



Kurikulum Merdeka: Solution or causation of students' lack of soft skills?

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ABSTRACT

Kurikulum Merdeka is a curriculum concept that allows teachers and students to choose and develop learning content according to their respective needs and conditions. This study aims to critically analyze the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka, with a focus on the impact on students' soft skills development. Unlike previous studies that mainly evaluate academic effectiveness, this research examines how well Kurikulum Merdeka succeeds or fails in fostering essential soft skills among students. The method used is a literature study, which involves an in-depth analysis of various relevant written sources. The results show that Kurikulum Merdeka provides mixed results in developing students' soft skills. Although there is an improvement in students' communication skills, the results are still below the expected target. In addition, students' empathy skills did not improve as expected, highlighting significant challenges in instilling empathy through this curriculum. The main barriers identified include a lack of training and support for teachers, limitations in teaching methods, and a lack of support from the home environment and parental involvement. Several strategies need to be implemented to improve the effectiveness of Kurikulum Merdeka. These strategies include improving teacher training, diversifying teaching methods, and increasing parental involvement in education.

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ABSTRAK

Kurikulum Merdeka adalah konsep kurikulum yang memberikan kebebasan kepada guru dan peserta didik untuk memilih dan mengembangkan konten pembelajaran sesuai dengan kebutuhan dan kondisi masing-masing. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis secara kritis implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka, dengan fokusnya pada dampak terhadap pengembangan softskill peserta didik. Tidak seperti penelitian sebelumnya yang terutama mengevaluasi efektivitas akademik, penelitian ini meneliti seberapa baik Kurikulum Merdeka berhasil atau gagal dalam membina softskill yang penting di kalangan peserta didik. Metode yang digunakan adalah studi literatur, yang melibatkan analisis mendalam dari berbagai sumber tertulis yang relevan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Kurikulum Merdeka memberikan hasil yang beragam dalam mengembangkan softskill peserta didik. Meskipun terdapat peningkatan kemampuan komunikasi peserta didik, hasil yang ada masih di bawah target yang diharapkan. Selain itu, kemampuan empati peserta didik tidak meningkat seperti yang diharapkan, sehingga menyoroti tantangan yang signifikan dalam menanamkan empati melalui kurikulum ini. Hambatan utama yang teridentifikasi termasuk kurangnya pelatihan dan dukungan untuk guru, keterbatasan dalam metode pengajaran, dan kurangnya dukungan dari lingkungan rumah dan keterlibatan orang tua. Untuk meningkatkan efektivitas Kurikulum Merdeka, beberapa strategi perlu diterapkan. Strategi ini meliputi peningkatan pelatihan bagi guru, diversifikasi metode pengajaran, dan peningkatan keterlibatan orang tua dalam proses pendidikan.

Kata Kunci: implementasi kurikulum; kurikulum merdeka; softskill peserta didik

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INTRODUCTION

The development of education in Indonesia is seen through various curriculum changes that have been made to adapt to the dynamics of the times and the needs of society. One of the latest innovations is the introduction of the Kurikulum Merdeka by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Djusaar et al., 2023). This curriculum is designed to provide greater flexibility for students and teachers in the teaching-learning process to adapt teaching methods to individual needs and local contexts. Kurikulum Merdeka also emphasizes character development and 21st-century skills, such as critical, creative, collaborative, and communicative thinking skills. In addition, this curriculum aims to hone soft skills essential for future life and careers (Lubis et al., 2023). The introduction of the Kurikulum Merdeka was driven by concerns over the low quality of education in Indonesia and the inability of the previous curriculum to meet the evolving needs of the job market. Although students are academically proficient, they often lack soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, which are needed in the world of work (Ellah & Azmi, 2023). Therefore, the Kurikulum Merdeka is designed to produce graduates who excel academically and have the skills needed to adapt and succeed in a dynamic work environment. Thus, the hope for the Kurikulum Merdeka is to prepare Indonesia's young generation to be better prepared to face global challenges and contribute positively to society.

The success of the curriculum is greatly determined by teacher readiness and adequate educational infrastructure (Barry, 2019). This statement is further supported by several studies regarding the main obstacles in curriculum implementation, which often stem from teacher training and inadequate educational facilities (Ningrum & Sofwan, 2023; Ramadhani & Hindun, 2023). This shows that the goals of the new curriculum are challenging to achieve optimally without adequate support, both in terms of teacher competence and infrastructure. In this context, the Kurikulum Merdeka is expected to address some of these issues by providing more freedom to schools and teachers to adapt teaching methods to students' needs (Manullang & Marpaung, 2024). With this freedom, schools and teachers are expected to be more flexible in developing teaching methods that suit the conditions and characteristics of their students. This expectation is based on the assumption that autonomy in managing the teaching and learning process can help overcome existing limitations and maximize the potential of each student according to their abilities and interests (Mytsyk & Bohdanova, 2022).

Integration of soft skills into the formal curriculum, which is an essential aspect that various parties should consider, shows that a curriculum that successfully integrates soft skills education not only enhances non-academic abilities but also has a positive impact on student's academic achievements (Feraco et al., 2023; González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022; Paus et al., 2022). With proper integration, students become better at communicating, collaborating, and thinking critically, where all components contribute to each other to produce more comprehensive learning outcomes. Kurikulum Merdeka, in facing criticism regarding its effectiveness in developing students' soft skills during its implementation, states that the freedom given by this curriculum can lead to inconsistency in the teaching and assessment of soft skills (Dwipratama, 2023; Hadiono, 2021). They argue that teachers may struggle to integrate soft skills education into daily lessons without clear guidelines and adequate training. This can result in variations in the quality of education students receive, depending on each teacher's interpretation and ability to implement the curriculum.

The doubts raise questions about whether the Kurikulum Merdeka truly serves as a solution or merely adds challenges in developing students' soft skills. Without a structured approach and adequate support for teachers, there is a risk that the goal of developing students' non-academic abilities will not be evenly achieved. Therefore, further evaluation and refinement of the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka are necessary to ensure that all students receive equal benefits in developing soft skills. This research aims to critically analyze the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka, with a particular focus on its impact on the development of students' soft skills. This research aims to address the gap in existing research, which

essentially evaluates the effectiveness of the curriculum in academic terms, by exploring the extent to which the Kurikulum Merdeka succeeds or fails in developing essential soft skills among students. Through in-depth examination, this research seeks to determine whether the Kurikulum Merdeka serves as a solution or a contributing factor to students' lack of soft skills. This article raises the issue of the effectiveness of Kurikulum Merdeka in developing students' soft skills, such as communication, cooperation, and problem-solving, which are needed in the world of work. However, there are concerns that suboptimal implementation may reduce the quality of these skills. This research hypothesis states that Kurikulum Merdeka has significant potential to improve students' soft skills development. However, this potential may not be fully realized without adequate training and guidance for teachers, who play an essential role in implementing this curriculum.

