

Professional Development for English Teachers in the Merdeka Curriculum: Needs and Challenges

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Abstract

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia represents a significant shift toward flexible, student-centered learning that requires English teachers to continuously develop their pedagogical and professional competencies. As English plays a crucial role in global communication and education, teachers' readiness to adapt to curriculum reform is essential. However, many teachers encounter challenges related to limited training opportunities, technological constraints, and institutional support. This study aims to examine the professional development needs and challenges faced by English teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. A mixed-method research design was employed involving ten English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers from junior and senior high schools in Indonesia. Data were collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and contextual insights. The findings indicate that teachers demonstrate strong motivation for professional growth but require further support in project-based learning design, differentiated instruction, technology integration, and character education implementation. Key challenges include insufficient structured training, limited technological infrastructure, and heavy administrative workloads. Despite these constraints, teachers show positive attitudes toward curriculum reform and actively seek collaborative professional learning opportunities. The study underscores the importance of sustained, context-sensitive professional development programs, technological support, and institutional mentoring to ensure effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and improve the quality of English language education in Indonesia.

Introduction

The rapid transformation of education in the twenty-first century requires teachers to continuously develop their professional competencies in response to pedagogical innovation, technological advancement, and curriculum reform. In Indonesia, one of the most significant recent educational reforms is the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes flexibility, student-centered learning, and contextualized instruction. This curriculum encourages differentiated teaching, project-based learning, and the integration of character education aligned with the Pancasila Student

Profile (Ministry of Education Indonesia, 2023). Consequently, English teachers are expected not only to teach linguistic knowledge but also to facilitate communicative competence, critical thinking, creativity, and intercultural understanding.

The Merdeka Curriculum was partly introduced as a response to learning disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for a more adaptive education system. It provides schools with autonomy to design learning approaches according to local needs and student characteristics. While such flexibility fosters innovation, it also requires

higher teacher professionalism, particularly in designing instructional modules, implementing differentiated assessment, and integrating technology effectively (Setiawati, 2025). Therefore, professional development becomes a crucial element in ensuring successful curriculum implementation.

Professional development is widely acknowledged as essential for improving teaching quality and student learning outcomes. Continuous training, mentoring, and participation in professional learning communities enable teachers to refine pedagogical strategies, update subject knowledge, and adapt to educational change (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). In English language teaching specifically, professional development is particularly important due to the evolving nature of language pedagogy, technological integration, and global communication demands (Isharyanti, 2024).

However, implementing effective professional development programs remains challenging in many contexts, including Indonesia. Studies indicate that teachers often encounter limited access to relevant training, insufficient institutional support, and resource constraints that hinder professional growth (Halawa, 2024; Suhendra, 2026). Moreover, some professional development initiatives tend to be top-down and insufficiently contextualized, reducing their practical impact on classroom teaching. This highlights the need for professional development programs that are responsive to teachers' actual needs and teaching environments.

The shift toward student-centered pedagogy in the Merdeka Curriculum also presents pedagogical challenges for English

teachers. The curriculum emphasizes inquiry-based learning, collaborative projects, and authentic assessment practices. While these approaches can enhance student engagement and communicative competence, teachers often experience difficulties in designing project-based assessments, managing classroom interaction, and maintaining student motivation (Ramli, 2025; Rohmah, 2025). Such challenges indicate that curriculum reform must be accompanied by sustained professional development support.

Another significant issue relates to technology integration in English language teaching. Digital literacy has become an essential competence for teachers, enabling access to authentic materials, online collaboration, and interactive learning platforms. However, disparities in technological infrastructure and teachers' digital competence remain obstacles in many Indonesian schools (Mardhatillah, 2024). Teachers who lack sufficient training in educational technology may struggle to implement innovative teaching practices effectively.

