

The Role of Learning Communities in Developing Teacher Competence

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the role of learning communities in developing teacher competencies at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Balikpapan. The type of research used is qualitative descriptive research with a case study method. Data collection techniques through interviews, observations and document studies. The results of the study indicate that learning communities that are routinely implemented in schools provide positive changes to teacher competencies that have an impact on the learning process of students. Active and enjoyable learning will certainly affect the motivation and activeness of students in participating in learning. Learning communities are also a place for professional and character development for educators to be more active, creative and confident. The findings indicate that active involvement in such communities significantly contributes to improved instructional practices, increased self-efficacy, and stronger professional identity. The study concludes that learning communities serve as a vital component in teacher professional development and recommends institutional support for their sustainability.

1. INTRODUCTION

The "Merdeka Curriculum", a new policy introduced by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud), is designed to address various challenges in Indonesia's education system. According to Kemendikbud (2022), this curriculum aims to promote innovation, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills among students by offering more autonomy and opportunities for independent learning (Tatema Harefa et al., 2023; Karim et al., 2024). Teachers play a pivotal role in the learning process and are expected to be the key drivers in the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. To support this goal, a special platform called the "Merdeka Mengajar Platform" (MMP) was launched to help teachers develop their potential and abilities. The main objective of MMP is to improve teacher competencies and to inspire fellow educators (Marisna, 2023).

Nevertheless, many teachers still face challenges in their teaching practices, including lack of structured lesson planning, monotonous delivery methods, and ineffective assessment techniques. Furthermore, teacher competencies in general remain relatively low. This reality has prompted schools to make concerted efforts to enhance teaching capacities. Various innovations and policies have been introduced to improve teacher performance, such as training sessions, seminars, workshops, and Teacher Working Group (KKG) forums (Khusna & Priyanti, 2023).

One initiative undertaken by schools to enhance teacher skills is the formation of learning communities. A learning community refers to a group of educators and school staff who systematically and continuously collaborate to study and achieve specific, measurable goals in order to improve the quality of teaching and positively influence student achievement (Giyanto et al., n.d.). In the context of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, learning communities provide support to teachers, education personnel, and other educators to discuss and resolve teaching challenges during the curriculum's execution (Kemendikbud, 2023). Given the current educational landscape, the quality of pedagogical competence among teachers can vary significantly depending on regional and institutional contexts. There are evident disparities in teaching quality, where some educators exhibit high levels of instructional skill while others still need considerable improvement in both ability and knowledge (Isrokatun et al., 2022). This pedagogical gap highlights the need for focused professional development, integration of technology in education, and curriculum reform.

Based on these facts, it is evident that many teachers with low competence continue to face challenges in the teaching and learning process (Arifin & Hanif, 2024). These challenges include inadequate lesson planning, repetitive instructional methods, and insufficient assessment practices. The management of learning communities has emerged as an efficient strategy to address such problems. Learning communities foster collaboration among students, teachers, and parents to build a supportive and motivating educational environment (Hasanah et al., 2023). Each member of the learning community plays a vital role in the learning process, contributing information, providing emotional support, and creating a positive learning atmosphere. Learning communities play a vital role in enhancing teacher competencies. Numerous studies have shown that these communities contribute significantly to improving both teacher abilities and instructional quality. This research is closely aligned with a previous study by Sekar and Kamarubiani (2020), which emphasized that learning communities function as platforms for professional development through social interaction, knowledge sharing, skill enhancement, confidence building, and networking. Their research is also in line with the Community of Practice (CoP) theory proposed by Etienne Wenger, which highlights the importance of collaborative learning environments in which individuals share knowledge to improve their skills and understanding.

Participation in learning communities also contributes to cultivating a positive and collaborative school culture. When teachers work together and support one another, they foster a more inclusive and conducive learning environment. These communities enable teachers to critically evaluate their teaching practices and apply improvements based on constructive peer feedback (Hakim et al., 2024). Consequently, learning communities not only enhance individual teacher competence but also elevate the overall quality of education within the school. Based on the above elaboration, this study aims to examine the role of learning communities in developing teacher competencies through various indicators such as motivation and engagement, benefits, positive impacts, understanding of barriers, learning strategies, and community evaluations at the school level. The study also measures the extent of pedagogical skill improvement and highlights the achievement aspects of school-based learning communities and pedagogical competencies. This research is conducted at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Balikpapan and aims to answer the question: "What is the role of learning communities in developing teacher competence?"

