

Teacher Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Kindergarten

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Abstract

The Merdeka Curriculum, a government-mandated educational policy, requires implementation across all educational levels, including early childhood education. Teachers play a pivotal role in its successful execution. To assess the effectiveness of this curriculum in a specific context, a descriptive quantitative study was conducted at the Pembina North Cikarang State Kindergarten. A questionnaire survey, utilizing a Likert scale, was administered to seven teachers to gather data on their perceptions of the curriculum's implementation. The results revealed that a significant majority of teachers (64%) strongly agreed with the curriculum's effectiveness, with an additional 31% agreeing. This positive feedback suggests that the Merdeka Curriculum is being well-received and implemented effectively in the studied kindergarten.

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INTRODUCTION

The Fourth Industrial Revolution and the dawning of a 5.0 society have ushered in significant transformations across all facets of human existence. The interconnected world we inhabit now faces an array of complex challenges on multiple fronts, jeopardizing the stability and well-being of society in areas ranging from technology and economics to social and environmental spheres (Tavares et al., 2022). However, besides providing challenges, these changes open up new opportunities.

Education is a key area affected by the dynamic nature of our world. The UN's Transforming Education Summit in 2022 stressed that education must undergo a transformation to remain relevant and effective in the face of rapid advancements (Guterres, 2022). That is why the curriculum changes from time to time. Curriculum changes aim to prepare future generations and equip children with essential knowledge, skills, and competencies to face challenges (Gouédard et al., 2020). As Hays and Reinders say, the curriculum of the future is designed to be dynamic and adaptive, always open to change and exploring possibilities, rather than fixated on certainties in design, delivery, and learning outcomes (Hays & Reinders, 2020).

Indonesia has recently introduced the Merdeka Curriculum, a new educational framework designed to foster student independence and creativity. Implemented from early childhood to high school, this curriculum aims to empower students to explore their interests and talents. By focusing on critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication, the Merdeka Curriculum challenges teachers to create dynamic learning experiences that equip students with essential 21st-century skills. This innovative approach to education has not only empowered students but also inspired them to explore their interests and talents, leading to a more engaging and effective learning experience (Utari & Muadin, 2023).

Implementing the existing curriculum requires students to pursue high grades in lessons and have expertise in their respective fields (Selian & Irwansyah, 2018). This can be a factor in students' inability to express themselves freely. Therefore, an Merdeka Curriculum is created to enable students to express themselves.

The early childhood education sector has also been required to implement an Merdeka Curriculum. Implementing the Merdeka curriculum at the early childhood education level aims to allow young children to learn more freely while playing, which is often referred to as independent play. The essence of this independent learning is to create a pleasant learning atmosphere without any pressure to get certain grades (Sudaryanto et al., 2020). The essence of Merdeka curriculum learning at the early childhood level is "freedom to learn, freedom to play," which is expected to provide meaningful and enjoyable experiences for children.

The Merdeka curriculum component at the early childhood level consists of two types, namely intracurricular learning and a project to strengthen the profile of Pancasila students. Both require teachers to combine various project-based strategies, carry out habituation activities, integrate local wisdom values, and improve teacher competence to provide a comprehensive and effective approach (Hidayanto et al., 2023).

So, what is teachers' perception as the main actors in implementing the Merdeka curriculum? How do they see the students' responses? Is it true that implementing the Merdeka curriculum can make learning fun? The

perceptions of early childhood education teachers towards implementing the Merdeka curriculum are essential to exploring and comparing ideal concepts and patterns of practice in educational institutions, especially early childhood education.

Thus, this research was conducted to find out kindergarten teachers' perceptions regarding the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in their institutions. It aimed to provide a more detailed picture of the effectiveness of implementing the Merdeka curriculum in an early childhood education unit.

METHOD

This research employs a quantitative methodology, specifically descriptive analysis. By using a quantitative approach, we can gather numerical data and apply statistical techniques to analyze and interpret the results. This allows for a more objective and measurable understanding of the research topic (Waruwu, 2023). The type of descriptive analysis is intended to use statistical methods to process and understand data by describing and explaining the characteristics of the collected data.

The subjects in this study were teachers who taught in a State Kindergarten located in North Cikarang, with a total of 7 people. Data collection was carried out on October 16, 2023. This research was conducted with a survey model using a closed questionnaire tool. The questionnaire contains statement items that explain the teacher's perceptions regarding the effectiveness of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in the kindergarten. Measurement uses a Likert scale with a score range of 1 to 5. The Likert scale of 1 to 5 shows answer options with five variations: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree.