Institutional support also plays a decisive role in teacher professional development. Schools, educational authorities, and professional organizations need to provide mentoring systems, collaborative platforms, and adequate resources to support teacher learning. Recent initiatives involving collaboration between the Indonesian Ministry of Education and international organizations, such as the British Council, demonstrate increasing attention to teacher professional development through structured training programs and

needs assessments (British Council Indonesia, 2024; Kemendikbudristek, 2024). Nevertheless, access to these programs remains uneven across regions.

Furthermore, integrating character education within English language teaching represents another challenge. The Merdeka Curriculum requires teachers to incorporate values such as ethical awareness, cultural sensitivity, and social responsibility into subject teaching. Many teachers report uncertainty about how to integrate these values practically in language instruction (Restika, 2025; Hanum, 2025). This suggests that professional development should address not only pedagogical techniques but also socio-cultural and character-based teaching strategies.

Teacher collaboration through professional learning communities, such as MGMP (Subject Teacher Working Groups), has been identified as a valuable mechanism for professional development. Collaborative forums allow teachers to exchange ideas, share teaching resources, and discuss classroom challenges. However, research indicates that these communities sometimes lack sustained mentoring, structured guidance, and institutional support, limiting their effectiveness (Zaki et al., 2025; Al Fikri, 2025). Strengthening collaborative professional networks could therefore enhance teacher readiness for curriculum implementation.

Teacher workload and administrative demands also remain significant barriers. Teachers often face multiple responsibilities, including administrative reporting, extracurricular supervision, and policy implementation tasks, which reduce the time

available for professional learning and reflective practice (Mahmud, 2020; Supatni, 2024). Addressing these systemic constraints is necessary for sustainable professional development.

Despite these challenges, many Indonesian English teachers demonstrate strong motivation to improve their professional competence. Positive teacher attitudes toward professional learning indicate a willingness to adapt to curriculum changes, particularly when professional development programs are practical, collaborative, and contextually relevant (Ilahi, 2025). Teachers tend to value training that directly addresses classroom challenges and provides opportunities for peer collaboration.

Globally, teacher professional development is increasingly associated with educational innovation, digital transformation, and lifelong learning. Effective professional development typically involves continuous support, reflective practice, and collaborative learning environments (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). Applying these principles within the Indonesian context requires sensitivity to local educational conditions, cultural diversity, and resource disparities.

Given the transformative nature of the Merdeka Curriculum and the central role of teachers in its implementation, understanding English teachers' professional development needs and challenges is essential. Empirical research specifically focusing on English language teaching within the Merdeka Curriculum framework remains relatively limited. Most existing studies address general curriculum implementation without deeply

examining professional development implications. Therefore, further investigation is necessary to identify teachers' specific needs, challenges, and strategies for adaptation.

This study aims to explore the professional development needs and challenges faced by English teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. By employing a mixed-method approach involving questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of teachers' experiences. The findings are expected to inform policymakers, teacher educators, and school leaders in designing context-sensitive professional development programs that support effective curriculum implementation.

Ultimately, strengthening professional development for English teachers is crucial for improving language education quality in Indonesia. Effective professional development enhances teacher competence, promotes student engagement, and supports communicative proficiency and global competitiveness. As the Merdeka Curriculum continues to evolve, sustained investment in teacher capacity building will remain a key factor in achieving meaningful educational transformation.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method research design to investigate the professional development needs and challenges faced by English teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia. A mixed-method approach was selected because it enables researchers to

combine quantitative and qualitative data to obtain a comprehensive understanding of complex educational phenomena (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This design allows the integration of statistical trends from questionnaire data with in-depth insights from interviews and classroom observations, thereby enhancing the validity and richness of the findings (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Research Design

The study adopted a convergent mixed-method design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously and analyzed separately before being integrated during interpretation. This approach is particularly appropriate for educational research where both measurable patterns and contextual experiences are essential for understanding teacher professional development (Ivankova & Wingo, 2018). Quantitative data provided general patterns of teachers' professional development needs, while qualitative data explored the challenges and contextual realities experienced by teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

Participants and Research Context

The participants consisted of 10 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers from junior and senior high schools in Indonesia who had begun implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant experience in curriculum implementation, ensuring that the data reflected authentic classroom practices (Etikan & Bala, 2017). The selected teachers

varied in teaching experience, school type, and geographical context, allowing diverse perspectives on professional development needs.

