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Bridging Structure and Agency: The Merdeka Curriculum in Madrasahs through the Lens of Anthony Giddens' Structuration Theory

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Abstract

Behind the formal curriculum design documents, often appearing as top-down blueprints, lies a dynamic interplay between teachers and students within the classroom. This is particularly evident in madrasahs, where religious values are intricately embedded in pedagogical practice. This study explores how the Merdeka Curriculum, emphasizing flexibility and character development, is not merely implemented but is interpreted and negotiated by educational agents: teachers and students. Drawing on Anthony Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration, the curriculum is approached not solely as a constraining structure but also as an enabling arena. Using a descriptive qualitative methodology and a literature-based analysis of contemporary studies within madrasah contexts, the research finds that teachers function as implementers and active interpreters of curricular content, reshaping prevailing pedagogical norms. Within the structuration framework, the curriculum assumes the role of a structure of signification providing symbolic meaning in the learning process; a structure of domination positioning teachers as holders of authority and resources; and a structure of legitimation manifesting agreed-upon rules and expectations. Curriculum implementation, therefore, is not a mere administrative task but a recurring social practice deeply entangled with local contexts. In madrasahs, such contexts encompass Islamic values, communal culture, and aspirations for nurturing individuals of strong character. These findings underscore that meaningful educational transformation must be grounded in the dynamic interplay between structure and agency, where teachers and students play a pivotal role in transforming curriculum into a lived, value-laden experience.

Keywords: *Merdeka Curriculum*, Madrasah, Teacher as Agent, Learning Practices, Structuration Theory, Anthony Giddens

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's educational landscape is undergoing a significant transformation with the introduction of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. This curriculum brings forth a vision of pedagogical flexibility, differentiated learning, and character-strengthening projects, marking a new direction that promises greater pedagogical autonomy for teachers and more personalized learning experiences for students. Yet, like all reforms attempting to reach a system's roots, this idealism does not always take uniform shape in practice. Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum proves to be anything but straightforward in

madrasahs where education is interwoven with religious values, local traditions, and often limited resources.

One of the key determinants of a madrasah's success in cultivating national character is its curriculum development. As Abdul Wahab describes, the curriculum is the "heart" of an educational institution (Khoiriyah, 2019). Muhaimin further argues that it serves as a translation of societal ideals, communal aspirations, and the demands of the times. In the context of madrasahs, the curriculum is not merely a technical instrument but a vital mechanism for transforming values into behavior and religious teachings into lived practice. The curriculum thus becomes the central axis guiding the direction of education (Ummah, 2019). Designing a curriculum that meets students' needs and affirms Islamic education's goals is therefore not optional it is imperative.

The COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of complexity to this challenge. For over two years, the teaching and learning process experienced significant disruption. Inequitable access to education, the varied quality of remote instruction, and the lack of face-to-face interaction led to learning loss, particularly in primary school students' literacy and numeracy skills. Data show that first-grade students lost the equivalent of six months of learning in literacy and five months in numeracy. This situation highlighted an urgent need to reposition educational approaches in the post-pandemic era. As a response, the government introduced the *Merdeka Curriculum*, not merely as a recovery tool for lost achievements, but as a philosophical recalibration of education to make it more adaptive and learner-centered.

Launched by Minister of Education Nadiem Makarim in 2019, piloted in 2020, and gradually implemented nationwide from 2022, the curriculum was founded on a simple yet ambitious objective: to grant educators and schools greater freedom in tailoring pedagogical methods to the unique characteristics and potential of their students. Four significant policy changes were introduced: the replacement of the National Standardized School Exam (USBN) with competency assessments; the discontinuation of the National Examination (UN) in favor of minimum assessments and character surveys; the simplification of lesson plans (RPP); and adjustments to the student placement (PPDB) zoning regulations to ensure greater inclusivity (Vhalery et al., 2022). These policies aim to transfer greater authority and trust to educational practitioners. However, such flexibility also comes with prerequisites: teachers must be capable of interpretation, innovation, and adaptation.