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study method. The qualitative approach was chosen because it provides descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words

from observable participants in depth. A case study method allows the researcher to explore information in detail regarding phenomena occurring at a specific research site. The study was conducted at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Balikpapan with participants consisting of the Vice Principal for Curriculum and two subject teachers actively involved in the learning community. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their direct involvement in the implementation of the learning community at the school.

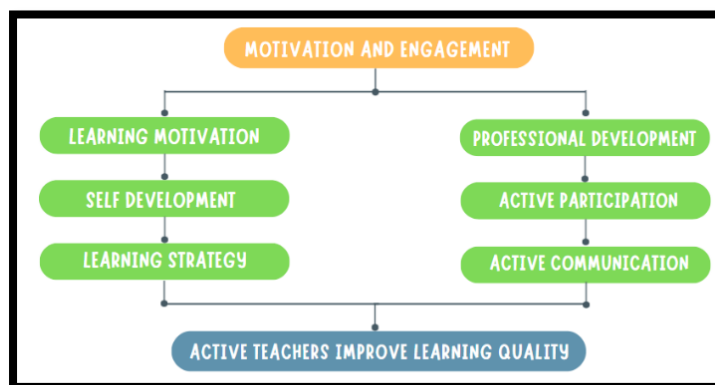
Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and document analysis related to the learning community program. The collected data were systematically organized, reduced to highlight relevant information, and presented descriptively. Data analysis employed the Miles and Huberman model, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification to identify patterns, themes, and relationships addressing the research focus.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

The research findings encompass “The Role of Learning Communities in Developing Teacher Competence”, which produced key indicators of needs such as motivation and engagement in learning communities, the benefits of learning communities, development strategies, impact, obstacles, and evaluations of the learning community process. Interviews were conducted using an open-ended technique with the Vice Principal for Curriculum Affairs and teachers at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Balikpapan. To strengthen the substance of the interview data, an in-depth analysis was carried out based on the data obtained, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Picture of Motivation and Engagement

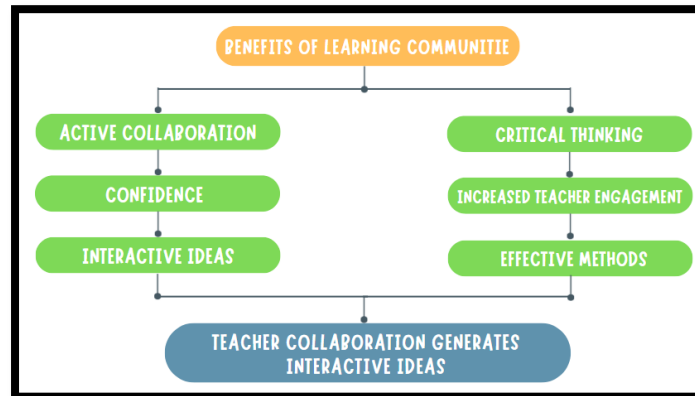


This study found that the learning communities implemented in the school fostered motivation and teacher engagement. Several teachers stated that the learning community had a significant motivational impact on improving teacher competence. In addition to having motivational value, the learning community also served as a platform for professional development. This demonstrates that learning communities require self-development as part of each activity. Active participation is also essential for improving teacher competence. Supporting the success of the learning community also requires teaching strategies and active communication.

Based on six key indicators Learning Motivation, Active Participation, Self-Development, Professional Growth, Teaching Strategies, and Active Communication it can be concluded that the success of learning communities relies heavily on full teacher engagement. When teachers are

motivated to learn, actively participate in activities, pursue self- and professional development, and implement effective strategies with open communication, a collaborative and meaningful learning environment is created. Consequently, active participation in learning communities directly contributes to improved teaching quality at school.

