education Processes, which emphasizes student-centered learning and curriculum flexibility. Merdeka Belajar programs such as the Merdeka Curriculum, National Assessment, simplification of lesson plans, and the Merdeka Mengajar Platform are designed to provide space for innovation for teachers (Kemdikbudristek, 2021).

On the other hand, teacher professionalism is the main foundation for improving the quality of learning. Law No. 14 of 2005 stipulates that teachers, as professionals, must have pedagogical, professional, social, and personal competencies. According to Darling-Hammond (2017), teacher professionalism will grow when teachers have autonomy, opportunities for continuous development, and relevant policy support. Professionalism is important because teachers are the main determinants of the success of the learning process (Hattie, 2009), while how that professionalism is formed is influenced by education, training, experience, and policies that regulate teaching practices.

The Merdeka Belajar policy also has a strong theoretical foundation, such as student-centered learning (Bransford et al., 2000), constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), learning autonomy (Little, 1991), and the concept of learning organization (Senge, 2006), which emphasizes the ability of teachers to continue learning and adapting. The policy foundations include Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, Government Regulation No. 19 of 2017 on National Education Standards, and the official Merdeka Curriculum document from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (2021).

However, there is an empirical gap that shows that policy implementation does not always run smoothly. Rahmawati's (2022) research found that teachers

experienced a gap in understanding the concept of Merdeka Belajar and felt that they had not received optimal assistance. A study by Sari & Pratama (2023) also shows that digital literacy and pedagogical adaptation remain obstacles in the utilization of the Merdeka Mengajar Platform. In addition, some teachers consider that the curriculum changes are not yet fully in line with the schools' ability to provide supporting facilities (Wahyudi, 2021). This gap emphasizes the need for research on teachers' perceptions, as perceptions influence the acceptance, implementation, and effectiveness of policies.

This study offers an innovative in-depth analysis of how teachers interpret and perceive the impact of Merdeka Belajar on their teaching professionalism, rather than just the technical aspects of its implementation. This perception analysis is important in order to provide an authentic picture of teachers' readiness, obstacles, opportunities for innovation, and the contribution of policies to improving professionalism.

The selection of research locations was based on the characteristics of schools that were in the process of transitioning to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, had diverse teacher experiences, and reflected the real conditions of educational units in facing national policy changes. In addition, these schools demonstrated relevant adaptation dynamics for a more in-depth study of teachers' perceptions of policy implementation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research method is a case study. Robert K. Yin (2014) explains that a case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context." This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method, which was conducted at SDN Gekbrong 1. The research subjects included the principal and teachers. Data collection techniques were carried out through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. Data validity was maintained through source and technique triangulation, while data analysis was carried out in stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing.

With this design, researchers can maintain the holistic and contextual characteristics of the educational phenomenon, namely how the Merdeka Belajar policy is implemented and experienced by teachers in a real school environment. Case studies allow the use of various data sources (interviews, observations, documents) to understand the phenomenon comprehensively and develop a valid analysis.

The case study method (Yin, 2018) was used because the research focused on the phenomenon of policy implementation in the real context of SDN Gekbrong

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Result**

Data analysis (semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and documentation studies) yielded six main themes that describe the relationship between Merdeka Belajar and teaching professionalism: (1) Teacher Understanding & Readiness; (2) Transformation of Learning Practices (Methods); (3) Teacher–Student Interaction; (4) Assessment Practices; (5) Use of Merdeka Belajar Tools; and (6) Systemic Support/Barriers. Each theme is described below with evidence and interpretation.

Theme 1 - Teachers' Understanding and Readiness for Independent Learning, Key findings: Teachers' perceptions of Merdeka Belajar are generally positive (recognizing the value of autonomy and relevance), but there is substantial variation in the depth of understanding and readiness for implementation. Empirical evidence: The interviews revealed two categories of informants: (a) teachers who understood the principles of CP/ATP and actively adapted teaching modules; (b) teachers who were familiar with the term "Merdeka Belajar" but were confused about the technical aspects (ATP preparation, formative assessment). Initial observations found that some teachers implemented project-based learning (P5) and differentiated learning, while others still predominantly used lecture methods with little variation. Interpretation: This variation in understanding is consistent with literature stating that professional autonomy is effective when accompanied by capacity and support (Ingersoll, 2003; Senge, 1990). Teachers who are better prepared tend to utilize policies for innovation; those who are less prepared require assistance.

