

## Challenges and Readiness of Elementary School Teachers in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

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### Abstract

*This study explores the challenges faced by elementary school teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. In the era of globalization, education is becoming increasingly complex, emphasizing not only academic aspects but also the adaptability of graduates to the changing world. The aim of this research is to determine the challenges faced by teachers and the readiness of teachers in implementing the independent curriculum. The research employs a qualitative descriptive approach to investigate the preparedness of elementary school teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Data collection techniques include observation, interviews, and document analysis. The evaluation of readiness encompasses indicators such as understanding the curriculum structure, planning, the learning process, module preparation, and assessment. Triangulation techniques ensure data accuracy. The findings reveal that teachers exhibit good readiness in planning and conducting lessons aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum. They comprehend the curriculum's principles and actively engage in developing lesson plans following the prescribed standards. Despite this positive outlook, challenges arise in terms of understanding and integrating key concepts, utilizing technology, and adapting assessment methods.*

**Keywords:** *Elementary school teachers, Implementation challenges 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, qualitative descriptive research.*

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi tantangan yang dihadapi guru sekolah dasar dalam menerapkan Kurikulum Merdeka. Di era globalisasi, pendidikan menjadi semakin kompleks, tidak hanya menekankan aspek akademik tetapi juga kemampuan adaptasi lulusan terhadap perubahan dunia. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengetahui tantangan yang dihadapi guru dan kesiapan guru dalam menerapkan kurikulum mandiri. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif untuk mengetahui kesiapan guru sekolah dasar dalam menerapkan Kurikulum Merdeka. Teknik pengumpulan data meliputi observasi, wawancara, dan analisis dokumen. Evaluasi kesiapan meliputi indikator seperti pemahaman struktur kurikulum, perencanaan, proses pembelajaran, penyusunan modul, dan penilaian. Teknik triangulasi menjamin keakuratan data. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa guru menunjukkan kesiapan yang baik dalam merencanakan dan melaksanakan pembelajaran sesuai dengan Kurikulum Merdeka. Mereka memahami prinsip-prinsip kurikulum dan secara aktif terlibat dalam mengembangkan rencana pembelajaran sesuai standar yang ditentukan. Terlepas dari pandangan positif ini, tantangan muncul dalam hal pemahaman dan pengintegrasian konsep-konsep utama, pemanfaatan teknologi, dan adaptasi metode penilaian.

**Kata kunci:** *Guru sekolah dasar, tantangan implementasi keterampilan abad 21, penelitian deskriptif kualitatif.*



## INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, educational challenges are becoming increasingly complex and rapidly evolving. The success of an education system is not solely measured by academic aspects but also by the graduates' ability to adapt to the changing world (Daga, 2021; Dhani, 2020). The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to meet these demands by equipping learners with 21st-century skills such as creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, the Merdeka Curriculum, with various internal learning approaches, optimizes learning content, providing sufficient time for students to familiarize themselves with concepts and strengthen their competencies (Ningrum & Muthali'in, 2023; Rahman et al., 2023; Shadri et al., 2023). Ministry's Regulation No. 4 of 2022 states that the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented based on the Head of the Standardization and Educational Assessment Agency's decree, affirming that the curriculum proceeds as planned. "Starting from the academic year 2022/2023, the Merdeka Curriculum becomes one of the choices selected by educational units. Moreover, based on the decision (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology No. 56 of 2022 regarding guidelines for implementing the curriculum for learning recovery), it includes three curriculum options that educational units can use for learning recovery, the structure of the Merdeka Curriculum, provisions related to learning and assessment, and also the teacher's workload. In practice, the Merdeka Curriculum is more flexible, focusing on essential content in competencies, such as literacy and numeracy, and project-based learning to develop soft skills and characters according to the Pancasila student profile (Nurzen, 2022; Sobakh et al., 2023; Yunitasari et al., 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum also grants freedom to school principals and teachers in choosing differentiated learning according to the students' profiles, oriented towards multi-subject learning. However, to achieve this, teachers need to have a profound understanding of these concepts and be able to integrate them into daily teaching. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Primary Schools (SD) faces challenges that require careful attention. The educational paradigm shift introduced by the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes contextual and creative learning, necessitating significant adjustments for teachers. The main challenges involve changing mindsets and traditional teaching methods to a more proactive, inclusive, and responsive approach to individual student needs (Kamila & Agus RM, 2023; Yudi et al., 2021; Yuhastina et al., 2020).

