



Navigating Merdeka curriculum in first grade: teacher challenges and strategies

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Abstract

This study investigates the difficulties encountered by first-grade teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and analyzes the techniques used to overcome these obstacles. A qualitative research methodology with a descriptive approach was utilized to gather data via observation, interviews, and documentation, followed by a thorough analysis of data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal various challenges, including the lack of familiarity with the new terminology for learning outcomes, objectives, lesson plans, and modules related to the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). Furthermore, students demonstrate inadequate preparation for the Pancasila Student Profile Project. Educators respond by seeking official information on the Merdeka Curriculum through Ministry of Education and Culture resources, participating in relevant webinars, discussing with colleagues, and embracing new pedagogical approaches and media. Additionally, collaboration with students and parents is emphasized for the productive implementation of lesson plans and project modules. This study suggests implementing ongoing support mechanisms such as continuous training and resource sharing to improve teachers' competencies in implementing Merdeka Curriculum effectively in first grade.

Keywords: *Merdeka curriculum, teacher challenges, teacher strategies, first grade*

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in the lower grades of primary schools brings significant educational changes, along with expectations and challenges (Ndari et al., 2023). As the education system becomes more student-centered and flexible, classroom teachers play a key role in this transformation.



Their role is not only as teachers who transfer knowledge, but also as role models for students. Teachers must be knowledgeable and constantly update their understanding with the times in order to accommodate students' needs (Ndari et al., 2023).

The role of teachers is crucial in human civilization and cannot be replaced by technological developments (Ibda, 2023). They must continue to develop their professionalism, incorporate moral values into their teaching, and help students develop their potential (Dhari et al., 2021). The quality of a teacher greatly influences the success of the learning process, as they are the main designers of learning (Juwairiah, 2021). The success of the learning process is measured by the achievement of learning objectives and students' learning progress. To achieve optimal learning, teachers must pay attention to classroom management, developing students' potential and thinking ability, and instilling good values in students throughout life (Remme et al., 2022).

To achieve effective learning goals, teachers need to understand and apply strategies in the learning process. The ability to use strategies is not only the result of daily experience or copying strategies seen, but also relies on theory and creativity (Khasanah et al., 2021). Teachers need to choose student-focused strategies, including activities, learning stages, and materials, in order to increase students' understanding, engagement, and motivation. By choosing the right strategy, learning will become more meaningful and students will achieve learning objectives well (Prihatini, 2020).

Apart from teachers, the curriculum also has an important role in education. The curriculum guides the implementation of learning and helps teachers in determining materials, learning strategies, and student assessment. The curriculum affects the overall progress of education. In Indonesia, there have been a number of curriculum changes from the 1947 curriculum to the current Merdeka curriculum. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (MoEC Ristek) has developed the Merdeka curriculum in an effort to address inequalities in literacy and numeracy. The merdeka curriculum emphasizes core materials, learning flexibility, soft skills development, and the Pancasila learner profile. One important aspect of the Merdeka curriculum is project-based learning, such as the Pancasila Learner Profile Strengthening Project (P5), which helps students become active and developed global citizens in various aspects (Mery et al., 2022).

However, the transition from the 2013 curriculum to the Merdeka curriculum has not been fully implemented. Some teachers still find it difficult to adapt to the Merdeka curriculum and remain in their comfort zone. Curriculum change is a challenge for some teachers, who must be able to adapt to changing times, innovate in learning, use learning media, create a conducive environment, build good relationships with students, and utilize technology in teaching (Arviansyah &

Shagena, 2022).

Public Elementary School Cikaret 01 is one of the primary schools in Cibinong, Bogor Regency, which has been implementing the Merdeka curriculum since the new school year 2022/2023 in grade 1. Grade 1 teachers at this school initially faced difficulties in implementing the Merdeka curriculum due to a lack of understanding about effective implementation and preparation of learning tools. To overcome this problem, they adopted various strategies in implementing the Merdeka curriculum. In this context, this study is important as it reveals the challenges faced by grade 1 teachers and the strategies they use in implementing the Merdeka curriculum, enriching the understanding of this issue (Arviansyah & Shagena, 2022).

This study can also be seen as a development of previous research, such as the study by Hesti Yulia Rosadi and Dian Fitri Andriyani which highlighted the important role of BK teachers in the merdeka curriculum during the pandemic. BK teachers use various techniques and strategies to ensure students can optimally participate in learning (Rosadi & Andriyani, 2020). The results of other studies, such as those conducted by Mumayzizah Miftahul Jannah and Harun Rasyid, identified problems faced by teachers, such as analyzing Learning Outcomes (CP) into Learning Objectives (TP), compiling the Flow of Learning Objectives (ATP), and teachers' lack of technological skills (Zulaiha et al., 2022). Therefore, this study is expected to provide deeper insights into the challenges Grade 1 teachers face and the strategies they use in implementing the Merdeka curriculum.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with the descriptive method to explain concepts and phenomena through a structured and narrative form. Qualitative research is a thorough process that intricately describes concepts and phenomena within a given phenomenon through a structured and narrative presentation. The descriptive method is employed to provide a detailed depiction of the observed phenomenon, utilizing words as responses to emerging questions.