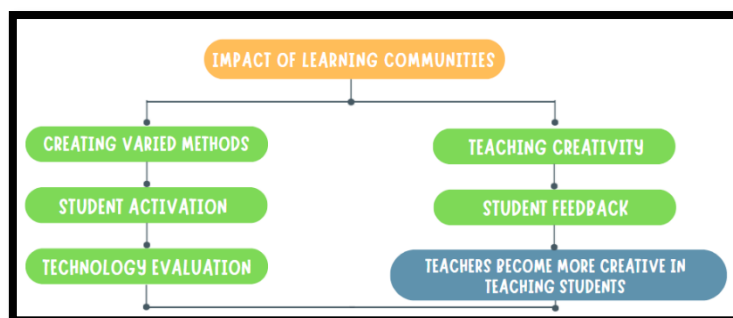
Figure 2. Picture of Benefits of Learning Communitie



Learning communities play a significant role in enhancing teacher competence in schools. One of their main benefits is the creation of a space for teachers to share experiences, knowledge, and solutions to various challenges in the teaching and learning process. This collaborative sharing is referred to as active collaboration. Critical thinking is another benefit of school-based learning communities. They encourage teachers to be more aware when identifying solutions to learning issues and help them make accurate and relevant decisions based on students' needs. The interview results revealed that the learning community also helps boost teacher confidence, particularly in expressing ideas and trying new methods in the classroom. P1 further added that participation in various teaching activities—both in the classroom and discussion forums has increased: 1:25 “Now I participate more in training and discussions. Before, I used to just listen, but now I also share my experiences. Since joining the learning community, I’ve become more confident, especially when we talk about practical things that can be directly applied in class”. These learning communities also enhance teachers’ understanding of new ideas and effective methods.

Based on the six key aspects of the benefits of learning communities Increased Teacher Engagement, Active Collaboration, Confidence, Effective Methods, Critical Thinking, and Interactive Ideas it can be concluded that the collaboration fostered in learning communities supports the development of new ideas. Through active involvement and increased confidence, teachers are encouraged to think critically and find more effective teaching strategies. The tangible result of this process is the emergence of interactive ideas that enrich the learning experience. Therefore, teacher collaboration has proven to produce meaningful innovations that positively impact classroom instruction.

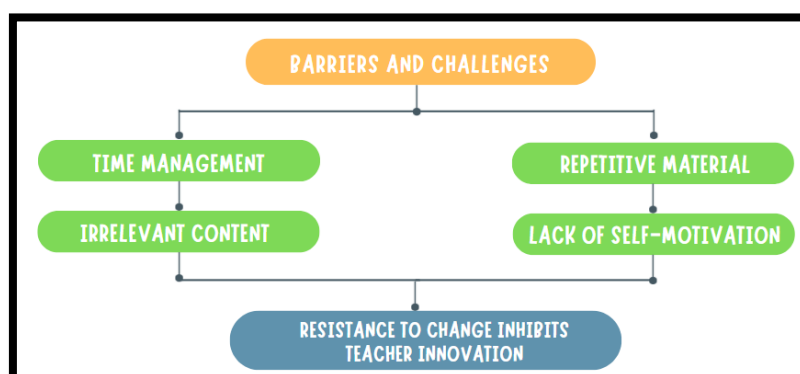
Figure 3. Picture of Impact of Learning Communities



Learning communities provide a range of positive impacts on improving the quality of teaching in schools. One major impact is that teachers become more creative in designing varied teaching methods. This use of varied methods aligns with the perspectives shared by Participants 1, 2, and 3, who agreed that the learning community has significantly contributed to increasing teacher creativity. This creativity plays an essential role in creating a more engaging and effective learning environment, which in turn promotes active student participation. According to P3, this increased student engagement leads to a more positive two-way interaction during the learning process: “I also encourage students more often to engage in discussions and hands-on activities so they become more active. The point is, I’ve become more creative in delivering lessons.” (P3)

This feedback not only improves students’ comprehension but also provides valuable input for teachers to evaluate the use of technology in the classroom. These evaluations aim to help teachers identify the most effective technologies and strategies to implement in class and develop further within the learning community. This ensures that teaching becomes more relevant, interactive, and aligned with students’ needs. Based on the six key aspects of the positive impact of learning communities Creating Varied Methods, Student Feedback, Teaching Creativity, Student Activation, Technology Evaluation, and Interactive Ideas it is clear that learning communities encourage teachers to continuously innovate in the classroom. Through creative teaching approaches and appropriate use of technology, teachers can enhance student participation and create space for meaningful feedback. These positive impacts are reflected in increased teaching creativity and student engagement. Therefore, learning communities play a key role in helping teachers become more active and dynamic in the classroom, ultimately fostering a more engaging and impactful learning environment.

