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Implementation of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Elementary Schools: How is Teachers' Perception?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe teachers' perceptions of the implementation of an independent curriculum in elementary schools. This research is qualitative. Qualitative research explores and understands the meaning of several individuals or groups of people with social problems. The researchers construct reality and understand the meaning, so this research strongly focuses on processes, events, and authenticity. The respondents were elementary school teachers. Data were collected through interviews. The main instrument of this study was the researcher, supported by field notes. All data were collected and reviewed descriptively to obtain reliable and trustworthy findings. The results showed that: (1) teachers' perceptions are positive and good towards the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in elementary schools, (2) teachers play an essential role in the process of curriculum development and implementation in elementary schools, and the success of curriculum implementation depends on the intensity with

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which teachers implement the curriculum in the classroom, (3) teachers can develop and implement curriculum and design classes to improve learning quality; (4) socialisation and special technical guidance related to the formation of the Pancasila learner profile have not been maximised; (5) not all elementary school teachers have adopted Merdeka curriculum; (6) not all teachers have information technology skills; and (7) the obstacle in implementing Merdeka curriculum is the lack of stable internet access, especially for remote schools that have geographically difficult internet access.

Keywords: teacher perceptions, implementation of merdeka curriculum, elementary schools

INTRODUCTION

The curriculum is one of the important elements in the implementation of learning at all levels of education (Siregar, 2021). This is in line with Ormond's (2017) view that explains the curriculum as a set of guidelines designed into a curriculum consisting of principles, environments, and requirements consistent with the learning objectives to be achieved. Following the appointment of Nadiem Makarim as Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (Mendikbudristek) in October 2019, a number of education policies and programmes have been established. One of them is Sekolah Penggerak (Maghfiroh & Sholeh, 2022). The Movers School programme was launched on 1 February 2021. The programme started in 2021/2022 in 2,500 schools in 34 provinces and 111 regencies/cities (Kholik et al., 2022). The mobilising school's programme is still in a phased implementation process, and structured support is still needed for schools that qualify to become mobilising schools. However, the programme has received attention from education observers and experts in Indonesia.

The emergence of the mobilising school's programme is a form of education reform that aims for systemic, social and cultural change. According to Nadiem (2020), school culture should not only focus on administrative approaches but should be able to encourage innovation and student-centred learning, with the hope that the graduates produced are in accordance with the Pancasila Student Profile (Marisa, 2021). The curriculum in Indonesia often changes in terms of its application in educational institutions. The curriculum implemented in Indonesia includes the 2006 KTSP, the 2013 curriculum, and what is still valid today is the Merdeka Curriculum (Merdeka Belajar) (Fakih Khusni et al., 2022; Mardiana & Umiarso, 2020). All curricula that are implemented aim to advance education according to the rapidly changing times.

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The purpose of curriculum implementation in education units is a benchmark for the field of education implementation at the education unit level (Boang Manalu et al., 2022). However, not all implementation of this curriculum goes smoothly, as there are still many opportunities for differentiation to achieve equitable outcomes for students. As independent factors of learning, teachers must be active and enthusiastic, creative, innovative and skilled to drive change in schools (Nasution, 2022; Suryaman, 2020; Tedjokoesoemo et al., 2021). As promoters of self-directed learning, teachers must not only be able to master the classroom and teach effectively but also create a good environment by building strong bonds with students (Hadi, 2021). Teachers should also be able to use various technologies available to enhance their teaching. Then, teachers must also practice correcting mistakes and shortcomings during teaching and learning activities (Fakih Khusni et al., 2022). With the innovations related to Merdeka Belajar policy, all teachers must measure themselves and see if they can adapt to the current era. This is done so that teachers are not inferior to their students in the use of information and technology (Jalinus et al., 2021). In addition, independent learning activist teachers must be able to instil good values in the midst of changes that can occur quickly through easy access and use of technology that is increasingly easy to use (Purnamawati et al., 2019).

The Merdeka Curriculum, as an extension of the 2013 curriculum, certainly received mixed reactions from teachers, students, and parents (Takdir et al., 2021). Each of them argued, and not a few complained that the curriculum change was considered too fast to replace the 2013 curriculum (Nasution, 2022). So far, the concept of the Merdeka curriculum has received many different responses from various educational institutions that promote student learning at the elementary and secondary school levels as well as at the tertiary level (See Fakih Khusni et al., 2022; Nasution, 2022; Sintiawati et al., 2022; Tedjokoesoemo et al., 2021). Implementation assessment is presented in the Pancasila Learner Profile Enhancement Project Development Guide. This section explains that the assessment of the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum, particularly the enhancement of the Pancasila Learner Profile, should basically involve learners (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). This study is limited to the perceptions of elementary school teachers only.