The research context involved schools transitioning from the previous national curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes student-centered learning, differentiated instruction, project-based assessment, and character education integration. These pedagogical shifts require teachers to adapt their teaching strategies and continuously enhance their professional competencies.

Data Collection Instruments

Three primary instruments were used:

Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative data on teachers' perceptions of professional development needs, technological readiness, institutional support, and curriculum implementation challenges. The questionnaire included Likert-scale items adapted from previous teacher professional development research (Desimone & Garet, 2015). Questionnaires are effective tools for collecting standardized data from multiple participants efficiently (Cohen et al., 2018).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain deeper insights into teachers' experiences, beliefs, and perceived challenges. This method allows flexibility while maintaining focus on research objectives (Kallio et al., 2016). Interviews explored themes such as training experiences, curriculum adaptation difficulties,

technological integration, and assessment practices.

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were conducted to examine how teachers implemented the Merdeka Curriculum in actual teaching practice. Observations help capture authentic classroom interactions and pedagogical strategies that may not be fully revealed through self-report data (Richards, 2021). Observation notes focused on teaching methods, student engagement, assessment approaches, and integration of character education.

Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative data from questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means, percentages, and frequency distributions, to identify overall trends in teachers' professional development needs. Descriptive analysis is commonly used in educational research to summarize patterns in survey data (Cohen et al., 2018).

Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed using **thematic analysis**, following the stages of data familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This method enables systematic identification of recurring patterns and themes in qualitative data.

After separate analyses, quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated through triangulation to enhance credibility and provide a holistic interpretation of the data (Fetters et al., 2013). Triangulation strengthens research validity by combining multiple data sources and perspectives.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure research quality, several strategies were implemented. Questionnaire reliability was tested using internal consistency measures. Interview protocols were reviewed by educational experts to ensure content validity. Data triangulation through questionnaires, interviews, and observations enhanced credibility and reduced bias (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Member checking was also conducted by sharing interview summaries with participants to confirm accuracy. Such validation procedures are recommended in qualitative research to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the research purpose, procedures, and confidentiality assurances before data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity was maintained by using pseudonyms, and data were used solely for research purposes. Ethical research practice is essential to protect participants' rights and ensure responsible scholarship (Israel & Hay, 2006).

RESULT

This section presents the findings of the study regarding the professional development needs and challenges faced by English teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The results are organized into quantitative findings from questionnaires and qualitative findings from interviews and classroom observations. The integration of these data sources provides a comprehensive understanding of teachers' professional experiences within the new curriculum framework.

Teachers' Professional Development Needs

The questionnaire results indicate a generally high level of awareness among teachers regarding the importance of continuous professional development. Out of the ten participating teachers, eight (80%) strongly agreed that ongoing professional training is essential for successfully implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, while the remaining two (20%) agreed. None of the participants expressed disagreement with the importance of professional development.

When asked about specific professional development needs, the majority of teachers identified several priority areas. Nine teachers (90%) reported a strong need for training in project-based learning design and assessment, reflecting the curriculum's emphasis on authentic and student-centered evaluation. Eight teachers (80%) highlighted the need for support in integrating technology into English language teaching, particularly in developing digital learning materials and conducting online or blended instruction.

Additionally, seven teachers (70%) expressed a need for professional development related to differentiated instruction, especially in addressing diverse student proficiency levels. Teachers noted that the Merdeka Curriculum requires more individualized learning approaches, which they find challenging without adequate training.

Qualitative interview data further confirmed these needs. Several teachers emphasized that although they are motivated to improve their teaching, they often lack access to structured professional development programs. One teacher commented:

"We are expected to design innovative projects and assessments, but sometimes we don't receive enough guidance on how to do this effectively."