Unfortunately, not all madrasahs are equally prepared to meet these demands. In many settings, the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* faces tangible obstacles. Teachers' limited understanding of the curriculum's underlying philosophy, the lack of in-depth training, and the persistent dominance of administrative approaches all pose serious challenges (Priyadi et al., 2024). Additionally, infrastructural limitations, inadequate managerial support, and diverse sociocultural backgrounds further complicate its application. Rather than being liberating, the intended flexibility may become burdensome for educators who are not yet accustomed to initiating and navigating their own pedagogical spaces.

This is where Anthony Giddens' (1984) structuration theory offers a valuable analytical lens to examine the dynamics of curriculum as social practice. Giddens posits that structure and agency are not oppositional but mutually constitutive. Curriculum, as a structure, does not merely constrain actions it also provides resources and possibilities for action. Conversely, agents, teachers, and students are not passive recipients but active interpreters, who reproduce and transform structure through recurring social practices.

Within this framework, implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* in madrasahs is not simply a matter of policy compliance, but rather a question of how the curriculum is interpreted and enacted within specific social spaces.

With its distinctive values, beliefs, and social relations, the madrasah classroom becomes the arena where structure and agency are deeply entangled. Here, the teacher is not just a conveyor of content but a manager of meaning; students are not mere recipients of instruction but active participants in shaping the learning process. The curriculum serves a triadic function: as a structure of signification (defining meaning), domination (organizing authority), and legitimation (reinforcing norms). Therefore, implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* should be viewed as a living process, not administrative, but dialogical.

Based on this background, the present study seeks to analyze the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* as a structure that not only shapes but is also shaped by agentive interaction within madrasah learning practices. This library-based study employs a descriptive approach, using Anthony Giddens' (1984) *structuration theory* as its primary analytical framework. Through this lens, the study aims to reveal that behind the ostensibly uniform face of national education policy lies a diversity of local practices emerging from the ways educational actors understand, interpret, and animate the curriculum within their daily realities. Accordingly, this study offers an entry point for understanding the dialectical relationship between curriculum design as structure and the praxis of Islamic education in the madrasah classroom as a meaningful social arena.

ANTHONY GIDDENS AND THE THEORY OF STRUCTURATION

At a particular juncture in the history of social thought when the dichotomy between structure and agency reached a theoretical impasse, Anthony Giddens emerged as a voice of the era. Born in London on January 18, 1938, Giddens was shaped by the intellectual dynamism of his birthplace, growing up with an almost obsessive passion for ideas. He pursued sociology at the University of Hull, the London School of Economics, and Cambridge institutions that served as centers of learning and vibrant laboratories of thought.

Across his body of work, we encounter a sustained tension between two poles: the coercive force of structure and the resistant potential of individual agency. Giddens observed how Durkheim and Parsons had privileged social structures as autonomous entities, while Weber emphasized subjectivity and personal meaning-making. With his *structuration theory*, Giddens did not side with one camp over the other. Instead, he forged a living dialectic between them, arguing that structure and agency are not mutually exclusive domains but two interrelated dimensions of the same social process.

As Beilharz (1991) notes, throughout more than two decades of teaching, Giddens consistently wrote not as a matter of academic routine but as an intellectual project aimed at reconciling critiques of classical theory with the need to explain contemporary realities. *Structuration theory* was not born of impatience with older paradigms, but out of sensitivity to a world changing too rapidly to be understood through outdated frameworks. Giddens rejected monolithic approaches, insisting that reality is fluid and must be approached from multiple perspectives.

In *The Constitution of Society* (1984), Giddens reframed the relationship between individuals and structures. He rejected the notion that structure is a fixed entity governing people from without. On the contrary, structure exists only insofar as it is continually reproduced through agents' actions. Social action is not merely a reaction to structure; it

is the arena in which structure is both sustained and transformed. This dual nature of structure, being both the medium and the outcome of social action, is what Giddens termed the duality of structure (Ahmad, 2020).

Through this framework, Giddens positioned agency not as a victim of structure but as its co-creator. Individuals possess the capacity to act, reflect, and resist. However, their actions are not without constraint; they are shaped by history, prevailing norms, and unequal access to resources. Thus, structure in this theory is not merely a set of limitations but also a field of possibilities.