Figure 4. Picture of Barriers and Challenges

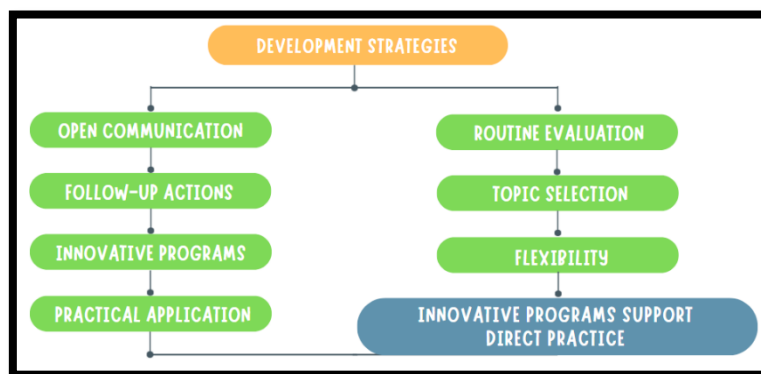


Barriers in the implementation of learning communities present challenges that need to be addressed to ensure the program runs optimally. These challenges may arise from various aspects, including time management adjustments that must align with teachers' teaching schedules. According to P1, another barrier is repetitive material. In some cases, learning communities discuss the same topics repeatedly without introducing new innovations. Irrelevant material is also a challenge, as it can make discussions less engaging and reduce teachers' motivation to participate: "Sometimes, the materials covered are not really relevant to my needs as a Bahasa Indonesia teacher. But I don't give up. I still attend, even if not fully present, and I catch up by discussing with more active colleagues." (P1)

Another obstacle is the lack of self-motivation among some teachers. Not all educators have a strong desire to innovate or develop their competencies through learning communities. Finally, a significant barrier is resistance to change. Some teachers still feel comfortable using conventional methods they've used for years and are reluctant to try new approaches. This resistance to change can hinder the innovation that learning communities are intended to foster. One of their primary goals is to encourage teachers to develop more creative and effective teaching methods in line with the changing times and student needs.

The six main factors that make up the challenges and barriers to teacher development Resistance to Change, Time Management, Repetitive Material, Irrelevant Content, Lack of Self-Motivation, and Limited Relevance show that both internal and external obstacles continue to restrict teachers' capacity to innovate. When teachers struggle to manage their time, deal with repetitive or irrelevant topics, and lack motivation, their ability to create dynamic learning experiences becomes limited. The greatest barrier lies in resistance to change, which slows down the transformation of teaching practices. Therefore, it can be concluded that resistance to change is a key factor that hinders innovation in teaching strategy development.

Figure 5. Picture of Development Strategies



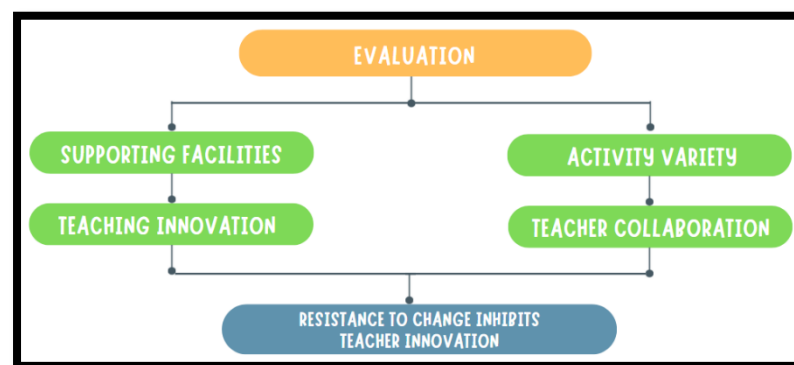
To optimize the role of learning communities in schools, a systematic and sustainable development strategy is required. According to Participant 2, one of the most fundamental indicators is open communication. Open communication creates a productive discussion atmosphere where teachers can give input and collaboratively find solutions to classroom problems: "We always collect feedback and then discuss it in the next meeting. We try to consider all suggestions." (P2). Based on the statements of Participants 1 and 2, open communication fosters a process of routine evaluation. These evaluations are conducted regularly to assess how well the learning community has met its objectives. This process is intended to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the program so that follow-up actions can be taken based on the