This statement reflects a common perception that professional expectations under the

Merdeka Curriculum have increased faster than available support systems.

Challenges in Curriculum Implementation

The data revealed three major categories of challenges: insufficient training opportunities, limited technological resources, and lack of institutional support.

Insufficient Training Opportunities

Seven teachers (70%) reported that they had attended only one formal training session related to the Merdeka Curriculum, while three teachers (30%) had not received any structured training at all. Teachers explained that available training programs are often short, theoretical, or not specifically focused on English language teaching.

Interview findings suggest that teachers often rely on self-directed learning, peer discussions, or online resources to compensate for limited formal training. However, this approach sometimes leads to inconsistent understanding of curriculum principles.

Technological Resources

Technological challenges emerged as another significant issue. Six teachers (60%) reported inadequate technological facilities at their schools, including limited internet access, insufficient digital devices, and lack of multimedia teaching tools. These limitations hinder the implementation of interactive and technology-enhanced learning approaches encouraged by the Merdeka Curriculum.

Classroom observations supported this finding. In several cases, teachers used traditional teaching materials despite expressing interest in digital learning tools. Observations showed that teachers frequently adapted by using printed materials or simplified digital resources rather than fully interactive platforms.

Institutional Support Constraints

Institutional support was identified as another major challenge. Five teachers (50%)

reported limited administrative support for professional development activities. Teachers noted that heavy teaching loads and administrative responsibilities reduce opportunities for attending training or participating in professional learning communities.

Moreover, some teachers expressed a need for ongoing mentoring rather than one-time training sessions. They suggested that continuous guidance would help them better understand curriculum expectations and improve teaching practice.

Uncertainty in Project-Based Assessment

One of the most prominent findings concerns teachers' uncertainty in designing and implementing project-based assessment. Eight teachers (80%) reported difficulty in developing assessment rubrics aligned with curriculum competencies. Teachers expressed concerns about balancing language proficiency assessment with character education outcomes emphasized in the Merdeka Curriculum.

Observations revealed variation in how project-based assessment was implemented. Some teachers assigned group projects focusing on communication skills, while others relied on traditional written tests due to uncertainty about assessment criteria. This inconsistency indicates a need for clearer guidelines and training.

Integration of Character Education

Another important finding relates to the integration of character education within English language teaching. Seven teachers (70%) reported difficulty incorporating character values such as collaboration, responsibility, and cultural awareness into language lessons.

Interview responses suggest that teachers understand the importance of character education but are unsure how to implement it practically. For example, some teachers incorporated collaborative group work or discussion topics related to social issues, but

they were uncertain whether these activities adequately fulfilled curriculum expectations.

Teacher Motivation and Positive Attitudes

Despite the challenges identified, teachers demonstrated strong motivation toward professional growth. All participants (100%) expressed willingness to participate in further training programs if available. Teachers showed positive attitudes toward the Merdeka Curriculum's goals, particularly its emphasis on student-centered learning and creativity.

Several teachers reported experimenting with new teaching strategies, such as collaborative projects, digital storytelling, and communicative language activities. Observations confirmed that teachers were making efforts to shift from traditional lecture-based instruction to more interactive approaches, even when resources were limited.

Importance of Collaborative Professional Learning

The study also highlights the role of collaborative professional learning communities. Six teachers (60%) reported participating in teacher working groups (MGMP) or informal peer discussions. These collaborations helped teachers exchange teaching ideas, discuss curriculum challenges, and share instructional materials. However, teachers indicated that such collaboration often depends on individual initiative rather than structured institutional support. Strengthening these professional communities could therefore enhance teacher preparedness and confidence.

Overall Interpretation of Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that English teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum demonstrate strong professional commitment but face systemic and practical challenges. Teachers require ongoing professional development that is contextually

relevant, practically oriented, and supported by adequate institutional resources.