To test this hypothesis, this study uses the literature review method to collect and analyze various relevant sources regarding the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka and its impact on students' soft skills development. Through this review, researchers can identify the weaknesses and strengths of the curriculum and provide recommendations for improvement. This article enriches the academic literature on curriculum and soft skills development and provides practical implications for education in Indonesia. Policymakers and educators can use this research to improve the effectiveness of soft skills teaching so that students excel academically and have good interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities. Doing so is expected to help optimize the Kurikulum Merdeka to better prepare students for future challenges, highlighting the importance of soft skills as a critical component in education that improves student competitiveness and readiness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kurikulum Merdeka

The curriculum stipulated in the Undang-Undang Sistem Pendidikan Nasional Nomor 20 Tahun 2003 includes objectives, content, learning materials, and methods that guide the preparation of the curriculum and syllabus. Currently, the Kurikulum Merdeka is the main focus of Indonesian education. This curriculum, designed by the Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, aims to improve the national curriculum to create a sovereign, independent, personality-driven, and advanced Indonesia and to produce Pancasila students who are critical, creative, independent, and have a global outlook (Sarmini et al., 2023). The Kurikulum Merdeka is also a development of the previous curriculum to overcome the learning crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Nugraha, 2022). Schools can choose to implement Kurikulum Merdeka or continue with Kurikulum 2013 or the Kurikulum Darurat until 2024, with 142,000 schools ready to implement it by 2022 (Tsuraya et al., 2022). Implementing this curriculum will significantly impact teachers and school staff, involving changes in administration, learning strategies, teaching methods, and assessment (Novelita & Darmansyah, 2022). The Kurikulum Merdeka aims to improve the quality of education through character education, creativity, innovation, and 21st-century skills (Anggreni, 2020; Indarta et al., 2022; Zumrotun et al., 2024).

Based on information from Kementerian Pendidikan, Budaya, Riset, dan Teknologi (Kemendikbudristek), the need for Kurikulum Merdeka arises from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which reveals that around 70% of 15-year-old students have abilities below the minimum standard in reading comprehension and application of basic math concepts. These PISA scores have shown no significant improvement over the past 10 to 15 years. In other words, the impact of COVID-19 on education in Indonesia is so significant that it causes many students to experience learning loss (learning loss), as shown in **Figure 1**. Therefore, the government developed a Kurikulum Darurat, which was formed to balance and correct the learning loss experienced by students.



Figure 1. Learning Loss

Source: Kemendikbudristek (see: <https://www.kemdikbud.go.id>)

This Kurikulum Darurat curriculum simplifies the Kurikulum 2013 from 2020 until the end of 2021. Minister of Education and Culture Nadiem Anwar Makarim revealed that under certain conditions, education units are given the flexibility to determine the Kurikulum Darurat that best suits student learning needs. Since 2022, Kurikulum Merdeka has been implemented, emphasizing the flexibility of learning and student character based on the Pancasila profile. In general, the Kurikulum Merdeka brings quite fundamental changes from the Kurikulum 2013, focusing on character development, more active and student-centered learning, and readiness to face the challenges of the 21st century.

Specifically, the difference between Kurikulum 2013 and Kurikulum Merdeka can be seen in the learning structure, which is more flexible in the former. The learning model in Kurikulum Merdeka is more student-centered, requires students to be more active, and emphasizes the development of 21st-century skills. According to kemendikbudristek.com, the following table shows the similarities and differences between Curriculum 2013, Kurikulum Darurat, and Kurikulum Merdeka.

Table 1. Similarities and Differences of the Kurikulum 2013, Kurikulum Darurat and Kurikulum Merdeka

Aspects	Kurikulum 2013	Kurikulum Darurat	Kurikulum Merdeka
Basic Framework	The main foundations are the objectives of Sisdiknas and the national education standards.		
Intended Competency	The government provides Basic Competencies (KD), which are grouped into four Core Competencies (KI): Spiritual attitudes, Social Attitudes, Knowledge, and Skills.	The education unit determines KI and KD	Learning outcomes are organized by phase. Early Childhood: <i>Foundation Phase</i> Elementary/Secondary: <i>Phases A, B, and C</i> Junior high school/equivalent: <i>Phase D</i> High school/equivalent: <i>Phase E and F</i>
	KD is expressed in the form of points and sequenced to achieve KI.	-	Learning outcomes are stated in paragraphs and sequenced to achieve, reinforce, and improve competencies.
Curriculum Structure	Lesson Hours (JP) are set per week Using a subject-based learning organization approach, except for SD/MI, which uses an integrative thematic approach	Each education unit regulates related learning	Learning hours (JP) are set per year Uses a subject-based, thematic, or integrated learning organization approach

Aspects	Kurikulum 2013	Kurikulum Darurat	Kurikulum Merdeka
			Allows for new subjects according to level
Learning	Using a scientific approach Extracurricular (face-to-face) focused learning	-	-
Assessment	Formative and summative assessment Strengthen the implementation of authentic assessment for each subject.	-	-
Teaching Tools by Government	Textbooks and non-textbooks	Education units can adapt textbooks and non-textbooks (optional)	Textbooks and non-textbooks. Example: Teaching modules, ATP, examples of projects strengthening the Pancasila profile, and examples of operational curriculum for education units.
Curriculum Tools	Curriculum implementation guidelines, assessment guidelines, and learning guides for each level	-	Assessment learning guide, school operational curriculum development guide, and project development guide for strengthening the Pancasila learner profile.

Source: Kemendikbudristek (see: <https://www.kemdikbud.go.id>)

Educational goals are reflected and defined in the curriculum. The curriculum is a framework or learning process program that helps achieve education)al goals. Therefore, education and curriculum are always interrelated and cannot be separated.

The implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka has a very noble goal, namely improving the quality of education in Indonesia (Ledia & Bustam, 2023). In addition, implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka also aims to foster the character of quality students and 21st-century skills (Cholilah et al., 2023). Thus, the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka is expected to create graduates who can advance Indonesia and be able to compete globally. Then, implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka aims to minimize the tendency of schools and students to focus only on academic values.

With this implementation, students can grow a broader and more diverse potential (Nasution et al., 2023). This is expected to open students' horizons and mindsets and strengthen the nation's character. Implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka is very important to know that student character development can run well. However, based on field observations, the Kurikulum Merdeka implementation has not been fully realized due to various obstacles (Nurcahyono, 2023).