Theme 2 - Transformation of Learning Practices (Methods), Key findings: The implementation of Merdeka Belajar has encouraged changes in teaching methods towards more student-centered activities (projects, PBL, discussions) among a number of teachers; however, this transformation has not been evenly distributed. Empirical evidence: Classroom observations (3 sessions) showed the use of PjBL/PBL in thematic and science lessons: teachers gave small project assignments, facilitated student collaboration, and used simple rubrics for assessment. Several new lesson plans/teaching modules (documentation) use CP as a learning reference, but records show variations in ATP quality. Interpretation: This transition in method supports the constructivist (Vygotsky) and learner-centered (Bransford et al.) theories, which require teachers to become facilitators. However, the success of the new method requires learning design skills and adequate time for preparation, which are obstacles for teachers with heavy workloads. Practical implications: An intensive coaching program is needed so that the transformation of methods can become routine practice, rather than just sporadic activities.

Theme 3 - Teacher-Student Interaction, Key findings: Classroom

interactions became more dialogic and participatory among teachers who adopted the Merdeka Belajar principle, increasing student agency and engagement. Empirical evidence: Observation of interactions revealed more open-ended questions, group discussions, and opportunities for students to choose topics for small projects. Teachers who successfully established dialogic interactions reported an increase in student motivation and activity. Interpretation: This change in interaction is in line with Hattie's (2009) findings that the quality of teacher-student interaction (feedback, questioning) significantly affects learning outcomes. Interactions that facilitate reflection also support the development of students' metacognitive skills.

Theme 4 - Assessment Practices, Key findings: Formative assessments are beginning to be used, but the use of assessment results for differentiated learning is not yet consistent. Empirical evidence: Some teachers use checklists, portfolios, and performance observations; however, qualitative rubrics are rarely used systematically. Assessment documentation in schools shows that grades are recorded, but the integration of formative assessments into remedial plans is still limited. Interpretation: Although Merdeka Belajar encourages authentic assessment, practices in the field show a gap in competence in designing valid assessment instruments and utilizing assessment data for pedagogical action. This is in line with studies that professional development in assessment requires intensive training (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Theme 5 - Use of Independent Learning Tools (PMM, CP, ATP, Teaching Modules), Key findings: The Merdeka Mengajar (PMM) platform and CP/ATP tools are being used, but access and utilization skills are major barriers. Empirical evidence: Teachers actively downloaded modules and materials from PMM, but some teachers had difficulty adapting the materials to their classroom context. ATP/CP is mentioned in several documents but has not always been a consistent operational guideline in the classroom. Interpretation: The Merdeka Belajar (Independent Learning) tool has the potential to support professionalism if teachers are given time and contextual guidance for adaptation. The availability of infrastructure (internet connection, devices) is a significant technical prerequisite.

Theme 6 - Systemic Support and Barriers, Key finding: Systemic factors (school principals, education authorities, parents/community, facilities and infrastructure) determine the level of adoption and sustainability of Merdeka Belajar practices. Empirical evidence: Principals who proactively facilitate sharing sessions, internal coaching, and allocate time for teacher collaboration show an increase in the adoption of new practices. Major obstacles include: limited teacher time (administrative burden), lack of ICT equipment, and unequal access to training. Interpretation: Key leadership support (instructional leadership) is consistent with quality management literature that positions school principals as

catalysts for change. The role of the office as a provider of assistance is also essential.

## **Discussion**

### **1. Findings Integration - In-depth**

The following discussion links empirical findings with literature, regulations, and policy implications.

#### **a. Understanding, Teacher Readiness, and Professional Agency**

Findings on variations in teachers' understanding confirm that policy enactment (how policies are interpreted and implemented) is highly dependent on teachers' professional capabilities (Sabatier & Mazmanian's policy implementation theory). Teachers who demonstrate a deep understanding usually have access to training, collaborative experiences (PLC), or involvement in professional community activities (teacher leaders). Ingersoll (2003) and Darling-Hammond (2017) emphasize that autonomy does not automatically guarantee quality; autonomy must be accompanied by professional support. Policy implications: Education agencies should focus on ongoing professional development programs that are on-the-job (coaching, lesson study), rather than just occasional workshops. SPMI regulations should be used to ensure that schools have internal coaching mechanisms in place.

#### **b. Learning Method: From Theory to Practice**

The transition to PBL and differentiation supports the principles of constructivism (Vygotsky) and learner-centered pedagogy (Bransford et al.). However, this transition requires strong instructional design skills, including aligning CP, learning objectives, and assessment (backward design). The finding that some teachers were not consistent indicates the need for curriculum literacy (a deep understanding of the structure of CP/ATP) among teachers.