The findings indicate that professional development programs should focus on:

- Project-based learning and assessment design
- Technology integration in language teaching
- Differentiated instruction strategies
- Character education integration
- Continuous mentoring and collaborative learning

Addressing these areas could significantly enhance teachers' ability to implement the Merdeka Curriculum effectively and improve English language learning outcomes.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight several important issues concerning the professional development needs and challenges faced by English teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia. Overall, the results indicate that while teachers demonstrate strong motivation to improve their professional competencies, they encounter structural, pedagogical, and technological constraints that influence the effectiveness of curriculum implementation. These findings reinforce the idea that curriculum reform requires sustained teacher support, not only policy changes.

One major finding relates to teachers' strong recognition of the importance of continuous professional development. Most participants expressed a willingness to participate in further training programs, particularly those focused on project-based learning, technology integration, and differentiated instruction. This aligns with research suggesting that ongoing professional development significantly contributes to instructional improvement and student learning outcomes (Desimone & Garet, 2015). Teachers' positive attitudes toward professional learning also indicate readiness

to adapt to educational reform, which is essential for successful curriculum implementation.

However, despite this motivation, insufficient training opportunities remain a significant challenge. Many teachers reported limited access to structured professional development programs specifically addressing the Merdeka Curriculum in English language teaching contexts. This finding supports broader educational research indicating that one-off workshops or short-term training are often insufficient for meaningful pedagogical change. Continuous mentoring, collaborative reflection, and sustained professional learning communities are more effective in promoting lasting instructional improvement (OECD, 2021). Therefore, professional development programs should move beyond occasional training toward ongoing support systems.

Technological challenges also emerged as a critical factor affecting curriculum implementation. Teachers reported inadequate infrastructure, limited internet access, and insufficient digital teaching tools. These constraints hinder the adoption of innovative teaching methods encouraged by the Merdeka Curriculum, such as digital project-based learning and interactive language activities. Similar concerns have been identified globally, where unequal access to digital resources continues to influence educational quality and teacher readiness (UNESCO, 2022). Addressing technological disparities is therefore essential for ensuring equitable implementation of modern curricula.

Another key issue highlighted in the findings is teachers' uncertainty in designing project-based assessments. While the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes authentic and student-centered assessment, many teachers reported difficulty developing appropriate evaluation criteria that integrate both language competence and character

education. This reflects a broader challenge associated with assessment reform, where teachers require practical guidance, examples, and mentoring to translate policy expectations into classroom practice. Effective professional development should therefore include hands-on training in assessment design, rubric development, and reflective evaluation strategies.

The integration of character education into English language teaching represents another area requiring attention. Teachers acknowledged the importance of incorporating values such as collaboration, responsibility, and cultural awareness but often lacked practical strategies to implement these goals within language instruction. This finding suggests the need for interdisciplinary professional development that combines language pedagogy with character education principles. According to contemporary language teaching perspectives, effective English instruction should not only focus on linguistic competence but also foster intercultural communication skills and social values (Richards, 2021).

Institutional support also plays a crucial role in shaping teachers' professional development experiences. Participants indicated that heavy workloads, administrative responsibilities, and limited school-level support often restrict opportunities for professional learning. Such constraints may reduce teacher motivation and limit innovation in classroom practice. Research on educational reform consistently emphasizes that institutional leadership, supportive policies, and collaborative school cultures are essential for sustaining teacher professional development initiatives (OECD, 2021).

The findings also underscore the importance of collaborative professional learning communities, such as teacher working groups. Teachers who participated

in collaborative forums reported greater confidence in adapting to curriculum changes. Collaborative learning enables teachers to share experiences, discuss challenges, and co-construct teaching strategies, thereby enhancing professional competence. This supports the argument that professional development should not be viewed solely as individual training but as a collective process embedded within professional communities.