In various studies, it has been found that there is a lack of in-depth understanding regarding key concepts in the Merdeka Curriculum and how to integrate project-based learning, soft skills development, as well as numeracy and literacy in each learning activity (Anggita et al., 2023; Wijaya et al., 2020). Weaknesses in this understanding have the potential to hinder effective and comprehensive learning experiences for students. The Merdeka Curriculum often requires the use of technology, creative teaching materials, and learning facilities that support interactive approaches (Abidah et al., 2020; n.d.; Kranthi, 2017). Additionally, appropriate evaluation and assessment methods aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum pose a challenge. In an educational environment accustomed to traditional assessment methods, teachers need to develop evaluation methods that reflect students' achievements in terms of skills, attitudes, and contextual understanding (Rachmawati et al., 2022; Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022). The importance of this research is as a form of handling all the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the independent curriculum.

In the context of educational development in Madiun Regency, there is one educational unit that has taken significant steps to implement the Merdeka Curriculum, namely SD Negeri Sidorejo 02. Preliminary study results at the research

location obtained information that the school has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum in all classes. This effort reflects the school's commitment to actively engage in the educational transformation advocated by the Merdeka Curriculum. Through the conducted survey, it was found that SD Negeri Sidorejo has conducted In-House Training on the Merdeka Curriculum with the hope of applying it in the following semester.

Based on the above explanation, the researcher is interested in conducting a more comprehensive study on Teacher Readiness in Implementing Merdeka Curriculum Learning at SD Negeri 02 Sidorejo. This research aims to delve into the extent of SD teachers' readiness in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and identify the factors influencing the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the primary school level.

### **METHOD**

This study adopts a descriptive approach utilizing a qualitative method. According to Sugiyono (2019) this approach is chosen to deeply investigate the natural conditions of the research object, where the researcher serves as the key instrument. The main goal of this qualitative research is to intricately describe and explain the issues focused on in the study. The research subjects consist of teachers from SD Negeri 2 Sidorejo from June-July 2023, totaling 12 teachers responsible for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in their classrooms. The aim of this research is to analyze the readiness of the teachers at SD Negeri 2 Sidorejo in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Data collection techniques in this research involve observational methods using observation sheets, interviews, and document analysis tools. The readiness evaluation process is conducted through designed questions encompassing indicators such as understanding the curriculum structure, readiness in lesson planning, preparedness in the teaching process, readiness of teaching modules, and preparedness in learning assessment. Information accuracy is tested in this research using technical triangulation, source triangulation, and time triangulation. Source triangulation is employed to verify doubts regarding the material by reviewing information obtained from various sources. Meanwhile, time triangulation is a method to gather information over time. The data analysis technique employs the Miles and Huberman method, including data collection, reduction, display, and drawing conclusions (data verification). According to Wijaya (2018:120-121), data triangulation is a technique of checking data from various sources in various ways and at various times.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on data analysis, research results were obtained regarding teacher readiness in implementing the independent curriculum based on 5 predetermined indicators

Understanding the Characteristics and Structure of the Curriculum

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology has introduced the Prototype Curriculum as the Independent Curriculum and Independent Learning Platform. Launched on February 11, 2022, in Episode 15 of the Independent Learning Agenda, this curriculum follows a series of public trials and socialization activities. The Independent Curriculum is a reform of the education system implemented through the school driving program to enhance the quality of learning in schools. Based on the conducted research, it is evident that the structure of the Independent Learning Curriculum at the Elementary School (SD) level involves the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening (P5) project. This project encompasses several essential aspects, such as sustainable lifestyle, local wisdom, the spirit of unity in diversity (Bhinneka Tunggal Ika), the formation of the soul and its varieties, engineering and technology, as well as entrepreneurship. Additionally, there is intracurricular learning covering flag ceremonies, literacy, numeracy,

cleanliness, religious and moral education (IMTAQ), and gymnastics. Extracurricular learning is also organized in two fields, namely the state and sports fields. From observations, it is evident that learning activities take place from Monday to Saturday. In interviews with informants, it was revealed that teachers of grades I and IV in elementary schools have a fairly good understanding of the structure of the Independent Learning Curriculum. However, there are still gaps in understanding that need improvement. They are aware of the curriculum structure, including the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening (P5) project, intracurricular learning, and extracurricular learning. This project is implemented considering the individual talents and interests of students. In the context of curriculum implementation, teachers acknowledge that they do not yet have concrete examples of self-directed learning at the elementary school level. Respondents stated that the picture of the curriculum implementation is still unclear, but they are actively learning and developing themselves (Indarta et al., 2022; Kamiludin & Suryaman, 2017). Teachers actively participate in workshops or training organized by the Department of Education to enhance their understanding of the Independent Learning Curriculum and efforts towards self-reliance.