Rose and Pennings (2022) present a simplified model of structuration interaction that illustrates the reciprocal relationship between agents and structures within organizations. Agents act, and structures respond; structures regulate, and agents interpret. This relationship is not linear but simultaneous. In practice, the two are connected through what Giddens calls *modalities*, the mediating means between structure and agency, which may take the form of language, technologies, or social habits.

Within the three central pillars of the theory modality, agency, and structure Giddens demonstrates how social spaces are shaped by recurrent actions. Human agency is the capacity to choose and reflect, even within limitations. Structure is the ensemble of rules and resources that both constrain and enable action. Modality is the space where these two dimensions meet in interactions that are constantly evolving.

Giddens (as cited in Rose & Pennings, 2022) defined structure in three dimensions: *signification*, referring to meaning and language; *domination*, about control over people and resources; and *legitimation*, involving norms, sanctions, and the justification of actions. These dimensions are not physical entities but systems of meaning that operate through social practices. Structure, therefore, is not a dead architecture it is a living system sustained through human action.

In educational contexts, this theory opens new pathways of understanding. Teaching and learning can be viewed as social practices that are both structured and structuring. A teacher does not simply deliver curriculum; they interpret and reproduce its meaning within the social context of the school. The teacher becomes an agent positioned between normative systems and the concrete needs of the classroom. In this setting, *structuration theory* materializes in action: the curriculum is not merely implemented it is brought to life.

Educational agents are not mere executors. They are actors who, with awareness and reflection, create new norms, revise old values, and shape the direction of learning. In practice, what is often perceived as a fixed curriculum structure is a fluid field of interpretation. Teachers, through the lens of structuration theory, are active interpreters. Meanwhile, students, though situated within certain structural frameworks, possess agentive potential to derive their own meanings from what they learn.

Structure in education, as Giddens understands it, is not limited to curriculum documents or administrative regulations. It also includes the grammar of interaction, the patterns of authority in classrooms, and the norms that define what can and cannot be discussed. These structures manifest through symbols (*signification*), power (*domination*), and norms (*legitimation*), all of which live through the daily practices of education.

Giddens' structuration theory becomes even more pertinent when technology enters the educational sphere. Spreadsheets, digital learning platforms, and algorithm-based assessments become part of the modalities bridging agent and structure. Technology is not merely a tool but a new structure that reshapes our actions. It is not neutral; it embeds structure within itself, influencing interaction and shaping thought patterns. This is what Giddens refers to as *time-space distanciation*: the ability of technology to transcend geographical and temporal boundaries.

Gradually, interaction with such technologies becomes habitual, forming structures that are reproduced unconsciously. In technology-driven educational systems, it is not enough to understand technical functionality; one must also grasp the structural implications. The relationships between teacher, student, and knowledge are reconfigured in digital spaces. *Structuration theory* offers a clear framework for understanding these dynamics.

Agency and structure cannot be separated. Like two sides of the same coin, they depend on each other to generate meaning. In education, this relationship is evident: teachers create structure through pedagogical practice, while structures, whether curricular, regulatory, or technological, influence how teachers think and act. This relationship is not antagonistic, but symbiotic.

Giddens provides us not with final answers, but with a framework. He offers not a closed system, but a way of seeing. In a world of constant change, precisely such theories prove most relevant, those that acknowledge limitations, yet also embrace possibilities.

THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM AS A STRUCTURE OF SIGNIFICATION: SYMBOLIZATION AND MEANING-MAKING IN MADRASAH LEARNING PRACTICES

In the quiet corners of a classroom, sometimes the only sound is the chalk on the blackboard; sometimes, the teacher's gaze communicates that the lesson is more than just the transmission of curriculum content. This is where structure comes to life, not merely as a set of articles and chapters, but as a symbolic world, a language understood and internalized through the social movement called education. Anthony Giddens refers to this as *signification*, a dimension of structure that does not exist as a rigid framework but as a system of meaning, a set of symbols activated through action.

Within the framework of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), structure is not an external entity that imposes itself from a distance. Rather, it is a pattern continually reconstituted by agents who teach, converse, and cultivate values in madrasah learning spaces. Thus, when the *Merdeka Curriculum* was introduced, it did not merely serve as an administrative apparatus. It became a new symbol. It brought a new language. It offered a renewed meaning of what learning entails in the 21st century.