Practical recommendations: Training focused on CP-based learning unit design, performance rubric creation, and simple, scalable differentiation strategies.

#### **c. Formative Assessment: Competency Gaps**

Merdeka Belajar emphasizes formative assessment as a tool for improving learning. Findings show that several instruments are used, but there is a lack of analysis and follow-up. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) emphasize that developing assessment capacity requires time, collaborative practice, and examples of rubrics that can be directly adapted.

Recommendation: Establish assessment learning circles at the school/cluster level to share rubrics, perform assessment calibration, and prepare

CP-based assessment templates..

d. PMM Devices and Infrastructure: Technical & Cultural Requirements

PMM is an important resource, but its implementation is hampered by limitations in infrastructure and material adaptation capabilities. Studies on education policy implementation emphasize the relationship between technology, user capacity, and organizational support. Without training focused on contextual adaptation, PMM risks becoming a repository of materials that are not used effectively.

Policy recommendations:

Provision of digital access (school hotspots), professional development schedules that support the use of PMM, and local adaptation guidance modules.

e. School Leadership & Organizational Culture

School principals act as agents of change; where supportive leadership (instructional leadership) is evident, teachers are more willing to experiment, share practices, and adapt new methods. This is consistent with the literature on learning organizations (Senge) and quality assurance (SPMI). Policy change requires a combination of top-down (policy/departmental support) and bottom-up (teacher initiatives) approaches.

## 2. Integration of Triangulation Results

This discussion was compiled by integrating the results of data triangulation obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of teachers' perceptions of the impact of the Merdeka Belajar policy on teaching professionalism.

a. Teachers' and Principals' Understanding of the Independent Learning Policy

The triangulation results show that teachers' and principals' understanding of the Merdeka Belajar policy is in the good to very good category. The observation findings show that principals are able to explain the Merdeka Belajar concept systematically, starting from Learning Outcomes (CP), Learning Objective Flow (ATP), Teaching Modules, to the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). This understanding is reinforced by the interview results, which reveal that teachers view Merdeka Belajar as a policy that provides flexibility, creativity, and autonomy in learning.

The documentation study confirmed these findings through the availability of operational curriculum documents for educational units, ATPs, and teaching modules that had been independently compiled by teachers. The consistency of data from these three sources shows that understanding of the policy is not only

conceptual, but has been internalized in daily learning practices.

b. Principal Leadership in the Implementation of Independent Learning

The integration of observation data, interviews, and documentation shows that the principal acts as an active instructional leader in overseeing the implementation of Merdeka Belajar. Observations show that there is scheduled learning supervision, open communication, and assistance to teachers in developing and reflecting on teaching modules.

The interview results reinforced these findings, with the principal emphasizing that the supervisory approach used was coaching and reflective in nature, rather than merely administrative assessment. The documentation study supported this through the existence of supervision records, teacher coaching schedules, and PLC meeting minutes.

This triangulation shows that school principal leadership is a key factor in creating a school climate conducive to improving teacher professionalism and successful policy implementation.

c. Implementation of Independent Learning in Teaching Practice

Classroom and school environment observations show that teachers have begun to implement project-based learning, discussions, and differentiation. Teachers appear to play more of a facilitating role, while students are active in the learning process. This is in line with the results of teacher interviews, which indicate that Merdeka Belajar encourages them to be more creative in designing learning activities.

The teaching module documents and P5 activity reports further reinforce these findings, showing that the implementation of learning does not stop at planning, but is also realized in practice. The consistency between data sources confirms that Merdeka Belajar has been implemented in practice and is not merely an administrative formality.

d. The Impact of Independent Learning Policies on Teacher Professionalism

Triangulation integration shows an increase in teacher professionalism in various dimensions. Observations note an increase in teachers' ability to manage classrooms, collaborate, and use student-centered learning approaches. Interviews reveal that teachers feel more confident, reflective, and open to learning innovations.

Documentation studies, such as teaching modules developed by teachers and learning reflections, confirm an increase in teachers' pedagogical and professional competencies. Thus, the impact of the Merdeka Belajar policy on teacher professionalism can be said to be positive and significant, although it still

requires continuous reinforcement.

e. Utilization of the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM) as a Supporting Instrument

The triangulation results show that the Merdeka Mengajar Platform is used as a source of learning and professional development for teachers. Observations show that teachers access PMM in the teachers' room, while interviews reveal that PMM helps teachers understand curriculum concepts and learning strategies.