evaluation results. It is also important that the community discusses relevant and contextual topics. The topics must be aligned with the real needs of teachers in the field.

To maintain the sustainability and relevance of learning communities, schools must support the development of innovative programs that can be applied in teaching. These could include collaborative teacher projects, internal training, or the development of new and engaging teaching methods. P3 also noted that for the learning community to function effectively, programs must be flexible to accommodate schedules, discussion formats, and meeting methods based on teachers' availability: "The learning community is flexible and adjusts to field needs—not just following trends. So, the topics discussed are really based on the challenges faced by teachers." (P3)

This ensures that teachers can remain actively involved in the community even when faced with time constraints or additional responsibilities. Finally, a very important indicator is the practical application of discussion results in the classroom. Every topic and conclusion from the learning community must be implementable by teachers in their teaching activities. This hands-on application has a positive effect on student learning activities, increases their engagement, and helps teachers reflect more effectively on the strategies they use. The six components in the strategy for development Routine Evaluation, Practical Application, Innovative Programs, Open Communication, Flexibility, and Topic Selection demonstrate the importance of a structured and adaptive approach to support teacher competency development. These strategies emphasize not only planning, communication, and evaluation, but also direct teacher involvement in practical, real-world contexts. Through innovative and relevant programs, teachers are encouraged to enhance their abilities through hands-on experiences. Thus, innovative programs that support practical classroom implementation are key to the success of learning community development strategies.

Figure 6. Picture of Development Strategies



Evaluation in a learning community is a crucial process to ensure that every activity carried out provides a positive impact on improving teacher competence. One of the main components that must be addressed and improved in this evaluation is the availability of supporting facilities, as explained by participant 1: 1:23 "Facilities are also important. If discussions are held in a regular room without any supporting tools, the results won't be optimal. I think the school needs to invest more in facilities like projectors, stable internet, or even online platforms that can be used for the learning community." (P1). Adequate infrastructure creates a comfortable and conducive learning environment for teachers to share knowledge and experiences. In addition to facilities, P1 also emphasized the need for variety in learning community activities. With a variety of activities, teachers can choose the ones most relevant to their needs, which enhances their

understanding of the concepts being discussed. Furthermore, input evaluation should also encourage the development of innovative teaching practices.

Lastly, teacher collaboration, as emphasized by P3, is a critical factor in input evaluation: “We might also need a mentoring system, where more experienced teachers help those who are new or need more guidance.” (P3). Discussion and collaboration among teachers from different backgrounds enrich perspectives and generate diverse ideas in the learning community. This collaboration also facilitates the exchange of best practices, allowing teachers to learn from one another and apply these insights in their own teaching. The six components in Input Evaluation supporting Facilities, Activity Variety, Teaching Innovation, Teacher Collaboration, Routine Evaluation, and Follow-up Actions are key to ensuring the effectiveness of learning community programs. Evaluating various forms of input helps identify areas for improvement, broaden the scope of activities, and drive innovation in teaching. Moreover, the presence of adequate facilities and teacher synergy are crucial to optimizing program outcomes. Therefore, it can be concluded that routine evaluations help to continuously improve learning community activities to achieve more optimal goals.

3.2. Discussion

This study provides in-depth insights into the role of learning communities in developing teacher competence in schools, particularly at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Balikpapan. The primary focus of this research is to identify how learning communities serve as collaborative platforms where teachers share experiences, improve pedagogical skills, and address challenges in the era of educational transformation. The findings of this study are grouped into six main themes: motivation and engagement, benefits of learning communities, positive impact, barriers and challenges, development strategies, and input evaluation.