Previous research conducted in several public and private elementary schools shows that these schools have indeed implemented strengthening character education since 2017 (e.g., Artobatama et al., 2020; Fakih Khusni et al., 2022; Junaidin et al., 2022; Nasution, 2022). However, no evaluation has been conducted on implementing the Merdeka curriculum.

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Therefore, it is necessary to know how teachers perceive the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum, especially in elementary schools. Perception is a person's understanding when interpreting something (Supardan, 2016). According to Fekih Zguir et al. (2022), perception is the process by which a person selects, organises, and interprets information to develop meaningful views. There is a need to explore how teachers perceive the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum, as this will have a significant impact on teachers' learning practices in the classroom. Teachers are the main actors in implementing the Merdeka curriculum in schools. In the context of this study, the teachers in question are elementary school teachers. Therefore, this study aims to further explore how teachers perceive the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in elementary schools.

METHOD

The research method used is the descriptive qualitative method. This method aims to describe the findings in detail in accordance with the phenomena that occur (John W. Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2009). J.W. Creswell et al. (2007) state that qualitative research is research that explores and understands the meaning of a number of individuals or groups of people with social problems. According to Yin (2016), researchers seek to construct reality and understand its meaning, so this research has a strong focus on processes, events, and authenticity. Data were collected in December 2022 through unstructured interviews with teachers who implemented the Merdeka curriculum. The main instrument of this study was the researcher, supported by field notes. All data were systematically collected and descriptively evaluated. Meanwhile, the interactive cycle model was used in data analysis. According to Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2014), a series of processes starts from data collection, compaction, presentation and verification of data

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The curriculum is an important factor in the success of the education process in schools. Teacher training regarding implementing the curriculum that has changed is very important because with changes and updates to documents such as the curriculum, a comprehensive understanding is needed for teachers to carry out a quality learning process. Merdeka Curriculum is an elective curriculum that schools can introduce starting in the 2022/2023 school year. Merdeka Curriculum continues the development direction of the previous curriculum. The Pancasila Learner Profile curriculum is currently being implemented at the elementary and

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university levels (Marisa, 2021). In the process of strengthening the Pancasila Learner Profile, the role of teachers is important. Teachers play a very important role in strengthening children's character. In addition to teaching and learning activities, teachers act as second parents for students at school (Arifin, 2022).

Teachers are key figures in school curriculum development and implementation (Dharmawan & Suryadarma, 2021). Through their knowledge, experience and skills, teachers are at the centre of any curriculum development effort. Better teachers support better learning because they have more knowledge about teaching practices and are responsible for implementing the curriculum in the classroom (Tikkanen, 2016; Van Houtte, 2021). Elementary school teachers have a positive and appreciative perception of the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum in elementary schools. Teachers integrate the core characteristics of the Pancasila student profile into the learning process. The characteristics of Pancasila students include (1) faith, (2) global citizenship, (3) mutual cooperation, (4) independence, (5) critical thinking, and (6) creativity.

Implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in elementary schools is an action or implementation of the curriculum from a plan that has been carefully and thoroughly prepared. Based on the results of interviews with informants in several elementary schools, the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in elementary schools can be summarised as follows: (1) for now, the Merdeka curriculum is only implemented for grades I and IV; (2) in 2023, there are still options to implement the 2013 curriculum, emergency curriculum or independent curriculum, but in 2024, it must implement Merdeka curriculum without further selection, (3) students become the centre of learning; (4) learning is mostly done in groups to build an attitude of mutual cooperation among students in accordance with the student profile of Pancasila; (5) the implementation of the independent curriculum begins with the application of diagnosis assessment; (6) student diversity is maintained at a high level; and (7) project-based learning.

Teachers need to know and understand the curriculum when others have developed it. Therefore, teachers should be involved in curriculum development. Teachers' views and ideas should be incorporated into the curriculum for development. On the other hand, the team developing the curriculum should consider teachers as part of the environment that influences the curriculum. Therefore, teacher involvement is essential for successful and meaningful curriculum development. Teachers, as implementers, are part of the final stage of school curriculum development (Siregar, 2021; Wilestari, 2021).

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To fulfil the needs of society, it is imperative to involve teachers in the curriculum development process. The curriculum development process requires teachers to act and reflect on the community's needs at each stage of the development process. However, sometimes the process for teachers to follow is not clear. The approach to their participation in this process is not well defined and is very difficult for teachers, so they face many challenges regarding their involvement in curriculum development (Nasution, 2022; Suryaman, 2020). Teachers should be able to actively reflect on the needs of the community at every stage of the curriculum development process. On the other hand, not all teachers have the opportunity to be involved in every process of curriculum implementation. Teachers' professional development is an important factor contributing to curriculum development and implementation success.