The questionnaire data was collected through a Google form platform, which was distributed through the teacher's WhatsApp group. This data is extracted to discover kindergarten teachers' perceptions after implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in kindergarten institutions. The description of each value on the scale is listed in the table as follows:

Table 1. Likert Scale Score

Scale	Score
strongly disagree	1
disagree	2
neutral	3
agree	4
strongly agree	5

The quantitative data obtained is then presented in percentage form and displayed descriptively. The questionnaire grids are displayed in tabular form as follows.

Table 2. Questionnaire Grid for Teacher Perceptions of the Effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum

Variables	Indicators	Item	Number of Items
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Learner freedom in the implementation of an Merdeka Curriculum	Students Skill	1	1
Characteristics of learners in an Merdeka Curriculum	Students Attitude	2, 3	2
implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by teachers	Teachers Skill	4, 5, 6	3
		Total	6

The next stage is the validity test. This technique determines the level of validity of the instrument used or how well a test tool measures its validity (Pramuaji & Loekmono, 2018). An instrument will be valid if it can measure what is desired and reveal data through the variables studied correctly. The formula measures this:

$$r_{xy} = \frac{n \sum_{i=1}^n x_i y_i - \sum_{i=1}^n x_i \sum_{i=1}^n y_i}{\sqrt{\left(n \sum_{i=1}^n x_i^2 - \left(\sum_{i=1}^n x_i \right)^2 \right) \left(n \sum_{i=1}^n y_i^2 - \left(\sum_{i=1}^n y_i \right)^2 \right)}}$$

Description

- r_{xy} : correlation coefficient between variable X and variable Y
- x_i : the i-th data value for variable group X
- y_i : the i-th data value for variable group Y
- n : amount of data

Picture 1. Validity Test Formula

Criteria:

- The instrument is valid if $r\text{-count} = r\text{-table}$
- The instrument is invalid if $r\text{-count} < r\text{-table}$

The next stage is the reliability test. The test is carried out to determine whether the data produced is reliable and resilient. The instrument reliability test was carried out using the Cronbach Alpha formula because this research is in the form of a questionnaire with a multilevel scale. Based on the test results, it can be reliable if the correlation shows a value > 0.6 and not reliable if it shows a value < 0.6 . The following formula is used:

$$r_{11} = \left(\frac{n}{n-1} \right) \left(1 - \frac{\sum \sigma_t^2}{\sigma_t^2} \right)$$

Description



r_{11} = the reliability value sought

n = the number of tested question items

$\sum \sigma_t^2$ = the number of variant scores for each item

σ_t^2 = variant total

Picture 2. Reliability Test Formula

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

After conducting the validity test and reliability test, the results are obtained with the following values:

Table 4. Reliability Test Result Value

Benchmark Value	Cronbach's Alpha Value	Conclusion
0.6	0.9444444444	Reliable

Based on the results of the validity test, the results of the instrument used have five valid items and one invalid item. Furthermore, the reliability test results state that the statement items are reliable. After conducting validity and reliability tests, the next step is statistical testing of the data obtained from the questionnaire.

Table 5. Survey Results of teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of Merdeka Curriculum at the early childhood education level

No.	Statements	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
1.	The Merdeka Curriculum can help discover children's interests and talents	0%	0%	0%	28.6%	71.4%
2.	The Merdeka Curriculum can help children be more active	0%	0%	0%	28.6%	71.4%
3.	Implementation of the Student's Pancasila Profile Strengthening	0%	0%	14.3%	14.3%	71.4%

	Project can build children's character values					
4.	The Merdeka Curriculum helps to create more enjoyable learning	0%	0%	0%	28.6%	71.4%
5.	Implementing an Merdeka Curriculum requires detailed and thorough planning	0%	0%	0%	42.9%	57.1%
6.	The Merdeka Curriculum is easy to implement	0%	0%	14.3%	42.9%	42.9%

1. Learner's Freedom in Implementing Merdeka Curriculum

Based on the statistical test results, it is known that the statement item, which reads that the Merdeka Curriculum can find children's interests and talents, produces the following details: 71.4% of respondents strongly agreed, and 28.6% agreed with the statement. From these results, teachers strongly agree that an Merdeka Curriculum can help them find the interests and talents of students.

One of the most important aspects of implementing an Merdeka Curriculum is implementing differentiated learning. Differentiated learning is a teaching and learning process in which teachers design flexible and diverse learning to allow learners to choose the way of learning that best suits their learning style (Sigalingging, 2023). It allows teachers to customize classroom learning to meet individual needs. This approach is essential to support learners' freedom to discover their interests and talents (Nafisa & Fitri, 2023).