The research is categorized as field research, which means an investigation conducted in a specifically selected location to explore a particular phenomenon within it (Moelong, 2009). The research site selected is Class 1 of Cikaret 01 Public Elementary School, with a research duration spanning 2 months and 25 days. The researcher chose Cikaret 01 Public Elementary School due to its implementation of the Merdeka curriculum, which allows for the acquisition of precise and relevant data.

The study relies on both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through observations in classes 1A and 1B, as well as interviews with teachers of classes 1 and 1B. Secondary data was obtained through documentation and relevant literature. The researcher utilizes various data collection techniques

such as observation, interviews, and documentation.

To evaluate the accuracy of the research findings, the researcher implements triangulation, including source triangulation, time triangulation, and method triangulation. These techniques are used to maintain the consistency and validity of the research findings. In analyzing the data, the researcher uses Miles and Huberman's approach, which includes reducing the data, representing the data, and drawing conclusions (Winarni, 2018) to increase the validity of the findings.

RESULTS

1. Teacher challenges in implementing Merdeka curriculum in the first grade

Based on the results of interviews, observations and documentation obtained, the Merdeka curriculum has been implemented at Public Elementary School Cikaret 01 since August 2022. The Merdeka curriculum is not much different from the 2013 curriculum because the Merdeka curriculum is a perfect curriculum from the 2013 curriculum and the two curricula are mutually sustainable. Even so, there are slight differences between the Merdeka curriculum and the 2013 curriculum, namely the teacher's teaching tools have changed to Learning Outcomes (CP), Learning Objectives (TP) and teaching modules, as well as the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). In addition to teacher teaching tools, the form of subjects studied by students also has differences. In the 2013 curriculum, the subjects at the elementary level are thematic, in which there are several integrated subjects, while in the Merdeka curriculum the subjects stand alone and the material that students learn is more in-depth. The Merdeka curriculum makes it easier for teachers because the teaching module has neatly arranged the material that students will learn and the teacher only conveys what has been arranged in the teaching module. In addition, the material that the teacher will convey to students is also broader and deeper because the subjects in the Merdeka curriculum stand alone. The teacher's teaching tools become denser than before.

When the Merdeka curriculum was first implemented in grade 1, teachers still felt unfamiliar with the terms CP, TP, teaching modules and P5 because the 2013 curriculum did not have these terms. In the learning process, teachers experience a little difficulty because some students cannot and are not fluent in reading, writing and counting so that teachers need to guide extra writing during exams and dictate students in reading questions. In addition, shaping students' character is also difficult because one class consists of 32 students who have different characteristics. In developing the dimensions of the Pancasila learner profile, grade 1 teachers do not experience difficulties because in developing the dimensions of the Pancasila learner profile in students can be integrated into the tasks given.

The implementation of P5 at Public Elementary School Cikaret 01 is carried out every Saturday at 07.15-08.30 WIB. In its implementation, it must take one

theme topic in one semester which is divided into theory and practice. P5 activities are divided into two activities, namely individual projects and group projects. P5 learning is the same as intracurricular learning, where at the end of the semester there is an exam tailored to the chosen theme. P5 learning also involves parents in its implementation.



Figure 1

P5 Learning Group Project

Source: Documentation of P5 class 1 activities (April 4, 2023)

Group projects on the theme of local wisdom, students are asked to make traditional food. The implementation of the group project was carried out at one of the students' residences in one group. The parents of the students concerned help supervise and direct students in completing group assignments.



Figure 2

Individual Project of P5 Learning

Source: Documentation of P5 class 1 activities (April 4, 2023)

In the individual project, students are asked to interview locals about the making of traditional foods that are famous in their place of residence. The theme chosen in grade 1 is entrepreneurship and local wisdom. Where each semester is focused on completing one theme. In the odd semester, grade 1 focuses on the theme of entrepreneurship, while in the even semester grade 1 focuses on the theme

of local wisdom. In implementing P5 learning with the theme of entrepreneurship, grade 1 processes used materials into more useful and usable materials, such as used bottle caps that are used as flower decorations or pencil cases from used mineral water glasses. While on the theme of local wisdom, grade 1 makes traditional Indonesian food, such as cucur cake, klepon cake, rawon and other traditional foods.



Figure 3

P5 activities on the theme of entrepreneurship about processing used goods

Source: Documentation of P5 first grade activity (April 4, 2023)

In implementing the P5 entrepreneurship theme, students are asked to process used goods, such as used bottles, bottle caps, cans, plastics and other used goods that can be used as handicrafts that have value.