Motivation and engagement are key to effective teacher learning and professional growth. Self-Determination Theory (Manninen et al., 2022) explains that intrinsic motivation teachers’ desire to keep learning is driven by autonomy, competence, and relatedness, all fostered through learning communities. Extrinsic motivation may come from policies or external rewards. Engagement Theory (Kearsley et al., n.d.) further highlights that active participation sharing experiences, discussions, and feedback enhances teaching skills. Similarly, Harlita & Ramadan (2024) found that learning communities motivate teachers to meet student needs and create inclusive, supportive classrooms.

Learning communities provide significant benefits for teachers, notably increasing participation in collaborative learning. Teachers exchange interactive ideas that can be directly applied in classrooms, fostering more engaging and effective learning. Rooted in Social Learning Theory (Cliffs & 1977), this process based on observation, imitation, and modeling builds teacher confidence and supports the use of varied teaching methods. Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 2014) further highlights that hands-on experiences and collective reflection in learning communities strengthen teachers’ understanding of effective strategies. Supporting research by Giyanto & Pradina (2023) confirms that learning communities enhance access to resources, problem-solving, and collaboration, creating a supportive environment for developing innovative teaching methods.

Learning communities significantly enhance teacher competence and creativity, particularly by improving teachers’ ability to design varied and engaging learning methods. According to Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), reflective participation in these communities reshapes teachers’ perspectives and practices, while Constructivist Learning Theory (Piaget, 2005) emphasizes knowledge building through active engagement. Through discussions

and collaboration, teachers develop innovative strategies that strengthen professionalism and competence, as shown by Khusna & Priyanti (2023). Likewise, Sekar et al. (n.d.) highlight that learning communities also benefit students by fostering social skills, broadening perspectives, and developing critical thinking, supporting holistic education.

Despite their benefits, learning communities face barriers that hinder effectiveness, notably resistance to change and time management issues among busy teachers. The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) explains that resistance often stems from perceptions that change demands extra effort without assured results. Another challenge, noted by Harlita & Ramadan (2024), is the digital literacy gap: while some teachers are adept with educational technology, others need more support. Addressing these barriers through targeted training and mentoring is vital to ensure inclusive and successful learning communities.

To keep learning communities effective and sustainable, creative programs with direct classroom applications are essential. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Theory stresses that teacher growth requires ongoing training, reflection, and practice, while Wenger's Communities of Practice (1999) highlights collaborative knowledge-building among teachers. Through discussions and peer feedback, teachers develop innovative strategies, adapt lessons to students' needs, and integrate technology, as confirmed by Khusna & Priyanti (2023). Open communication and flexible scheduling further ensure active participation, making learning communities vital for dynamic and relevant teaching environments. Routine input evaluation is crucial for effective learning communities. This involves reviewing facilities, activity variety, innovation, and teacher collaboration. According to Falletta's (1998) Model of Training Evaluation reaction, learning, behavior, and results regular evaluation ensures programs build teacher competence. Formative evaluation is especially important for identifying strengths, addressing weaknesses, and providing constructive feedback for continuous improvement.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that learning communities play a crucial role in enhancing teacher competence at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Balikpapan. Through collaborative activities, these communities have successfully increased teachers' motivation and engagement, boosted their confidence, and stimulated creativity in developing more varied and effective teaching methods. Another positive impact is the creation of a discussion environment that encourages teachers to think critically, share experiences, and collaboratively solve instructional challenges. Learning communities function not only as spaces for professional development but also as platforms for strengthening communication and cooperation among educators.

Despite the many benefits, the implementation of learning communities still faces several challenges, including time management, resistance to change, and irrelevant or repetitive materials. These issues highlight the need for ongoing improvement and support in managing the program effectively. Therefore, strategic development is essential—one that includes open communication, regular evaluation, innovative programs, and the application of practical teaching methods in the classroom. With proper management, learning communities can serve as an effective tool for enhancing teacher professionalism and supporting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

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