The learner-centered approach gives learners the freedom to determine their interests and talents. Educators must know each individual's learning needs to create a safe and comfortable learning environment and facilitate individual improvement in competencies (Lestarinigrum, 2022).

In addition, learner-centered learning emphasizes the fulfillment of their rights. Thus, it opens up more opportunities for them to choose various activities or learning materials inside and outside the classroom. Freedom of choice prevents learners from feeling constrained or forced to do an activity. On the contrary, learners will be more motivated and involved in the teaching and learning process.

2. Learners' Character Development

The test results for the statement "The Merdeka curriculum can help make children more active" show that 71.4% of respondents strongly agree, and the remaining 28.6% agree. This means that most teachers strongly agree and the remaining part agree that the Merdeka Curriculum can help early childhood learners be more active in learning activities.

Meanwhile, the analysis results on the statement item "The application of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project can build positive character values in children" show that 71.4% of respondents strongly

agree, 14.3% agree, and the remaining 14.3% think neutral. Thus, most respondents consider applying the Pancasila student profile strengthening project to be effective in helping students better recognize, appreciate, and be motivated to practice the values contained in Pancasila.

One of the characteristics of learning that implements the Merdeka Curriculum is proactive. Proactive teachers will anticipate the class they will teach from the beginning and develop lesson plans based on the needs of students. This can also be seen from their readiness to manage the class, respond to student questions, and ensure that all students are actively involved in the teaching and learning process.

Teacher activeness from the beginning before learning begins is the key to students' becoming more active as well. Likewise, in its implementation, teachers are required to create an interesting and enjoyable learning environment so that students can be actively involved in learning (Nafisa & Fitri, 2023).

An Merdeka Curriculum can be interpreted as an independent play curriculum in early childhood education. Thus, learners must be more actively involved in playing while learning. Active, in this case, can also refer to the freedom of expression of learners in responding to various things received by their senses.

Meanwhile, character development becomes more strongly legitimized through the implementation of an Merdeka Curriculum. In the decision of the Head of the Education Standards, Curriculum and Assessment Agency Number 009/H/KR/2022 of 2022, the Dimensions, Elements, and Sub-Elements of the Pancasila Learner Profile are listed (Keputusan Kepala Badan Standar, Kurikulum, Dan Asesmen Pendidikan Tentang Dimensi, Elemen, Dan Sub-Element Profil Pelajar Pancasila, 2022). From this policy, the curriculum in education units becomes more flexible, emphasizing the simplification of content (Fauzi, 2022).

Student character development can be formed in various ways inside and outside the classroom. Students can hone their competence academically or hone skills such as practicing courage to voice opinions in discussions and the ability to get along with others. Character development is considered important because it aims to shape the personality of a good child by their age and development (Daulay & Fauziddin, 2023). Some of the character values developed through the Pancasila profile are God-fearing and noble, independent, cooperation, global diversity, critical reasoning, and creativity. Character development-based learning is integrated with activities or learning experiences, co-curricular through project-based learning, and extracurricular activities that develop students' talents and interests (Lestari, 2023).

3. Creating Fun Learning

The test results for the statement "The Merdeka Curriculum creates fun learning" show that 71.4% of respondents strongly agreed and 28.6% agreed. Thus, most respondents recognize that the Merdeka Curriculum can help create enjoyable learning. Teacher testimonials say that learning takes place in a more varied manner and increases the attention of students.

The emphasis on learner activeness in implementing the Merdeka curriculum requires teachers to be more creative. Teachers can maximize

the use of various kinds of learning media if needed (Nafisa & Fitri, 2023). Learning can involve both media and learning models, approaches, methods, and varied learning resources to create more enjoyable learning.

The Merdeka curriculum is designed to create a new perspective: education that is learner-oriented and focuses on cognitive assessment as well as affective and psychomotor skills (Gita, 2023). Therefore, teachers must create a profound and enjoyable teaching and learning atmosphere (Damayanti et al., 2023). Teachers must be able to use their creativity to incorporate the content of Pancasila values into learning, which aims to form fun and exciting learning for children.

4. The need for good planning

In terms of planning, all respondents consider that the Merdeka Curriculum requires careful planning to be implemented. The analysis of the answers to the question item "The Merdeka Curriculum requires detailed and careful planning" shows that 57.1% of respondents strongly agreed, and 42.9% agreed. It appears that none of the respondents thought neutrally or even disagreed.