Figure 4

P5 activities on the theme of local wisdom in making traditional cakes

Source: Documentation of P5 class 1 activities (April 4, 2023)

In the implementation of P5 on the theme of local wisdom, students were asked to make a typical Indonesian cake. After making the cake, students presented

it in front of the class. In implementing P5 learning, grade 1 teachers do not experience difficulties. It's just that in explaining and giving P5 tasks, they need to be detailed and clear when conveying to students, and need extra guidance to students when completing individual tasks. In group projects, grade 1 teachers work together with parents.

The selected art learning in grade 1 SD Negeri Cikaret 01 is music using pianika instruments. The implementation of art learning is the same as in other art learning, namely the theory-practice method which is carried out once a week.

Reporting student learning outcomes in the Merdeka curriculum has no difference from the previous curriculum. It's just that the reporting of student learning outcomes is divided into intracurricular learning outcome reports and P5 learning outcome reports, and the learning outcome reports are in the form of sheets. For the P5 learning outcome report, the assessment is in the form of letters, such as Not Developing (BB), Starting to Develop (MB) and so on, while for the extracurricular learning outcome report the assessment is the same as the previous curriculum. In preparing reports on student learning outcomes, grade 1 teachers do not experience difficulties because there is no difference between reports on learning outcomes in the Merdeka curriculum and the 2013 curriculum.

Factors that cause difficulties to arise in implementing the Merdeka curriculum in grade 1 come from teacher factors and student factors. The cause of the difficulties arises from the teacher factor, namely not understanding the Merdeka curriculum so that it can hinder the application of it in the learning process, while from the student factor, namely the Merdeka curriculum has P5 learning, where grade 1 students do not understand and cannot accept P5 because grade 1 students are transitional students from kindergarten so it is still somewhat difficult to apply it.

2. Teachers' strategies in implementing Merdeka curriculum in the first grade

To deepen their understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, first-grade teachers proactively sought extensive knowledge and information. They delved into resources available on the official website of the Ministry of Education and Culture, as well as the Merdeka platform. Moreover, they actively participated in webinars hosted by the teacher community. These teachers didn't hesitate to consult and discuss with supervisors and fellow educators who had a more profound understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum.

In preparation for their classes, these teachers meticulously designed teaching tools tailored to their instructional needs. This included the development of specialized teaching modules aligned with the learning program, and the careful selection of relevant educational media. Observations confirmed these efforts: on any given day, one could witness a first-grade teacher entering the classroom,

teaching modules and instructional media in hand, ready to deliver an engaging lesson. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in their teaching was far from monotonous. Instead, first-grade teachers utilized an array of methods and tools to keep the learning experience vibrant, ensuring students remained engaged and preventing any sense of monotony during lessons.



Figure 5

Class 1A teacher demonstrates the media in front of the class

Source: Documentation of observation in class 1A (March 27, 2023)



Figure 6

Class 1B Teacher Demonstrating Media in Front of the Class

Source: Documentation of observation in class 1B (March 28, 2023)

The Grade 1A teacher utilizes various teaching techniques, including lectures, interactive Q&A sessions, and learning aids such as toy money. In a similar manner, the Grade 1B teacher also employs lectures, Q&A sessions, and printed pictures as learning tools. Both educators strive to maintain a diverse set of teaching approaches to capture students' attention and enhance understanding of the material.

The Pancasila learner profile promotes values such as mutual cooperation, teamwork, and independence, which are observable in students' attitudes and behaviors during classroom interactions and task completions.

Additionally, educators engage students in activities like attendance checks and guided readings from textbooks to foster a culture of literacy and numeracy. Not only do these practices familiarize students with fundamental mathematical concepts, but they also enhance their reading abilities and attentiveness. Research indicates that Grade 1 teachers regularly involve their students in attendance-taking by counting their peers and instructing them to read passages from their textbooks. Furthermore, students who struggle in reading, writing, and arithmetic can take advantage of specially designed lessons.

The effectiveness of the P5 pedagogical method depends on thorough preparation. The involvement of educators, students, and parents is crucial to its success. To achieve optimal results, P5 teachers diligently adhere to module and schedule guidelines while fostering active participation from both students and parents.

Grade 1 teachers combine students' scores over time to determine their final grade. Objective evaluations are prioritized. Report generation does not distinguish between regular courses and the P5 program. Technical terms are explained upon first use and sentences flow logically with causal connections. The language is formal, free from bias and uses precise vocabulary. The spelling and grammar follow American English conventions, and the text is error-free. Successful implementation of an Merdeka curriculum depends on a number of key factors, including the teacher's knowledge and understanding of the curriculum, the need for harmonious collaboration between teachers, students, and parents, and the appropriate selection of teaching methods and materials that are tailored to each topic.