Obstacles in curriculum implementation are essential to consider. The school curriculum greatly influences classroom activities in creating an effective teaching and learning process for students' formation. The curriculum is the core of education. The nation must understand its genuine concept. Moreover, the Kurikulum Merdeka, which is still in the adaptation stage and has only been launched for a few months, requires careful socialization and preparation from curriculum implementers (Nurcahyono, 2023).

Soft Skills

Technological advances, globalization, and changes in socio-economic dynamics provide significant challenges in various fields, including education in the digital era (Sihotang, 2021). Soft skills in education become essential in this context because they are life skills that include character and moral values that will help a person be ready for life, including work (Hardiana et al., 2023). For students, soft skills are beneficial when entering the world of work. This resulted in the emergence of demands on individuals in the world of work, which emphasizes the importance of soft skills (Deryane, 2023). Soft skills are also part of an individual's character to succeed in life (Hamsal et al., 2023). The Kurikulum Merdeka, often also called independent learning in the 21st century, seeks to meet these changing needs by integrating the development of soft skills in the education system.

Soft skills, known as interpersonal or non-technical skills, include various attributes that enable individuals to actively interact with the environment and adapt to the changing times. These abilities include personal qualities such as responsibility, confidence, sociability, self-control, and integrity. In addition, soft skills also include interpersonal skills such as participating in groups, sharing knowledge, leadership, negotiation skills, and working in diversity (Irawan et al., 2023).

Soft skills describe a set of abilities that a person has to overcome problems. Learning soft skills is an essential need because, so far, the learning process has emphasized aspects of complex skills. Soft skills are behavioral competencies or emotional and social intelligence to adjust to work and society (Hamsal et al., 2023). So, in this 21st century, the emphasis on soft skills has developed significantly due to several factors.

Table 2. Factors that Lead to Soft Skills Development

Factors	Detail Factors that Lead to Soft Skills
The Rise of Automation and AI	The rise of automation and artificial intelligence has led to a shift in work. This shift increases the focus on roles that require human-centered skills such as creativity, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking (Hidayatin & Susanti, 2023). The fourth industrial revolution, characterized by artificial intelligence, supercomputers, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, automated cars, and other innovations, is unfolding exponentially and will affect various fields (Adha, 2022).
Global Economy	There is interconnectedness because the global economy has increased the need for individuals to collaborate across cultures and communicate effectively in diverse environments. Because the alignment between the cultural habits of employees and the physical environment of the organization can affect the performance and comfort of other employees. Culture is an internal condition usually based on organizational performance (Sahar & Kurniawan, 2020) because an efficient organizational culture is often considered one of the main factors related to success in an organization. The condition and state of a company's human resources are the keys to individual and teamwork success (Saefudin & Silalah, 2024).
Globalization	Globalization has made the world more interconnected, so intercultural communication skills, cross-country collaboration, and adaptability are essential. Globalization increasingly integrates multiculturalism into daily life, making it essential for education to promote understanding and appreciation of various cultures (Baharudin et al., 2023). Multiculturalism is a concept or approach that recognizes, appreciates, and promotes cultural diversity in society. Multiculturalism involves recognizing the diverse ethnic groups, religions, languages, and cultural traditions within a country or community (Binawan & Najicha, 2023).
Dynamic Changes in the World of Work	Dynamic changes in the world of work, where the world of work is experiencing rapid and dynamic changes. Therefore, critical thinking, creativity, and lifelong learning are crucial. In addition, to face global challenges, improvements are needed in the human development sector, which can be achieved by developing critical thinking skills in students as part of the nation's next generation (Syafitri et al., 2021).

Factors	Detail Factors that Lead to Soft Skills
Increased Collaboration and Teamwork	As many companies now emphasize, increased teamwork and collaboration are critical to achieving goals. Working well in teams, leading groups, and collaborating effectively with others are indispensable.
Paradigm Shift in Education	There is a paradigm shift in education as modern education systems increasingly realize that academic knowledge alone is insufficient to prepare students for future challenges. Education is expected to produce a creative, innovative, and competitive generation (Anwar, 2022). Therefore, there is a shift towards a more holistic education that includes the development of soft skills
Digital Technology	The fourth revolution, driven by digital technology and combining the physical, digital, and biological worlds, has resulted in transformational changes in the business and work environment (Kusuma, 2021). Today's job market demands favor candidates who have not only technical knowledge but also good interpersonal skills, a strong work ethic, and the ability to adapt quickly to change.
Complex Social Challenges	The rise of complex social challenges, such as climate change and social inequality, requires individuals with empathy and leadership skills to drive meaningful change.

Source: Hamsal et al. (2023)

With the demands of the 21st century (see **Table 2**), the Kurikulum Merdeka emphasizes several vital soft skills. These skills are crucial for students to thrive in a rapidly evolving world. They include effective communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities. Additionally, critical thinking and adaptability are prioritized to prepare students for future challenges.

1. Critical and Logical Thinking

Critical thinking skills encourage students to analyze information, evaluate arguments, and make informed decisions. Critical thinking enables students to systematically identify problems and develop innovative solutions (Malanog & Aliazas, 2021). Logical thinking, on the other hand, involves the ability to judge rationally and coherently and consider multiple viewpoints before making a decision. HOTS learning is characterized by the ability to analyze, evaluate, and create logical reasoning, critical consideration, problem-solving, and creative thinking (Machmud et al., 2023). Through developing critical and logical thinking skills, students can be better prepared to face complex challenges in the real world, with the ability to evaluate situations in depth and formulate effective solutions.

2. Communication and Collaboration Skills

Communication is essential because effective communication is required to express ideas clearly, listen actively, and collaborate with groups or other people. The Kurikulum Merdeka focuses on developing verbal and written communication skills and proficiency in using digital communication tools. In addition, the ability to work collaboratively in groups, appreciate diverse perspectives and contribute to a common goal. These are fundamental workplace skills that students will need in the future.

3. Creativity and Innovation

In the Digital 5.0 era, creativity in teaching has become increasingly important (Harianto & Karjadi, 2024). Teachers must integrate information and communication technology with pedagogical skills to create engaging and effective learning experiences (Adisel & Pranansa, 2020). Nurturing creativity and innovation is an integral part of the curriculum, as it empowers students to think outside the box, generate new ideas, and adapt to the ever-evolving demands of the working world.