Documentation in the form of PMM training certificates and teacher self-development records reinforce these findings. However, triangulation also revealed variations in the level of PMM utilization among teachers, which was influenced by digital literacy skills and device availability.

f. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Policy Implementation

Data integration shows that the main supporting factors for the implementation of Merdeka Belajar include school leadership, a culture of teacher collaboration, and government policy support. Meanwhile, the inhibiting factors that consistently emerge from the three data sources are limitations in technological infrastructure, differences in teacher abilities, and time constraints in developing teaching modules.

The consistency of findings across data sources indicates that these barriers are structural in nature and require sustained policy intervention.

g. Implications for Education Quality

The triangulation results show that the implementation of Merdeka Belajar has had an impact on improving the quality of learning, as indicated by increased student participation, creativity, and confidence in learning. Observations show a more lively classroom atmosphere, while interviews with teachers and principals confirm changes in student learning behavior.

P5 product documentation and learning reports serve as concrete evidence that the Merdeka Belajar policy contributes to the achievement of quality education.

h. Synthesis of Discussion

Overall, the integration of triangulated data shows that teachers' perceptions of the Merdeka Belajar policy are in line with its implementation in the field and supported by documentary evidence. The consistency between data sources reinforces the validity of the findings that the Merdeka Belajar policy plays a significant role in improving teacher professionalism and learning quality, with school principals as strategic actors in driving change.

### 3. Conceptual Model of Research Results

#### a. Conceptual Model Chart (Narrative Version - Schematic)

The conceptual model of the research results can be explained in the following chart:

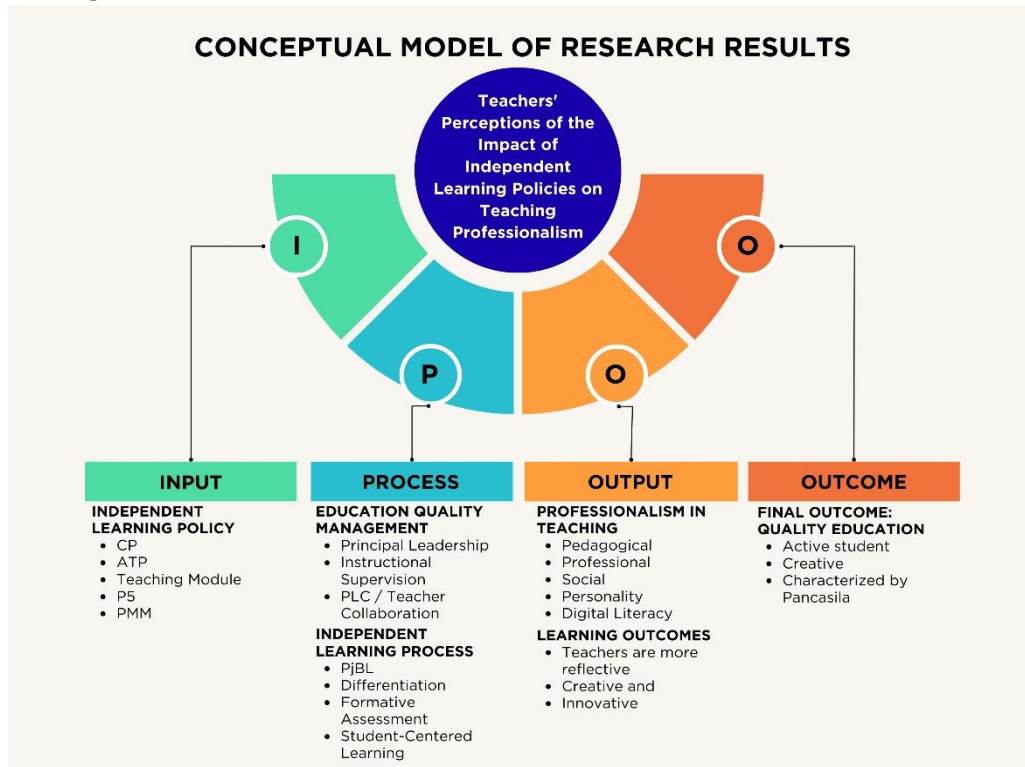


Figure 1 - Conceptual Model Chart of Research Results

#### b. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors (Contextual Variables)

These environmental factors influence all stages, from policy implementation to the achievement of quality educational outcomes.

