

Analysis of the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Supporting Student-Centered Learning in Elementary Schools

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Abstract

Background - The Merdeka Curriculum was introduced as an educational transformation initiative that emphasizes student-centered learning.

Purpose - This study aims to analyze the implementation, challenges, strategies, and evaluation of the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum in supporting student-centered learning in elementary schools.

Method/approach - This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, utilizing purposive sampling through data collection via observation and interviews.

Findings - The findings indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum generally aligns with student-centered learning, characterized by the application of differentiation in content, process, and product. However, challenges remain in its implementation, such as disparities in student participation and varying levels of teacher readiness in adapting learning approaches. Overall, the curriculum's implementation is proceeding well and demonstrates positive progress in creating a flexible and responsive learning environment.

Conclusions - This study emphasizes the importance of strengthening teachers' competencies and adopting inclusive learning strategies to maximize the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation.

Novelty/Originality/Value - An empirical analysis of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in facilitating student-centered learning in elementary schools, a topic that has yet to be thoroughly explored in the context of Indonesian education.

Keywords: student-centered learning; elementary school; curriculum implementation

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INTRODUCTION

The development of education in the 21st century is marked by a shift in the learning paradigm, in which students are expected to be able to think critically, creatively, communicatively, and collaboratively (4Cs) to prepare them to face global challenges (Rochmah, 2023). Learning today is not merely about the transfer of knowledge but also about developing competencies through active and meaningful learning processes (Amalida & Halimah, 2023). In reality, however, in actual practice at the elementary school level, learning often remains teacher-centered, where the teacher remains the primary source of information, leading students to tend toward passivity (Saleh, 2024). This situation highlights the gap between the reality of learning in the field and the ideal demands of 21st-century education, necessitating efforts to shift the learning paradigm toward a more student-centered approach.

The Merdeka Curriculum is the latest transformation of Indonesia's education system, aimed at improving the quality of learning, particularly in elementary schools. This curriculum is designed solely to create a learning process that is more adaptive, focused, comprehensive, and relevant, while also addressing the needs of students in the modern era. The primary focus of this curriculum is character development and the strengthening of competencies through meaningful and contextual learning (Hapsary et al., 2025). The Merdeka Curriculum also grants teachers the freedom to design and implement learning activities tailored to the conditions of students in the classroom. Differentiation of processes, content, and products is a key principle in implementing learning, as it allows for adaptation to students' conditions (interests, readiness, and abilities) (Agung, 2024). This approach places students at the center of the learning process, ensuring they receive an optimal learning experience tailored to their needs (Setyaningrum et al., 2023). Furthermore, this curriculum assists teachers and school principals in determining the most suitable strategies for instruction, thereby fostering flexible, meaningful, and student-centered learning that focuses on developing individual potential (Halimah et al., 2023).

The introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum is expected to emphasize student-centered learning innovation as a response to previous teacher-centered practices. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is tailored to students' content, processes, assessments, interests, and readiness to learn, making it more personalized and meaningful (Paila, 2023). The flexibility to explore knowledge during the learning process can foster the development of student agency (Kurniawan, 2023). Students are then encouraged to be more active, independent, and responsible for their own learning processes, while teachers primarily act as facilitators, guiding the learning process rather than serving as the sole source of knowledge (Prasetyo et al., 2023). The contribution of this approach to learning also creates an inclusive learning environment and accommodates student diversity (Pertiwi et al., 2022). In other words, the Merdeka Curriculum represents an effort to transform learning strategies toward a model that prioritizes students' needs.

In reality, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools has not yet fully realized its student-centered learning objectives. It is still common to find that some teachers are not yet fully prepared to implement the curriculum, both in terms of planning and execution (Andina et al., 2023). Furthermore, teachers' readiness to integrate learning approaches that emphasize student autonomy is still perceived as a major challenge in many educational institutions (Wardani & Kiptiyah, 2024). Other studies also reveal that teachers' readiness in certain aspects namely pedagogical and implementation-related remains limited, which impacts the optimization of learning (Aulia et al., 2025). This phenomenon indicates that there remains a gap between the concept of the Merdeka Curriculum and the reality of its implementation in the field (Pratami et al., 2025).