4. Emotional Intelligence and Adaptability

Understanding and managing emotions and empathizing with others are vital to emotional intelligence. The Kurikulum Merdeka aims to foster students' self-awareness, social skills, and resilience. In addition, given the current changes, adaptability is essential for navigating uncertainty and embracing new

opportunities. Students are encouraged to develop an evolving mindset and the flexibility to adjust to circumstances that will continue to change.

5. Technological Literacy and Literate Communication

Technological literacy helps students to understand and use technology effectively and responsibly. This skill enables students to access and analyze digital information, collaborate online, and utilize technology for more interactive and creative learning. However, literate communication is the ability to convey and understand information effectively through various media, including oral, written, and digital. This skill is essential in education to help students communicate clearly and precisely, understand text and digital content, and actively participate in academic discussions and collaboration.

In addition to the previously mentioned soft skills, other important ones include motivation and self-awareness, which are essential for personal and professional growth. Analytical thinking and complex problem-solving are crucial for navigating and addressing intricate challenges. Leadership, social influence, and professional ethics play a significant role in guiding teams and upholding integrity, while global citizenship and attitudes foster a broader understanding of diverse cultures. Lastly, empathy, active listening, understanding diversity, social responsibility, and accountability are crucial to building inclusive and responsible communities.

Integrating soft skills in a Kurikulum Merdeka has significant implications for the holistic development of students. Moreover, the inclusion of soft skills aligns with the broader goals of education, which go beyond academic knowledge to encompass the development of well-rounded individuals who can make meaningful contributions to society. In addition, it can equip students with the skills to navigate the complexities of the modern world of work and employability. Here are some factors that influence soft skills.

1. **Experience and Environment:** Internal organizational environmental factors include the support provided to employees in the workplace, which significantly impacts their performance. However, the organization's external environmental factors include conditions, events, or situations outside the organizational environment, such as the economic crisis, which can affect the organization's overall operations and strategies. Work experience can also help students hone skills such as time management, leadership, and problem-solving, which are relevant for the future.
2. **Personality and Character:** A study found the influence of personality and individual character on soft skills development. One of the aspects discussed is emotional intelligence, which is a person's ability to understand and manage their and others' emotions (Rachman & Sinthiya, 2022). In addition, motivation and attitude are also essential factors that influence a person's soft skills. Thus, individual personality and character, such as emotional intelligence, motivation, and attitude, play an essential role in developing one's soft skills, according to the journal's contents.
3. **Education and Training:** Research mentioned that specialized training, such as effective communication, leadership, and teamwork, can affect the development of students' soft skills (Susilawati et al., 2021). Extracurricular activities such as participation in student organizations, clubs, or sports can also develop students' soft skills because they are related to their job performance (Lutfia & Rahadi, 2020). Thus, specialized training and extracurricular activities effectively improve students' soft skills.
4. **Culture and Social Values:** Social values can be taught early childhood to improve social skills. In addition, organizational culture can also influence the development of one's soft skills through the values and practices implemented in the work environment (Sanusi & Sari, 2020). Social norms also regulate acceptable behavior and influence how people develop and use their soft skills. Therefore, the culture and social values in various contexts, both in community traditions and work environments, can shape and influence the development of one's soft skills.

METHODS

In this research, the literature review method is used. This literature review involves an in-depth analysis of various written sources, such as scientific journals, books, articles, and other relevant documents related to the Kurikulum Merdeka and the development of students' soft skills. This method aims to understand and evaluate how the Kurikulum Merdeka plays a role in the formation or lack of soft skills in students. By examining various perspectives and findings from previous research, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of the curriculum and its implications for the development of students' non-academic skills.

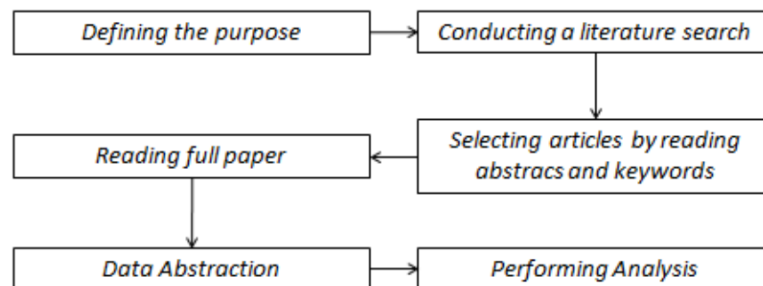


Figure 2. Research's Method
Source: *Aznam et al., 2022*

The explanation of each step in **Figure 2** is as follows.

1. **Defining the purpose:** The first step in exploring the theme "Kurikulum Merdeka: Solution or Causation of Students' Lack of Soft Skills?" is to define the purpose of the study. This involves articulating a clear research objective that seeks to understand whether the Kurikulum Merdeka, implemented to promote educational freedom and flexibility, addresses the issue of students' lack of soft skills or if it inadvertently contributes to the problem. This step sets the research's scope, direction, and significance, establishing a foundation for subsequent investigation and analysis.
2. **Conducting a literature search:** The next step involves conducting a comprehensive literature search to gather existing research and data related to the Kurikulum Merdeka and its impact on students' soft skills. This process includes identifying relevant academic journals, books, conference papers, and other scholarly sources. Using databases such as Google Scholar, Semantics, and educational research repositories, researchers can compile a robust collection of literature that provides insights, theories, and findings pertinent to the study's objective.
3. **Selecting articles by reading abstracts and keywords:** After gathering a broad range of literature, the researcher must select the most relevant articles by reviewing abstracts and keywords. This step involves quickly assessing the relevance and quality of each source to determine if it aligns with the research question. By focusing on abstracts and keywords, researchers can efficiently filter out less pertinent studies and ensure that the selected articles provide valuable insights into the Kurikulum Merdeka's impact on students' soft skills development.
4. **Reading the full paper:** Once the relevant articles were selected, the next step was to read the full paper thoroughly. The researcher conducted a literature review of 72 papers. This review allowed us to understand each study's methodology, results, and discussions and critically evaluate the findings to identify gaps, inconsistencies, or areas for further exploration. This step ensured a comprehensive and rigorous analysis. During the review, researchers highlighted teaching methods in Kurikulum Merdeka, effective strategies in soft skills development, and implementation challenges. This information is used to formulate recommendations to improve the effectiveness of Kurikulum Merdeka in developing students' soft skills.