From a methodological perspective, the use of mixed-method research in this study allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' experiences. Quantitative data provided general trends regarding professional development needs, while qualitative insights offered contextual explanations of challenges faced by teachers. Combining these approaches enhances research validity and provides richer educational insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Overall, the discussion suggests that successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum depends heavily on sustained professional development support for English teachers. Key areas requiring attention include project-based assessment design, technology integration, differentiated instruction, character education integration, and institutional support mechanisms. Addressing these areas can improve teacher confidence, instructional quality, and ultimately student learning outcomes.

Future professional development programs should therefore be context-sensitive, practice-oriented, and collaborative. Continuous mentoring, accessible digital resources, and supportive institutional policies are essential to ensure that curriculum reform translates effectively into classroom practice. By strengthening teacher professional capacity, the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum—flexible learning, student-centered pedagogy, and holistic

competence development—can be more effectively achieved.

Conclusion

This study explored the professional development needs and challenges faced by English teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia. The findings indicate that teachers demonstrate strong motivation to improve their professional competence and adapt to curriculum reform. However, they continue to encounter several challenges, including limited access to structured professional development programs, technological constraints, institutional support issues, and uncertainty in implementing innovative pedagogical approaches such as project-based learning and character education integration.

One significant conclusion is that professional development remains a central factor in the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers recognize the importance of continuous learning and express willingness to participate in training opportunities that are practical, context-sensitive, and directly relevant to classroom needs. Previous research confirms that sustained professional development contributes significantly to improving instructional quality and student learning outcomes (Desimone & Garet, 2015). Therefore, policy efforts should prioritize accessible, ongoing, and practice-oriented professional development programs rather than relying solely on short-term training initiatives.

Another important finding concerns the role of technology in English language teaching. While the Merdeka Curriculum encourages innovative and flexible learning approaches, unequal access to technological infrastructure continues to hinder effective implementation. Teachers require not only adequate digital facilities but also training in technology-enhanced pedagogy to maximize

learning opportunities. Global education research highlights that digital competence is increasingly essential for teachers in modern educational systems (UNESCO, 2022). Addressing technological disparities is therefore crucial to achieving equitable curriculum implementation.

Institutional support also emerges as a critical factor influencing teacher professional development. Heavy administrative workloads, limited mentoring systems, and insufficient school-level support reduce opportunities for professional learning and innovation. Educational policy studies consistently emphasize that supportive institutional environments and collaborative professional cultures are necessary for sustaining teacher development initiatives (OECD, 2021). Schools and educational authorities should therefore provide structured mentoring programs, collaborative learning communities, and incentives for professional growth.

Furthermore, the study highlights teachers' uncertainty in designing project-based assessments and integrating character education within English language teaching. These aspects are central to the Merdeka Curriculum but require practical pedagogical guidance. Teachers need concrete examples, training workshops, and mentoring support to translate curriculum policy into effective classroom practice. Research on language pedagogy suggests that integrating communicative competence, intercultural awareness, and character education requires systematic professional preparation (Richards, 2021).

Despite these challenges, the findings also reveal positive teacher attitudes toward

curriculum reform. Teachers show willingness to experiment with student-centered teaching approaches, collaborative projects, and innovative learning strategies. This professional commitment represents a strong foundation for successful curriculum implementation. However, sustained support is essential to ensure that teachers can maintain motivation and continuously improve their instructional practices.

Overall, this study underscores that effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum depends not only on policy reform but also on comprehensive teacher professional development. Continuous training, technological support, collaborative professional communities, and institutional encouragement are key factors that influence teachers' readiness and instructional effectiveness. By addressing these areas, educational stakeholders can enhance the quality of English language education and support the broader goals of flexible, student-centered learning promoted by the Merdeka Curriculum.

Future research should involve larger samples, diverse educational contexts, and longitudinal approaches to better understand the evolving professional development needs of English teachers. Such research can contribute to evidence-based policymaking and more effective teacher support systems. Ultimately, strengthening teacher professional development will play a crucial role in ensuring meaningful educational transformation in Indonesia.

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