DISCUSSION

1. Teachers' challenges in implementing the Merdeka curriculum

In early 2022, the Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia introduced the "Merdeka Curriculum" as an enhancement of the 2013 curriculum. SD Negeri Cikaret 01 implemented this curriculum starting August 2022, at the onset of the new academic year, in the first-grade classes.

The Merdeka Curriculum brought several innovative changes, including the introduction of the Project for Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile (known as P5). There has been a change in the terminology regarding teaching materials. The curriculum was carefully designed to offer educators the flexibility to tailor their instruction to their students' environment, resources, potential, interests, abilities,

and needs. The condensed teaching materials allowed for easier preparation by teachers.

In first-grade education, there is an emphasis on providing additional guidance to students struggling with reading, writing, and math. According to Herdawati et al. (2022), implementing such strategies is essential for students to obtain fundamental skills. Integrating Pancasila values into education is achieved through regular classes, extracurricular activities, and projects focused on entrepreneurship and local knowledge, following insights from Irawati and her team from 2022.

The Merdeka Curriculum has a distinct feature of promoting arts education. In SD Negeri Cikaret 01, the first-grade students explored music as their chosen form of art. They embarked on a journey to learn musical scales using a melodica, a practice in line with Nurani and her associates' 2022 recommendations emphasizing the inclusion of art in the learning process.

Although the Merdeka Curriculum presented innovative features, the reporting format for students' learning remained similar to its 2013 precursor. Assessing student progress involves evaluating various aspects, such as attendance and academic achievements, in accordance with the 2022 guidelines proposed by Nurani and her team.

However, the transition to the Merdeka Curriculum hasn't been without its challenges. The primary obstacles relate to teachers' lack of familiarity with the new curriculum and the difficulties experienced by students, particularly those recently transitioning from kindergarten, in adapting to the P5 concept.

2. Teachers' strategies in implementing the Merdeka curriculum

Based on interviews, observations, and literature studies, sources suggest that to enhance comprehension of the "merdeka" curriculum, educators can visit the official Kemendikbud website, peruse data on the merdeka platform, engage in relevant webinars, seek advice from school supervisors, and communicate with colleagues. This aligns with Ummi Inayati's theory, which presents six strategies from Kemendikbud for implementing the "merdeka" curriculum (Inayati, 2022). The main objective for first-grade educators is to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum's concepts and goals, to ensure their effective implementation in the learning process.

They create teaching materials based on the lesson plan and use relevant media related to the subject matter. Various teaching techniques are employed to prevent student disengagement. This approach is consistent with the theory of Neza Agusdianita and Salati Asmahasanah (2020), emphasizing the necessity for students to interact directly with tangible objects.

The dimensions of the Pancasila student profile employed in first grade encompass mutual cooperation, teamwork, and independence. Ashabul Kahfi

argues that the profile of Pancasila students reflects the globally competent character of Indonesian students who abide by Pancasila values (Kahfi, 2022).

The "merdeka" curriculum was developed to address disparities in education quality, primarily in literacy and numeracy. PISA data indicates that approximately 70% of 15-year-old students in Indonesia lack minimum reading and math skills (Kurniasih, 2022). First-grade teachers use various strategies to improve students' literacy and numeracy skills. One such strategy is offering numeracy lessons outside of regular school hours.

The success of the "merdeka" curriculum is also dependent on thorough preparation and collaboration among teachers, students, and parents. In terms of reporting, student learning outcomes are compiled from various aspects, including intracurricular grades, projects, extracurriculars, and attendance, as described by Dwi Nurani (Nurani et al., 2022). Ultimately, the effective implementation of the "merdeka" curriculum depends on the approaches and techniques utilized, as well as the educators' comprehensive grasp of the curriculum. Collaboration among teachers, students, and parents is a crucial component of this process.

CONCLUSION

The Merdeka Curriculum's application within first-grade elementary Bahasa Indonesia instruction has presented specific challenges attributed to both teacher and student factors. Teachers demonstrated a limited understanding of the curriculum, causing confusion with new terms like CP, TP, ATP, teaching modules, and P5 learning. Concurrently, students showed a lack of preparedness for P5 instruction. To navigate these challenges, first-grade teachers consulted official resources, such as the Ministry of Education's website and the Merdeka platform, participated in specialized webinars, sought guidance from school supervisors and seasoned peers, and employed diverse teaching methodologies.

Furthermore, the integration of Pancasila student profile dimensions into instructional tasks was deemed crucial, emphasizing the collaborative relationship between teachers, students, and parents as fundamental to the curriculum's successful implementation. The implications of this research suggest that proper training for educators and early familiarization for students are essential for the seamless adoption of new curricula. Additionally, fostering a tripartite collaboration among educators, students, and parents could further ensure educational success and curriculum integration.

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