5. Data abstraction: Data abstraction involves systematically extracting relevant information from the selected full papers. This step includes identifying key themes, findings, and patterns related to Kurikulum Merdeka's impact on students' soft skills. Researchers organize this data in a structured format, often using spreadsheets or qualitative data analysis software. Data abstraction enables a concise and organized research synthesis, facilitating easier comparison and integration of findings from multiple sources.
6. Performing analysis: The final step is analysis, where researchers interpret the abstracted data to draw meaningful conclusions. This involves comparing and contrasting findings from different studies, identifying trends, and assessing the overall impact of the Kurikulum Merdeka on students' soft skills. Analytical methods may include qualitative thematic analysis, meta-analysis, or statistical techniques, depending on the nature of the data. The goal is to provide a clear, evidence-based answer to the research question, determining whether the curriculum serves as a solution to or a cause of students' lack of soft skills.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Kurikulum Merdeka, the latest initiative in education in Indonesia, is designed to provide more freedom and brotherhood to teachers and students in the teaching and learning process. Due to the evolution of Industry 4.0, digital technology significantly impacts global life, including in the world of education. This technological advancement has prompted the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology to issue policies enabling education to optimally utilize technology (Gotama & Artika, 2024).

In this context, there is a growing discussion about the impact of this curriculum on the development of soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, and critical thinking skills, which are increasingly considered necessary in the modern world of work. Some preliminary research and observations show that the Kurikulum Merdeka can potentially improve students' soft skills through a more practical and project-based learning approach. This approach aims to align educational outcomes with the demands of the modern workforce, ensuring students are better prepared for future challenges.

However, there are also concerns that if not accompanied by adequate support and training for teachers, the curriculum could result in a decline in mastery of soft skills. In this discussion, various results and views have emerged regarding the effectiveness of the Kurikulum Merdeka in increasing or decreasing students' soft skills. The success of this curriculum largely depends on how well teachers are equipped to integrate these new methods into their teaching practices and how consistently they can apply them in diverse educational settings.

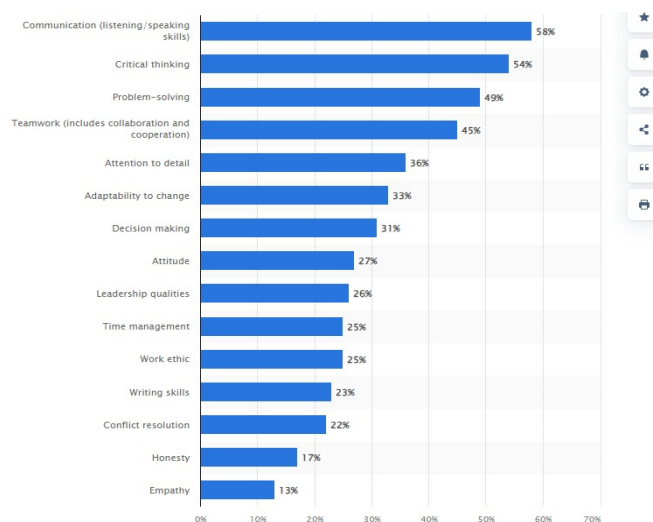


Figure 3. Statistics of Soft Skills Improvement
Source: Borgeaud (see: www.statista.com)

Based on available data in **Figure 3** by Borgeaud in Statista.com, the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka in developing students' soft skills shows mixed results. One of the visible successes is the improvement in students' communication skills, which reached 58%. This figure shows significant progress in communication and essential soft skills in work and everyday life. However, this figure is still below expectations, which usually targets a steady improvement of above 70%, indicating that there is still room for improvement and optimization in implementing this curriculum. On the other hand, students' empathy skills showed a meager improvement, reaching only 13%. This figure reflects a significant challenge in instilling and developing empathy among students through Kurikulum Merdeka. Empathy, as the ability to understand and feel the feelings of others, is an essential aspect of soft skills that support teamwork, effective communication, and good interpersonal relationships. The low rate of improvement in empathy indicates that the methods and approaches used may not have been effective enough in emphasizing the importance of and ways to develop empathy among students.

While Kurikulum Merdeka has successfully improved some aspects of soft skills, such as communication, the lagging results suggest significant barriers that need to be overcome. These barriers may stem from various factors, including a lack of training and support for teachers, limitations in teaching methods, and a less supportive home environment and parental involvement. Therefore, there is a need for in-depth evaluation and adjustment of strategies so that Kurikulum Merdeka can be more effective in developing the entire spectrum of soft skills students need to succeed in the future. Several strategies can be implemented to overcome these obstacles and increase the effectiveness of Kurikulum Merdeka. First, a comprehensive and continuous increase in teacher training is needed to equip them with the required skills and knowledge. Based on Jentsch & König in "Teacher Competence and Professional Development," Teacher training can help them develop their skills, making learning more effective. Secondly, adequate resource allocation must be ensured, especially for schools in resource-constrained areas (Yustikia., 2019). Third, Holistic assessment methods must be developed and implemented to effectively measure soft skills development (Sembiring & Nasution, 2023). Fourth, the curriculum should be flexible and adapt to students' local context and individual needs (Mardiana et al., 2024). Fifth, parental and community involvement in the education process should be enhanced to support soft skills development at home. Lynch, in "The Impact Of Parental Involvement On Children's Soft Skills, Academic Achievement, And Income," stated that parents play an essential role in helping students improve their soft skills, even when they are not at school. Because parents are more often with their children, they will know more about their children's character. Therefore, parents must also contribute to developing students' soft skills. Finally, according to Jaggars et al. in their report "The digital divide among college students: lessons learned from the COVID-19 emergency transition", the digital divide needs to be addressed with policies and programs that ensure all students have access to the necessary technology and resources.

So, in recent years, the Kurikulum Merdeka has been introduced as an innovative approach to address the evolving educational needs of students in Indonesia. Designed to promote flexibility, creativity, and independence, this curriculum aims to better prepare students for the demands of the 21st century by fostering essential soft skills such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. However, its effectiveness in achieving these goals has been debated. While the curriculum offers a promising framework, several challenges hinder its full potential. To ensure that the Kurikulum Merdeka effectively enhances students' soft skills, targeted strategies must be implemented to address these obstacles and maximize its impact.

Kurikulum Merdeka as a Solution for Improving Soft Skills

The Kurikulum Merdeka, initiated by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, aims to encourage a more holistic approach to education (Wulandari et al., 2023). It emphasizes independence, critical thinking, creativity, and the development of soft skills that match the needs of the modern workforce. By giving teachers and students more freedom and flexibility in the teaching and learning process, Kurikulum Merdeka aims to create a more adaptive learning environment that is relevant to real-world challenges (Riswanto & Mulyanti, 2024).

The Kurikulum Merdeka can significantly enhance students' soft skills by emphasizing practical and project-based learning. This approach helps students cultivate communication, teamwork, and critical thinking more effectively than traditional methods (Oxley & Riley, 2022). By engaging in hands-on projects and collaborative tasks, students are better prepared for real-world scenarios, making them more adept at problem-solving and working with others.