#### Readiness of Lesson Plans

In the context of implementing the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka), the success of the learning process heavily relies on the preparedness of each educator in developing Lesson Implementation Plans (RPP). The RPP is a document prepared by teachers that comprehensively details how a lesson will be executed, covering procedures to the organization of learning. The planning process is not just a requirement but is at the core of the entire educational institution. Furthermore, lesson planning is a concrete step relevant to adapting to the new curriculum, which must be tailored to the context and specific needs of the educational institution. As explained by Munawar (2022), the primary goal of all planning activities is to create a lesson plan that is not only effective but also efficient. The Independent Curriculum, with its philosophy of providing guidance and freedom to schools to choose learning criteria that align with the established curriculum structure, places the RPP as a key instrument in a directed and useful learning process. In this context, the results of the author's interviews with informants indicate that teachers of grades I and IV in elementary schools have demonstrated good readiness in developing lesson plans. This readiness is not merely a response to demands but reflects a deep understanding of the principles of the Independent Curriculum. The teachers not only understand but are also active in developing lesson plans in accordance with the established standards, demonstrating their commitment to following the guidelines and principles contained in the curriculum. Thus, the role of the RPP in the context of the Independent Curriculum is not just an administrative instrument but a concrete guide that assists educators in directing and implementing learning effectively. The readiness of teachers in developing RPP not only reflects an understanding of the curriculum but also a willingness to take an active role in implementing the principles of the Independent Curriculum in everyday teaching practices (Angga et al., 2022; Setiawan et al., 2020).

#### Readiness of the Learning Process

The goal of the Independent Learning curriculum is to provide students with the freedom to choose their desired learning path. To make the learning process more effective, teachers must adapt learning activities to the current conditions of the students (Novitasari & Fauziddin, 2022). In practice, the implementation of competency-based learning in the Independent Curriculum is based on efficiency and effectiveness. The focus is tailored to essential, relevant, and in-depth materials so that students have sufficient time to build creativity and innovation in achieving basic competencies. The competencies designed in this curriculum are focused on

enhancing literacy and numeracy. Based on interviews with educators regarding the readiness of teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum, it was revealed that they were aware of the new curriculum-related policies. Additionally, they understood the teaching methods that refer to students' talents and interests. This understanding guides educators to focus on developing students' competencies while avoiding excessive administrative pressure and mastery of teaching materials. According to them, the concept of Independent Learning allows educators to be more oriented towards improving students' competencies without being burdened by excessive administrative loads. Thus, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is directed towards more dynamic learning that is responsive to the needs and interests of students. The learning process in the Independent Learning Curriculum is described as a cycle involving three main stages (Isnaeni & Irawan, 2023; Nafisa & Fitri, 2023). The first stage is the Diagnostic Assessment, where teachers conduct an initial assessment to recognize students' potential, characteristics, needs, developmental stages, and learning achievements. This assessment is generally done at the beginning of the academic year to provide a strong foundation for further planning related to the most effective teaching methods. The second stage is Planning, where teachers organize the learning process according to the results of the diagnostic assessment. In addition, teachers also group students based on their ability levels, ensuring that each student receives a learning approach tailored to their needs. The third stage is Learning, where teachers regularly conduct formative assessments to evaluate students' learning processes and make adjustments to teaching methods. At the end of the learning process, teachers can also conduct summative assessments as part of the evaluation process for the overall achievement of learning objectives. Based on observations, it was found that teachers are quite proficient in preparing the learning process according to the structure of the Independent Curriculum. According to interviews conducted by the author with informants regarding the readiness of the learning process, it was mentioned that classroom teachers are doing well in implementing learning activities that align with the structure of the Independent Curriculum. The implementation of the learning process includes opening, core, and closing activities. The implementation of learning allows students to choose learning activities according to their talents and interests (Nisa, 2023; Oksari et al., 2022).

#### Readiness of Learning Modules

The results of interviews with educators regarding the development of teaching modules reveal that the main goal of this process is to provide teaching tools that can serve as a guide for teachers in implementing learning activities. In its implementation, teachers are given the freedom to choose or modify teaching modules prepared by the government to suit the unique characteristics of their students. Additionally, teachers also have the option to independently create teaching modules according to their needs and specific learning contexts. The criteria that teaching modules must possess include essentiality, where the modules are designed to provide an understanding of the concepts of each subject through learning experiences and interdisciplinary approaches. Modules are also expected to be interesting, meaningful, and challenging, with the aim of fostering student interest in learning and active engagement. It is crucial that the modules are relevant and contextual, connected to students' previous knowledge and experiences, and suitable for the time and learning environment context. Continuity is also a key criterion, with the flow of learning activities closely related to the developmental phases of student learning.