Implementing any curriculum requires careful preparation and planning; the Merdeka Curriculum is no exception. Schools must prepare adequate infrastructure and resources and adjust their curriculum and learning system. Shihab et al. also recognize that adaptation to the Merdeka Curriculum requires careful preparation and development, including a deep understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum policy, teacher involvement in the adaptation process, and support from the school and government (Shihab et al., 2023). Especially in the context of early childhood, where students are unique according to their stages of thinking, need role models, and need concrete objects in their stimulation, careful design is needed so that children can be served according to their needs (Oktaria et al., 2024).

Teacher readiness is the key to effectively implementing the Merdeka curriculum in early childhood education. One of the efforts is to design learning plans and prepare problem-solving strategies to meet learning needs based on the goals that have been formulated (Suttriso & Yulia, 2022). Teachers also need to improve their competence and knowledge of the curriculum and develop learning strategies that align with the latest approaches.

With the curriculum innovation in Indonesia through the Merdeka Curriculum policy, all educators are expected to be able to adapt themselves to the times accompanied by curriculum updates. Teachers can also participate in the mobilizing teacher program as a forum to improve teacher abilities and gain insight into the values of Pancasila following the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum (Faiz et al., 2022).

On the other hand, government support is also needed. The government needs to provide comprehensive guidance and training for schools and teachers to understand and implement the Merdeka Curriculum effectively. Many efforts by the government or education units can be made to develop teacher potential, such as organizing scientific activities through training, seminars, and workshops so that they can become professional teachers (Barlian et al., 2022).

5. The Ease of Implementation

Regarding ease of implementation, most teachers claim that the Merdeka curriculum is easy to implement. For the statement "The Merdeka Curriculum is easy to implement," 42.9% of respondents strongly agreed, 42.9% agreed, and 14.3% stated that they were neutral.

When confirmed with 14.3% of the respondents, it was found that implementing the Merdeka curriculum took much work. However, because implementing the new curriculum has become mandatory for all education units, teachers have no choice but to try to adapt. The adaptation stage made some teachers want to change their mindset and teaching methods slowly.

After studying, the teachers saw that the Merdeka Curriculum wanted flexibility in every aspect, especially in meeting learning outcomes. Rani et al. also recognized that one of the advantages of an Merdeka Curriculum for teachers is that the speed of teaching can be adjusted to the needs of students (Rani et al., 2023). Not only in terms of learning, the assessment is also very flexible (Shalehah, 2023). The Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture allows early childhood education institutions to implement the curriculum independently, considering their respective conditions and readiness.

The findings in this study are also relevant to those stated by Jannah and Rasyid, who consider the implementation of an Merdeka Curriculum in early childhood education institutions to facilitate teachers. According to him, teachers also become more creative and innovative and have the freedom to prepare teaching tools (Jannah & Rasyid, 2023).

However, some teachers can acknowledge that there are still obstacles to adjusting the curriculum, such as transitioning from the previous planning model to the new model and mastering various learner-centered learning models. That requires self-adjustment, which can sometimes be challenging (Daulay & Fauziddin, 2023).

The overall results of data mining conducted using a questionnaire instrument showed that 64% of respondents strongly agreed, 31% agreed, and 5% stated that they were neutral about the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum in kindergarten. That means that most teachers gave positive reviews of the practice of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in the kindergartens studied.

The findings are in line with previous research conducted by Anwar in 2022. In his research, which used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, Anwar concluded that teachers have diverse perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum. Among them, they believe that the Merdeka Curriculum is dynamic and flexible and can be adjusted to the needs of the school. The Merdeka Curriculum is a reference for teachers to be more creative in creating independent learning (Anwar, 2022).

Teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum cannot be used as the primary benchmark for teacher readiness for or the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation. However, knowing how teachers perceive the curriculum will provide policymakers with an overview of how well the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented in educational units.

CONCLUSION

Based on the study results, it can be concluded that kindergarten teachers mostly gave positive feedback on implementing an Merdeka Curriculum in the kindergartens studied. The Merdeka Curriculum allows educators to design more superficial learning and focus on learner development. In turn, this flexibility is seen as supporting learners' freedom to learn according to their age and stage of development. Apart from this, the support of all parties involved is needed for the optimal implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, starting from educational institutions, teachers, and parents. As the main actors in teaching and learning activities, teachers are expected to be highly adaptable and have unlimited creativity. Schools play an essential role in providing curriculum documents and curriculum development. Meanwhile, parents must be ensured to be involved as partners with educators in assisting, identifying children's needs, and providing ongoing guidance at home.

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