However, the success of the Kurikulum Merdeka hinges on its proper implementation (Mursyid et al., 2023). Teachers need adequate support and training to deliver this curriculum effectively. Without the necessary resources and professional development, the benefits of this innovative approach may not be fully realized. Therefore, ensuring that educators are well-prepared and equipped is crucial for the curriculum to achieve its intended outcomes.

Kurikulum Merdeka, the latest education initiative in Indonesia, is designed to give teachers and students more freedom and flexibility in the teaching and learning process. One of its main focuses is student-centered learning, allowing personalized learning experiences according to each student's needs and strengths. This approach is expected to help students develop self-awareness and self-regulation, essential components of emotional intelligence. By providing space for students to explore their interests and talents, Kurikulum Merdeka seeks to create a more inclusive learning environment that supports personal growth (Gotama & Artika, 2024).

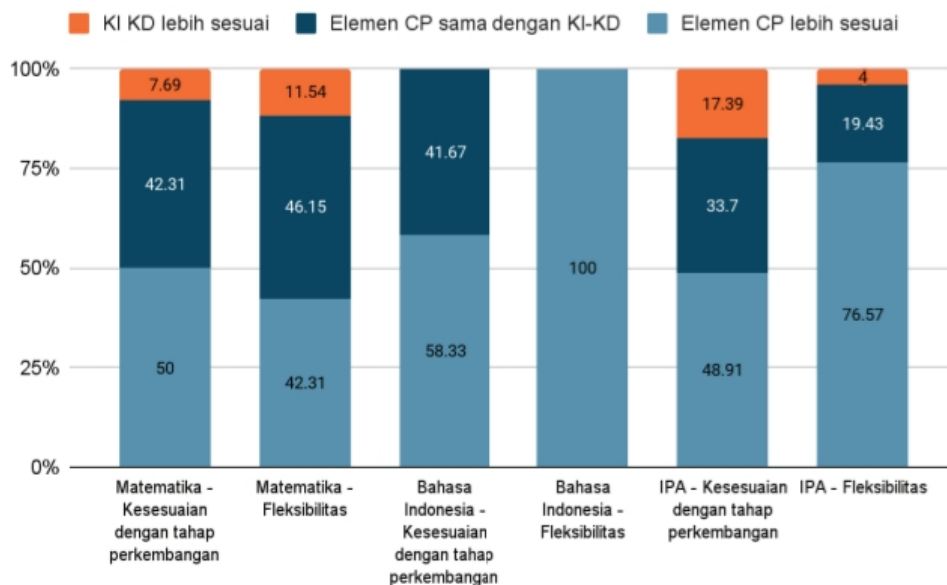


Figure 4. Results of Comparative Analysis Between CP and KI-KD

Source: Kemendikbud (see: <https://kurikulum.kemdikbud.go.id>)

In addition, Kurikulum Merdeka emphasizes the importance of active learning, where students are directly involved in the learning process through discussions, debates, and hands-on projects. This method aims to improve communication and teamwork skills, crucial soft skills required in the modern working world (Yeni & Susanti, 2023). By facilitating interaction and collaboration between students, this curriculum has the potential to strengthen interpersonal relationships and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

However, the successful implementation of this curriculum depends on adequate support and training for teachers to ensure that these objectives can be achieved effectively. Thus, when referring to **Figure 4**, it can be concluded that increasing CP in the Kurikulum Merdeka can be caused by how active learning methods can enrich the learning process and improve various competencies that are part of the learning outcomes, provided that they are supported by proper implementation and adequate support for teachers.

The Kurikulum Merdeka also strongly emphasizes project-based learning, where students can develop soft skills through collaborative projects (Cholilah et al., 2023). This approach encourages collaboration between students to foster teamwork, leadership, and conflict resolution skills and provides hands-on experience in completing projects with real-world applications. Through this experience, students can hone their problem-solving and critical thinking skills, which are crucial to facing the complex challenges of the future work environment.

Kurikulum Merdeka integrates technology into teaching and learning, significantly improving students' digital literacy (Fauziah et al., 2023). By familiarizing students with modern communication tools, this curriculum enhances their communication ability in a digital environment. Using digital platforms for group projects and assignments also helps students practice virtual teamwork and communication skills, preparing them for remote working scenarios that are increasingly common in today's professional world. However, there are also concerns that without proper implementation, this curriculum could result in a decline in the mastery of soft skills if not accompanied by adequate support and training for teachers.

How has technology affected your students' learning?

Answer Choices	Responses
Technology has positively affected my students' learning.	83.72%
Technology hasn't affected their learning one way or the other.	10.47%
Technology has negatively affected my students' learning.	5.81%

Figure 5. Teachers' Opinions on the Use of Technology During Learning
Source: Causey (see: www.epravesh.com)

Based on Causey, the data from **Figure 5** highlights the varied perspectives of teachers on the influence of technology on student learning. Most respondents, amounting to 83.72%, expressed that technology positively impacts student learning. This consensus among educators suggests a broad acknowledgment of technology's role in enhancing educational experiences. The positive reception to technology among teachers indicates their recognition of its benefits in various aspects of education. These benefits include expanded access to information, availability of interactive educational resources, and the facilitation of more effective collaborative learning environments. This data underscores the growing importance of technology in modern education and its potential to improve learning outcomes.

On the other hand, 10.47% of teachers feel that technology has not affected students' interactions with each other. While this could indicate that technology has not been fully utilized to build social interaction among students, it could also reflect that there is room to further integrate technology into learning activities that promote student collaboration and communication. However, there is also a small proportion, 5.81% of teachers, who think that technology has a negative impact on student learning. Regarding distractions from electronic devices, misuse of technology that reduces learning concentration, or the inability to filter relevant and accurate information (Wang, 2022).

Character education in the Kurikulum Merdeka focuses on building empathy, resilience, and ethical values as an integral part of the educational process. This concept covers intellectual aspects and strengthens students' emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. Through the mentorship program implemented in schools, students are allowed to learn from role models and get direct guidance that supports the

development of their soft skills (Coyne-Foresi & Nowicki, 2021). Character education in the Kurikulum Merdeka is about strengthening academics and preparing students to become more emotionally and interpersonally skilled individuals, ready to face challenges in the real world with confidence and integrity.