Implemented gradually since 2022, the *Merdeka Curriculum* is more than a policy; it is a narrative. And every narrative needs a storyteller. Here, madrasah teachers assume the role of agents not merely as executors of instructions, but as interpreters of symbols. They do not simply read the curriculum document; they translate it into practice, into a language that resonates with students. For example, the initiative known as the *Project for Strengthening the Profile of Pancasila Students* is not just jargon. It is actualized into tangible actions: collaborative projects, classroom discussions, and values lived out in students' daily experiences.

In this context, the classroom becomes a symbolic arena. Teaching activities no longer revolve solely around subject delivery, but around value cultivation, character formation, and identity sharpening. The curriculum functions as a medium; the teacher becomes a symbolizing agent. Education thus evolves from knowledge transmission to a social practice of meaning-making.

One of the most concrete representations of the signification dimension within the *Merdeka Curriculum* is the *Profile of Pancasila Students* an idealized vision of Indonesia's future citizen: intelligent, virtuous, critical, creative, and globally aware. The six dimensions articulated in the Regulation of the Educational Standards, Curriculum, and Assessment Agency No. 009/H/KR/2022 are not mere indicators. They embody the values the curriculum seeks to instill as a symbolic structure from faith and piety, appreciation of diversity, cooperation, independence, critical thinking, to creativity. These serve as a map of values enacted by teachers and students on the ground.

Each of these elements constitutes a form of social language. When teachers design collaborative projects to foster *gotong royong* (cooperation), they reproduce structure. When students are invited to reflect on their actions through project-based learning, they participate in symbolic practices that enrich their social awareness. Thus, the gap between structure and agency collapses. What emerges is a dynamic interplay, where meaning is continuously created and affirmed through practice.

Giddens reminds us: structure holds no power unless it is reproduced. In other words, without the social actions of agents, the curriculum remains a lifeless document. Yet in madrasahs, it comes alive through the teacher's voice, through student interaction, through reflective spaces opened daily. Teachers become the bridge between text and meaning; between state policy and lived experience.

Symbolization in madrasahs, therefore, does not take place in a vacuum. It develops within social relations, religious value systems, and specific local contexts. Concepts such as *faith and piety*, for instance, are not confined to doctrinal interpretation; they are constructed as ethical systems in social action: how one treats others, manages emotions, and exercises self-restraint in digital spaces.

The *Merdeka Curriculum* becomes a living structure because it remains open to interpretation. And teachers as agents in structuration theory play a pivotal role in making that interpretation socially meaningful. In their hands, the curriculum is not imposed from above, but shaped from below through daily interactions between students, values, and contemporary challenges.

Ultimately, the relationship between the *Merdeka Curriculum* and madrasah's educational practice is not unidirectional. It is a dialogue a sustained conversation between structure and agency, between symbol and action, between official documents and lived experience. It is here that Giddens' theory finds its vitality: structure and agency are not only interrelated they are co-constitutive, in a duality that remains continuously alive.

Thus, the *Merdeka Curriculum* is not merely a new educational system. It is an evolving landscape of meaning shaped and reshaped by teachers, students, and learning practices that increasingly recognize that education is not just about cognitive content, but also about values and life itself. And in madrasah classrooms across Indonesia, we are witnessing this structure take root not as a burden, but as a possibility.

THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM AS A STRUCTURE OF DOMINATION: MADRASAH TEACHERS' AUTHORITY AND EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Power in education often manifests in silence. It does not always emerge as a direct command, but rather as a form of authority that subtly shapes the direction of learning. In Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (1984), *domination* is not merely control over others, but the capacity to manage resources, both authoritative (human) and allocative (material). In the context of madrasahs, this form of domination is embodied gently

through teachers' actions through their choice of methods, the development of teaching modules, and the interpretation of curricular symbols.

Initially perceived as a top-down policy, the *Merdeka Curriculum* in fact grants substantial autonomy to grassroots agents, madrasah teachers. It is here that domination assumes its most productive form. Teachers are not merely executors of directives; they are decision-makers. They are empowered to design their own teaching modules, adopt context-based pedagogical approaches, and craft learning interactions tailored to students' needs. Their authority does not derive from position, but from interpretative responsibility, the ability to transform policy into meaningful social practice within the classroom.