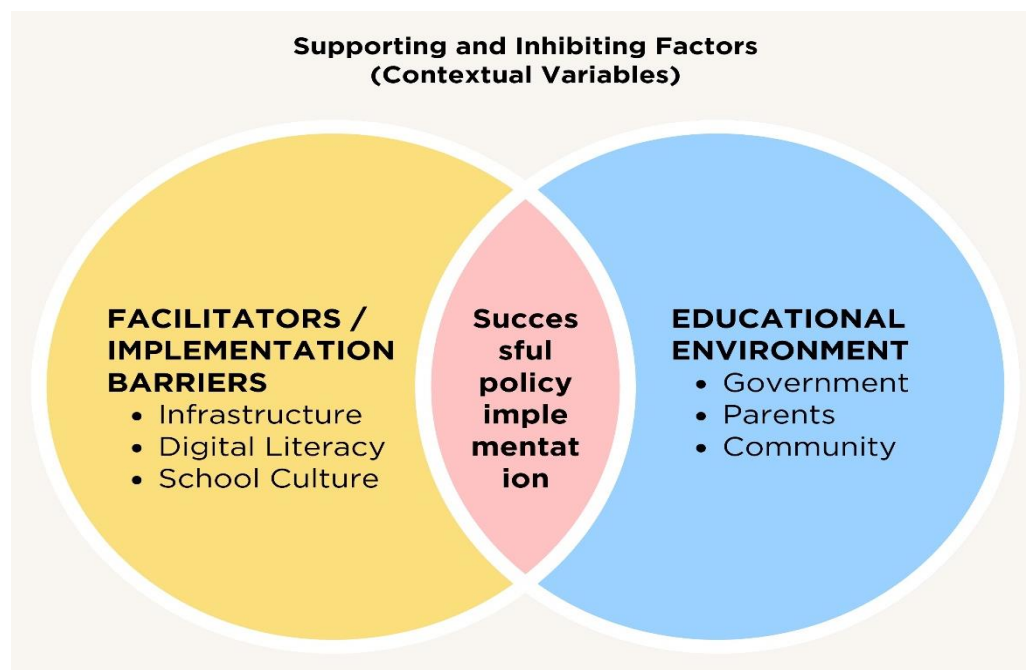


Figure 2 - Chart of Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

This conceptual model shows that the Independent Learning Policy is a key input in the education system. The policy does not have a direct impact, but is mediated by Education Quality Management, particularly through school leadership, learning supervision, and a culture of teacher collaboration.

This process then influenced classroom learning practices, which were characterized by the implementation of project-based learning, differentiation, and formative assessment. Quality learning processes encouraged improvements in teachers' professionalism in pedagogical, professional, social, and personal aspects, including digital literacy skills.

Improved teacher professionalism results in learning outcomes in the form of more reflective, creative, and innovative teaching practices. These outcomes ultimately lead to quality education outcomes, namely students who are active, creative, and possess the character traits of Pancasila students.

This model also emphasizes that the educational environment acts as both a supporting and inhibiting factor that influences the successful implementation of policies at every stage.

## CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Merdeka Belajar policy has had a positive impact on improving teachers' professionalism, both in terms of pedagogy, lesson planning, assessment, and reflective skills. This process of change is gradual and is greatly influenced by the support of school leadership, the availability of resources, and a culture of collaboration among teachers. In general, Merdeka

Belajar encourages the creation of learning that is more flexible, contextual, creative, and student-centered.

Teachers understand Merdeka Belajar as a policy that provides autonomy, creativity, and flexibility in learning. The majority of teachers believe that this policy brings positive changes, despite technical challenges and the need for adaptation. Teachers have begun to implement various approaches such as Project Based Learning, Discovery Learning, differentiation, and formative assessment. Learning has become more active, involving students in real learning experiences and fostering creativity.

Teachers' professionalism has improved in several aspects: a) Pedagogical Competence: Teachers are better able to design learning according to student needs. b) Professional Competence: Teachers are becoming more proficient in developing ATP and Teaching Modules. c) Social and Personal Competence: Teachers are more communicative, reflective, and open to collaboration. d) Digital Skills: Teachers have improved in their use of the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM) and supporting technologies.

School principals play an important role as leaders, mentors, and facilitators who ensure the effective implementation of Merdeka Belajar. Instructional supervision, teacher mentoring, and strengthening a collaborative culture have proven to have a significant impact on improving the quality of learning.

The implementation of Merdeka Belajar has had a tangible impact on improving the quality of learning, as seen in student activity, creativity, presentation skills, and student involvement in projects. The classroom environment has become more dynamic and oriented towards individual learning needs.

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