The holistic assessment method in Kurikulum Merdeka offers a broader approach than simply measuring students' academic performance (Mardiana & Emmiyati, 2024). By evaluating students in various aspects, such as participation in group activities, presentation skills, and contributions to community service, this curriculum encourages the development of soft skills, which are vital in the modern world of work. Holistic assessment methods allow teachers to look at students comprehensively, taking into account test results or written work, as well as how students interact in teams, their ability to convey ideas, and the positive impact they make in society. In addition, by providing continuous feedback, teachers help students to recognize their strengths and identify areas that need improvement. Thus, the holistic approach to assessment and continuous feedback in Kurikulum Merdeka supports the improvement of students' soft skills and helps them prepare to face real-world challenges more readily and confidently.

Partnerships with the community and industry in the Kurikulum Merdeka not only offer students hands-on experience in the real world but also have great potential in the development of soft skills that are highly sought after in today's professional environment (Senowarsito et al., 2023). Active partnerships with the community and industry enrich students' learning experiences with real-world contexts but also help them strengthen the soft skills essential for success in today's competitive global job market. Through the combination of practical experience and networking opportunities provided, Kurikulum Merdeka prepares students to become competent professionals and individuals who can adapt and thrive amidst the dynamics of an ever-changing work environment.

Kurikulum Merdeka offers an inclusive and diverse learning environment, a key aspect in preparing students to face today's global challenges (Ramadhan & Arifin, 2024). By promoting inclusivity and diversity, this curriculum encourages students to appreciate different perspectives and cultures. This not only includes recognizing ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity but also extends to understanding differences in beliefs, socio-economic backgrounds, and learning abilities. Through this approach, students learn to be more open and receptive to differences and develop more effective communication and collaboration skills in an increasingly global and multicultural environment. In addition, the curriculum emphasizes equity in education, ensuring that all students have equal access to quality education and opportunities for personal growth (Ainscow, 2020). This includes providing appropriate support for students with special needs or from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The curriculum bridges the gap in educational opportunities by creating a learning environment that supports and embraces this equality. It provides a strong foundation for every student to reach their full potential.

Kurikulum Merdeka emphasizes inclusive and diverse learning environments to shape students' character and social skills, which are crucial for success in a connected and complex world (Yantoro et al., 2023). By fostering a deep understanding of diversity and integrating values of equality, the curriculum aims to produce a more skilled, tolerant, and prepared generation to meet global challenges. This approach goes beyond academic instruction, focusing on holistic development to prepare students for future societal demands.

Kurikulum Merdeka as an Obstacle to Improving Soft Skills

Independent learning encourages learners to develop according to their interests, talents, potential, and needs and allows them to become agents of change in learning. However, a great responsibility also lies with the teacher to ensure that the ideal goals of implementing a Kurikulum Merdeka can be achieved optimally (Tanggung, 2023). Although Kurikulum Merdeka has noble goals to improve holistic education and promote soft skills development, implementation challenges may hinder its effectiveness. Therefore, it is crucial to identify these barriers and develop effective coping strategies so that Kurikulum Merdeka can successfully

develop students' soft skills. Here are some potential barriers that Kurikulum Merdeka may face in improving soft skills:

A significant challenge in implementing Kurikulum Merdeka is the inconsistency in how schools and teachers implement it. The lack of clear standards can significantly influence student learning experiences across different educational institutions. The goal of Kurikulum Merdeka is to optimize the spread of education in Indonesia through diverse intracurricular learning, with the implementation of a self-directed curriculum that prioritizes project-based learning to implement the Pancasila student profile (Saadah & Amarullah, 2023). While some schools may be better able to integrate group activities, presentations, and collaborative projects into daily learning, other schools may have difficulty doing so. This may result in inequalities in soft skills development between students in different educational environments.

The issue of lack of resources is also a significant barrier. One of them is due to limited facilities. Schools with limited budgets may not have sufficient funds to provide the necessary infrastructure, equipment, and teaching materials to support active and project-based learning (Wardana et al., 2023). This kind of learning, which emphasizes active participation and hands-on experience, often requires additional time, effort, and funds. Without adequate support, the potential of Kurikulum Merdeka to develop social, leadership, and collaboration skills in students may be hampered. The contribution of teachers in the curriculum development process is important to match the content of the curriculum with the needs of students in society. However, without adequate training, teachers may struggle to deliver lessons that effectively encourage the development of students' soft skills (Khotimah et al., 2024). This can result in less interactive and less inspiring learning, hindering students' ability to develop soft skills such as collaboration, communication, and problem-solving.

These limitations, such as the refusal of some teachers to switch from traditional teacher-centered teaching methods to a more student-centered and interactive approach, can cause problems that will lead to suboptimal distance learning processes. This kind of resistance can not only slow down the adoption of Kurikulum Merdeka but can also affect the overall quality of education (Dallyono et al., 2022), especially when it is unable to integrate new teaching methods that emphasize student engagement and soft skills development, which are indispensable for preparing students for the increasingly complex demands of the modern world of work. Therefore, strong support in the form of ongoing training and effective change management approaches are essential to help teachers overcome these challenges and ensure the success of Kurikulum Merdeka in developing students' full potential in soft skills. Lack of effective assessment tools that can accurately measure students' soft skills development. The standardized testing methods typically used are often unable to capture the nuances of skills such as communication, teamwork, or leadership taught and reinforced in the Kurikulum Merdeka. This can inhibit recognition and reward of student progress in these aspects, reducing the incentive for teachers and students to focus on soft skills development.

Teacher performance in teaching, i.e., the teacher's proficiency in realizing effective learning activities and the analysis of planning and follow-up learning to achieve teaching objectives, is crucial amid the prevalence of overemphasis on academic performance in the current education system. When schools focus too much on measurement through exams and grades, soft skills such as interpersonal skills are often neglected (Lestari & Rahmawati, 2023). As a result, students can miss out on the encouragement and support needed to develop aspects of life that are not solely focused on traditional subject matter. Therefore, there is an urgent need to balance the vital valuation of academic achievement and the recognition of soft skills development so that education can holistically assist students in preparing for real-world challenges.

Batas Kategori	Frekuensi	Persentase (%)	Kategori
$X < 26$	1	0,28	Rendah
$26 \leq X < 40$	128	35,46	Sedang
$40 \leq X$	232	64,26	Tinggi
Jumlah	361	100	

Figure 6. Student Stress Level
 Source: Kirana et al. (2022)

From **Figure 6**, the results of the study of 361 respondents surveyed, the majority experienced high levels of academic stress, with the following details: only one person (0.28%) was in the low category, 128 people (35.46%) were in the medium category, and 232 people (64.26%) were in the high category. This data indicates that most of the study subjects experienced significant academic stress, thus highlighting the need for interventions and strategies to manage and reduce stress among students. Based on that, when the curriculum cannot be adapted to students' individual needs or local realities, there is a risk that developing social skills, collaboration, and other soft skills will not be optimal, which can even affect stress for students. Therefore, the rigid structure of the curriculum often challenges the development of soft skills in schools. Flexibility in curriculum design allows education to be more responsive to students' diverse learning styles and environmental contexts. By integrating soft skills into the entire curriculum and activities, students have more significant opportunities to practice and hone these skills consistently and integrate.