This teacher's authority extends beyond social interaction into the domain of educational resources. The government provides various instructional tools: textbooks, teaching modules, project frameworks for the *Pancasila Student Profile*, school-level operational curricula, and audiovisual media. Yet, these tools are not delivered as rigid directives. They are raw materials awaiting interpretation, modification, even reinvention. This is where allocative domination operates: teachers act not as passive users but as resource managers. They select, adapt, and reconfigure content based on local needs and realities.

At a symbolic level, teacher domination penetrates even deeper. The *Pancasila Student Profile* project modules, for instance, are not mere activity guides; they are value-laden initiatives aimed at shaping student character according to the core principles of Pancasila: mutual cooperation, integrity, creativity, diversity, and spirituality. Teachers leading these projects do more than facilitate activities; they mediate meaning. They translate ideological objectives into practical actions, bridging the gap between symbol and enactment.

The textbooks used in the *Merdeka Curriculum* also reflect a subtle power dynamic. Student books function as primary texts, while teacher guides carry implicit instructions, strategies for delivery, assessment approaches, and character reinforcement. In specific subjects, such as Pancasila Education, Physical Education (PJOK), and the Arts, only teacher manuals are provided, as if the system asserts: the teacher determines meaning, not the text. The teacher is the central figure who animates content, contextualizes knowledge, and orchestrates learning interactions. This authority is not bestowed from above, it stems from the system's trust in the teacher's capacity.

By mastering these instructional tools, madrasah teachers exercise a dual mode of domination: as social controllers (authoritative) and as resource managers (allocative). In the classroom, they do more than teach; they orchestrate the rhythm of interaction. They set the tempo, direct discussions, and shape the value landscape. Beyond the classroom, they design learning plans, curate resources, and interpret policy within concrete local contexts.

Giddens maintains that structure is not external to human action; it does not exist outside of practice. On the contrary, structure is sustained, modified, and reproduced through the agency of individuals. Thus, when madrasah teachers implement the *Merdeka Curriculum*, they are actively reproducing a new form of domination, one that liberates rather than oppresses and creates space rather than imposes control.

The *Merdeka Curriculum*, therefore, is not merely a reform of educational documents; it is a reconstruction of roles. Teachers are no longer positioned as mere extensions of state policy, but as central agents of transformation. In Giddens' terms,

domination is not something to be avoided, but something to be directed so long as it is exercised with awareness and responsibility.

In madrasah classrooms, the structure of domination is not experienced as a repressive force, but as a growing responsibility. As dominant agents, teachers are not engaged in controlling students; they are shaping the symbolic world these students will inhabit. In the end, education is not about who holds power, but about who can give meaning to the power they have.

THE MERDEKA BELAJAR CURRICULUM AS A STRUCTURE OF LEGITIMACY: RULES, NORMS, AND JUSTIFICATION OF MADRASAH TEACHERS' ACTIONS

In the madrasah classroom, what determines the quality of education is often not just *what* is taught, but *why* and *how*. This is where the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum operates as a structure of legitimacy, not as a coercive system, but as one that provides moral, epistemic, and normative grounding for every teacher's action. Anthony Giddens refers to this as a normative scheme, a set of rules that regulate behavior and justify actions within a social context.

The *Merdeka* Curriculum offers both ethical and operational frameworks for madrasah teachers to act with legitimate authority. Teachers now have the freedom to choose contextually appropriate pedagogical approaches, implement adaptive formative assessments, and conduct differentiated instruction. However, this freedom is not unbounded. It is anchored in a set of new norms that are more reflective, more respectful of teacher autonomy, and more aligned with a humanistic vision of the learning process. Teachers are not mere implementers; they embody and live the curriculum.

The philosophy of *Merdeka Belajar* rests on a fundamental premise: trust. It assumes that teachers, as the primary agents of transformation, can act in transformative ways only when granted intellectual freedom. Innovation cannot emerge from constraint. Thus, this curriculum is not built on control, but on autonomy coupled with responsibility. Its principles, *Humanizing relationships*, *Understanding concepts*, *Building sustainability*, *Choosing challenges*, and *Empowering contextual learning* (5M) are not just slogans. They are practical norms that serve as ethical guidelines and frameworks of legitimacy for teachers' pedagogical actions.