In terms of the components of teaching modules, the interview results indicate that they should include at least learning objectives, learning steps (including learning media), assessment, as well as additional learning information

and references to support teachers in the learning process. In addition, teachers are given the freedom to add other components according to the needs of the subject and specific learning contexts in educational units. This flexibility allows teachers to develop teaching modules that are suitable for the needs and specific characteristics of the students they guide (Rustini et al., 2023). Thus, the interview results emphasize that the development of teaching modules becomes a tool that supports the flexibility and adaptability of teachers in organizing effective and relevant learning.

Based on the interview results with informants regarding the readiness of teaching modules, it was mentioned that primary school teachers have a good level of readiness in preparing teaching modules. Both first-grade and fourth-grade teachers, before conducting learning activities, prioritize the design of teaching modules. The first step is to develop learning objectives by analyzing learning achievements first and then competencies based on these achievements. The second step involves developing the flow of learning objectives by analyzing learning achievements first and then analyzing competencies based on these achievements. The third step is formulating learning achievements by updating core competencies (KI) and basic competencies (KD) into learning achievements (CP) used during lessons (Faiz & Kurniawaty, 2020; Lia Marlina et al., 2021).

#### Top of Form

#### Readiness of Facilities and Infrastructure

Physical infrastructure in schools is a crucial aspect in supporting the smooth process of teaching and learning. The success of an education program depends heavily on the condition and management of buildings and infrastructure in the school environment. Therefore, the management of educational facilities and infrastructure is not only considered an administrative effort but also a crucial strategy to enhance the effectiveness of the learning process. Managing facilities and infrastructure is not merely an administrative activity; it is a significant contributor to the success of an education system. Based on observations and interviews, it was found that the facilities and infrastructure at SD (elementary school) are relatively good. Factors such as the number of classrooms, equipment in each room, the availability of books in the library, and learning media indicate the school's success in providing a relatively good learning environment. Additionally, with a class capacity of around 15-30 students per class, this situation is considered ideal for creating effective interaction between teachers and students. The importance of infrastructure, including buildings and the surrounding school environment, is also evident in the observation results. The land and room sizes are arranged to be suitable for the number of students, creating relevant and optimal learning conditions. However, there is a note that the school still requires certain improvements, especially regarding learning media. Additional development of learning media relevant to the Merdeka Belajar curriculum should be planned in the School Activity and Budget Plan (RKAS) to ensure the achievement of the curriculum's goals.

#### Learning Assessment

Learning assessment functions as an instrument to evaluate the effectiveness of the learning process and measure student achievements. The learning outcome report should include information about learning achievements as well as the growth and development of students (Kemendikbutristek, 2022b). For example, authentic assessment can be used to measure student development in cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. Although providing detailed information about student learning outcomes, many consider that authentic assessment requires a considerable number of instruments (Sugiri & Priatmoko, 2020, p. 60).

It is essential to note that the Merdeka Curriculum, which advocates the concept of learner autonomy, will also impact learning assessment. However, from the interview results, it appears that teachers still lack understanding, especially regarding the assessment reporting aspect. The information obtained indicates that teachers have not fully understood whether the assessment concept will remain the same or undergo significant changes compared to the previous curriculum. The interviews with informants about learning assessment show that the tool used to determine the success of learning and evaluate student performance is called learning assessment. Authentic assessment, for example, has the ability to measure student development in cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions. According to (Faiz & Kurniawaty, 2020) one common form of evaluation used in elementary education is authentic evaluation, which provides detailed information about student learning outcomes but often requires various evaluation tools. In the context of learning assessment readiness, interviews with class teachers show that they are well-prepared to conduct assessments or evaluations (Nafisa & Fitri, 2023). Teachers state that assessments or evaluations are carried out using the Learning Objective Flow (ATP), which details the learning objectives (TP) to be achieved and identifies these TP. The evaluation process is then carried out by providing written and oral tests or using post-tests and pre-tests. Although this readiness appears positive, teachers acknowledge that additional training is still needed related to assessment in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study sheds light on the challenges and readiness of elementary school teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings reveal that while teachers exhibit a commendable level of readiness, particularly in areas such as lesson planning, the integration of 21st-century skills, and the development of learning modules, there are still challenges to be addressed. These challenges encompass aspects of technology adoption, varying levels of understanding regarding the curriculum's key concepts, and the need for continuous professional development. Despite these challenges, the study highlights the positive aspects of teachers actively engaging in workshops and training sessions to enhance their understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum. To foster successful implementation, there is a clear need for targeted professional development, adequate resources, community collaboration, a robust monitoring and evaluation system, and policy support. Addressing these aspects will not only overcome challenges but also contribute to the effective realization of the Merdeka Curriculum's goals, ultimately improving the overall quality of elementary education. Based on research, it can be concluded that teachers are ready to implement an independent curriculum and are able to overcome all the challenges they face.

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