Cultural resistance to critical thinking or open communication in some communities can reduce the effectiveness of soft skills education. In addition, dominant expectations of academic achievement often dominate the educational agenda, reducing the focus on developing soft skills critical to students' success in the real world. Therefore, to successfully develop soft skills thoroughly, a deep understanding of cultural dynamics and societal expectations is required, as well as efforts to integrate these values into broader educational strategies.

Integrating technology in the Kurikulum Merdeka brings some barriers that must be overcome, especially regarding the digital divide. This gap can exacerbate inequalities in education, where students from lower economic backgrounds may not have equal access to the necessary devices and internet connections. This can hinder their full participation in online or technology-based learning, limiting their potential to develop soft skills such as collaboration and creativity.

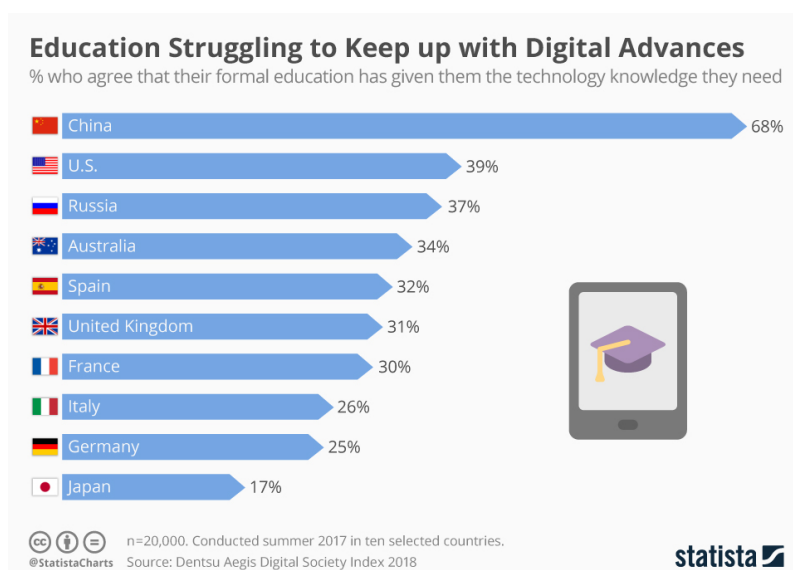


Figure 7. Technology Provision in Education in Some Countries
 Source: Armstrong (see: www.statista.com)

Based on **Figure 7** from Armstrong (2018) in Statista.com, it can be concluded that despite being considered developed countries with advanced infrastructure, providing technology is still a significant challenge for some countries. Data shows that in China, only 68% of the population has full access to cutting-edge technology. The situation in the United States is even lower, with only 39% of the population being adequately facilitated. Japan, known as one of the world's technology leaders, recorded a staggering figure, with only 17% of the population having optimal access. This shows that despite the rapid development of technology, its distribution and accessibility are still significant obstacles that need to be overcome to achieve equitable digital inclusion across all walks of life. In addition, over-reliance on technology also poses challenges. While technology facilitates communication and distance learning, too much time spent in front of a screen can reduce opportunities for face-to-face interactions essential for developing interpersonal skills. The ability to communicate face-to-face, read facial expressions, and build deep social relationships can be hindered, reducing students' potential to learn from the experience of direct interaction in real situations.

Parental involvement plays a crucial role in developing students' soft skills, especially in the context of the Kurikulum Merdeka. Lack of support from parents can be a significant obstacle as they not only need an understanding of the importance of soft skills but also need to provide the necessary encouragement outside the school environment. Different home environments can also influence students, as not all students have access to an environment conducive to developing skills such as effective communication and teamwork. Therefore, collaboration between schools and parents is essential to create holistic support that supports students' integral development in facing the demands of the future world of work.

CONCLUSION

The Kurikulum Merdeka shows mixed results in developing students' soft skills, with some successes and many challenges that must be overcome. The increase in students' communication skills reached 58%, but it is still below the stable target expectation of above 70%, indicating that there is still room for improvement and optimization. More worryingly, the improvement in students' empathy skills only reached 13%, reflecting the great challenge of instilling empathy through this curriculum.

Key barriers that require in-depth evaluation include a lack of training and support for teachers, limitations in teaching methods, and a lack of support from the home environment and parental involvement. Several strategies need to be implemented to overcome these obstacles and improve the effectiveness of Kurikulum Merdeka. First, a comprehensive and continuous improvement of teacher training is needed. Secondly, adequate resource allocation should be ensured, especially for schools in resource-constrained areas. Third, holistic assessment methods must be developed and implemented to measure soft skills development effectively. Fourthly, the curriculum should be flexible and adaptable to students' local context and individual needs. Fifth, parental and community involvement in the education process must be enhanced. Finally, the digital divide must be addressed with policies and programs that ensure all students have access to the necessary technology and resources.

Kurikulum Merdeka offers a promising framework for enhancing soft skills among students by focusing on holistic development, active learning, and real-world applications. By effectively implementing this curriculum, Indonesia can prepare its students to thrive in the modern world of work, equipped with the essential soft skills needed for personal and professional success. To effectively implement Kurikulum Merdeka and maximize its impact on soft skills development, the following strategies are essential: (1) **Teacher Training:** Provide comprehensive training for teachers to equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to facilitate a student-centered, project-based learning environment; (2) **Curriculum Flexibility:** Allows schools the flexibility to adapt the curriculum to the local context and students' needs, ensuring relevance and engagement; (3) **Resource Allocation:** Ensure adequate resources, including technology, materials and support staff, to facilitate the smooth implementation of the curriculum; (4) **Stakeholder Engagement:**

Involving parents, communities, and industries in the educational process to create an ecosystem that supports students.

With this in-depth evaluation and adjustment of strategies, it is expected that Kurikulum Merdeka can be more effective in developing the entire spectrum of soft skills that students need to succeed in the future. The emphasis on creativity, teamwork, and problem-solving skills will prepare students for global challenges. In addition, this curriculum adaptation will ensure the relevance of education in the digital and automation era.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors also affirm that the data and content of this article are completely free of plagiarism, with all information presented having been ethically obtained and originally written. Any quotations or references from other works have been properly acknowledged and cited following applicable academic standards. The authors are committed to maintaining scientific and ethical integrity at every stage of the research and writing of this article.

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