Teachers are equipped with adequate knowledge and skills to contribute effectively to curriculum development and implementation. Therefore, teachers need training courses and workshops that focus on professional development to contribute to curriculum development. On the other hand, an important aspect that needs to be effectively considered in terms of teacher involvement in curriculum development is that teachers should be encouraged in the curriculum development process (Boang Manalu et al., 2022; Tedjokoesoemo et al., 2021). This means that improvements should be made in the learning process in various areas. Thus, teachers play an important role in the process of curriculum development and implementation to improve student learning outcomes.

Teachers involved in curriculum development have many roles and responsibilities. Teachers carry out the learning process and guide students to develop their interests and skills. Teachers prepare to learn plans and programmes within a specific curriculum, as it is the teacher's responsibility to implement the curriculum to meet student needs. Merdeka curriculum is a curriculum with varied intra-curricular learning, where the content is optimised so that students have sufficient time to explore concepts and strengthen their skills (Jalinus et al., 2021). Teachers can choose different learning resources to be tailored to students' learning needs and interests. Projects to strengthen the achievement of the Pancasila learner profile are developed based on specific themes identified by the government. These projects do not aim to achieve specific learning objectives and are not linked to subject content.

Involving teachers as the focus of curriculum development will result in effective educational reforms (Slijepčević & Zuković, 2015). Therefore, teachers are an important factor in the success of curriculum development, including in terms of engagement and assessment.

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Moreover, teachers' involvement in the curriculum development process is also important to align curriculum content with students' needs. The problem is that not all elementary school teachers have the opportunity to participate in Merdeka curriculum training. Especially socialisation and technical guidance specifically for Pancasila student profile training. This is the view of the elementary school teachers who were selected as respondents. They stated that not all elementary school teachers had the opportunity to participate in the Merdeka curriculum socialisation.

Involving teachers as the focus of curriculum development will result in effective education reform (Slijepčević & Zuković, 2015). Therefore, teachers are an important factor in the success of curriculum development, including in terms of engagement and assessment. In addition, teachers' involvement in the curriculum development process is also important to align curriculum content with students' needs. The problem is that not all elementary school teachers have the opportunity to participate in Merdeka curriculum training. Especially socialisation and technical guidance specifically for Pancasila student profile training. This is the view of the elementary school teachers who were respondents. They stated that not all elementary school teachers had the opportunity to participate in the Merdeka curriculum socialisation.

The results of this study are consistent with previous research. Fakih Khusni et al. (2022) stated that the existence of a driving school can be a role model, training ground, and source of inspiration for other teachers and principals. In a driving school, having teachers who understand that each student is different and apply different teaching methods according to their level will produce a profile of students who are noble, independent, and autonomous, who are able to reason critically, creatively, collaboratively, and have a sense of national and global diversity. A very important finding of the Leadership School is the support from the surrounding school community that supports the education process in the classroom, ranging from parents, and community leaders, to local government. Based on interviews regarding teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum, the perceived benefits are (1) teachers can be more creative and develop, (2) learning is more fun and meaningful, (3) learning is student-centred, and (4) Merdeka curriculum learning focuses on student-centred learning models.

Meanwhile, obstacles for teachers who live or work in geographical areas with difficult internet access or weak signals. In addition, teachers who are over 50 years old sometimes find it difficult to keep up with developments in information technology. According to one manager, there are barriers to teaching IT skills to school resources (Fakih Khusni et al., 2022; Purnamawati

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et al., 2019; Thohir et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the Merdeka curriculum requires the use of the internet to access self-directed learning platforms. In addition, it requires a good network. Meanwhile, access to road signs is still very difficult in some areas. This is an obstacle for public schools, especially those in remote areas. Other obstacles encountered by one informant were (1) the Merdeka curriculum seemed forced, (2) not all teachers welcomed the socialisation of the Merdeka curriculum, and (3) the lack of staff competence in schools. This is because the teachers who participated in the socialisation and training only used the Merdeka Belajar platform. The teachers only install the application without follow-up.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results and discussion above, the following conclusions can be drawn: (1) teachers are positive about the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum in elementary schools; (2) teachers play an important role in the process of curriculum development and implementation in elementary schools, and the success of curriculum implementation depends on the intensity of teachers in implementing the curriculum in the classroom; (3) teachers can develop and implement curriculum and design classes to improve learning; (4) with the Merdeka curriculum, teachers can develop and implement the curriculum to improve learning; (5) with the Merdeka curriculum, teachers can develop and implement the curriculum to improve learning; (6) teachers can develop and implement the curriculum to improve learning; (7) teachers can develop and implement the curriculum to improve learning; (8) teachers can develop and implement the curriculum to improve learning.

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