From these principles arise tangible practices. One of the most prominent manifestations is project-based learning, which is no longer an optional method but an integral component of the *Merdeka* Curriculum's architecture. In this model, students are not merely completing tasks; they are constructing meaning. They learn how to think, not merely what to remember. Teachers facilitate rather than dictate. In this pedagogical dynamic, the legitimacy of the curriculum is not merely written in policy documents; it permeates consciousness, materializes in action, and is continuously reproduced in the social practice of teaching and learning.

THE DUALITY OF STRUCTURE: MADRASAH TEACHERS AS REFLECTIVE AGENTS IN CURRICULUM REPRODUCTION

Giddens' structuration theory challenges the traditional dichotomy between structure and agency. Human beings are not mere products of structure, and structures do not exist beyond the reach of human action. Instead, both are co-constitutive, forming what Giddens describes as the *duality of structure*. Within the madrasah, this duality is

embodied in the teacher figure: they are not only policy implementers but also meaning-makers. They adjust, interpret, and even reconfigure the curriculum according to the social rhythms of their classrooms.

Rules constrain every teacher's action, yet resources lie within those rules. Every limitation within this framework also presents an opportunity. Thus, when a teacher adopts a pedagogical method rooted in local wisdom, creates their own digital learning media, or initiates collaborative learning projects connected to students' everyday lives, these are not acts of defiance but expressions of agency. The teacher is responding to the structure, not resisting it, but renewing it from within.

This reflective process does not emerge spontaneously. It is cultivated through professional development, mentoring, and structural support. Contemporary teacher training for madrasahs no longer focuses solely on instructional technique. It now includes the development of soft skills, strengthening communication, fostering emotional intelligence, and nurturing critical and collaborative thinking, all core competencies of 21st-century learning and the philosophical heart of *Merdeka Belajar*. When online training reaches teachers in remote areas, what occurs is far more than the transfer of knowledge: it enables the circulation of best practices, the exchange of pedagogical reflections, and the reinforcement of a collective learning ecosystem.

Through these reflective actions, what initially appears to be a rigid and formal curriculum structure becomes fluid, adaptive, and even humane. Curriculum reproduction does not occur on paper but within classrooms through conversation, method selection, and teachers' responses to failure and success. The structure is not a fixed framework; it is a living system sustained by agents who are conscious of their roles.

Ultimately, the *Merdeka* Curriculum is not merely a technical reform. It is a newly legitimized space where teachers are no longer positioned as executors of state policy, but as dynamic subjects who drive transformation. In madrasahs, this agency is not exercised in isolation. It operates within a structure animated by conviction: that change is not only possible, it has already begun in small classrooms, in quiet dialogues, in repeated but intentional acts.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that the *Merdeka* Curriculum cannot be understood merely as a technical policy ready for implementation. It is not just an administrative document, but a living social structure, dynamic, negotiated, and embodied in the daily practices of teachers and students in madrasahs. The curriculum takes its most concrete form within the classroom, not through official texts, but in how teachers teach, how students respond, and how educational values are renegotiated daily.

In this context, the role of madrasah teachers becomes pivotal. They are not simply enforcers of top-down policies but active agents who reproduce and, in many cases, reinterpret the direction of educational reform. This role demands competencies that go far beyond technical or methodological expertise. It requires reflective sensitivity to social context, understanding of student characteristics, and navigating the ever-shifting dynamics of learning environments.

Based on these findings, implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum in madrasahs should not be limited to technical training. What is more urgently needed is the cultivation of reflective dimensions within teachers themselves, especially through pedagogical dialogue. Madrasah teachers must be provided with spaces to engage in discussion, reflection, and contextualization of curriculum principles in light of their everyday

realities. In this regard, experience-based approaches and critical dialogue among teachers are more relevant than top-down instructional models.

Theoretically, Anthony Giddens' structuration framework (1984) has proven to offer a sharp analytical lens. Through this lens, educational policy is seen not as something merely handed down from above, but as something dynamically reproduced through everyday classroom practice. In other words, the *Merdeka* Curriculum is not solely determined by the state it is reinterpreted and reshaped by teachers, students, and the classroom context itself.

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