Previous studies indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools is flexible, contextual, student-centered, and focused on developing 21st-century competencies through several stages, such as planning, implementation, and learning evaluation (Saraswati et al., 2025). Other studies also indicate challenges in its implementation, ranging from teachers' lack of understanding of the concept, limited facilities and infrastructure, to difficulties in developing instructional materials and assessment tools (Sucipto et al., 2024). Although there are many studies related to this curriculum, a gap remains the scarcity of in-depth analyses that specifically highlight the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in supporting student-centered learning at the elementary school level, particularly within the context of specific educational institutions that have not yet been comprehensively explored (Adi, 2025).

Based on the background and research gaps, the objectives of this study are to 1) analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in supporting student-centered learning in elementary schools, particularly in terms of planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning; 2) identify various challenges faced by teachers in implementing student-centered learning in elementary school settings; and 3) describe the strategies used by teachers to optimize the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum so that learning is more effective and aligned with students' needs. Urgently, this research is important because the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is still relatively new and requires in-depth evaluation at the elementary school level to ensure its alignment with the principles of student-centered learning. Practically, the results of this study are expected to serve as evaluation material for teachers and schools in improving the quality of learning, while theoretically, they can enrich studies on curriculum implementation in the context of elementary education.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in supporting student-centered learning in elementary schools. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore the phenomenon comprehensively based on real-world conditions in the field, in line with the characteristics of qualitative research that emphasizes an understanding of the natural social context (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

The subjects of this study included classroom teacher, school principal, and students from 1 class at an elementary school in Boyolali. Purposive sampling was used to select informants, whereby those considered to have the deepest understanding and direct involvement in the implementation of student-centered learning were chosen as informants. This ensures the collection of data that accurately reflects the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and its practical application in the learning process (Sugiyono, 2019).

Data collection was conducted through interviews and observations, with in-depth interviews used to gain an understanding of, explore, and identify the experiences and challenges faced by teachers and school principals regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Furthermore, observations were conducted to capture real-world conditions regarding how teachers apply the Merdeka Curriculum as student-centered learning in the classroom, including interactions between teachers and students during the learning process.

Triangulation of techniques and sources was used to validate the data, selected to ensure that the data obtained regarding the implementation of student-centered learning is truly consistent from various perspectives. Data analysis, including data reduction, presentation, and drawing conclusions, utilized the interactive model (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This approach was

employed to analyse the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools, identify the challenges faced by teachers, and determine the most suitable strategies for optimizing student-centered learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of Student-Centered Learning

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the elementary school level in this study indicates a significant transformation in the teaching approaches used. These approaches are now more flexible and responsive to students' needs. Now, educators are no longer rigidly confined to merely delivering content but are beginning to adapt teaching styles to suit the classroom environment, particularly the individual needs of each student. This phenomenon reflects the implementation of the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, where teachers have autonomy in designing learning activities, as observed in field practice (Paila, 2023).

Teachers have been using the Merdeka Curriculum as a guide in designing classroom learning activities, although they still make adjustments based on classroom conditions. This indicates that their implementation of the curriculum is still in the adaptation and development phase. Teacher readiness is also a key factor in successfully adopting the Merdeka Curriculum to ensure the success of the teaching process (Andina et al., 2023; Aulia et al., 2025).

Interviews with teachers revealed that lesson planning is now tailored to students' abilities, focusing more on how each student processes the material. Adapting modules to learning outcomes and the current conditions of students in the classroom is now a priority in instructional design. Typically, a variety of activities are incorporated into the learning process to ensure that students with diverse learning styles can fully engage in classroom activities. This means that the Merdeka Curriculum is characterized by the implementation of instructional differentiation in its design.

The results of the observation indicate that the learning process is proceeding well, and the approach has sought to be student-centered, with the teacher acting as a facilitator who accommodates all student needs and activities in the classroom. This is evidenced by the students' active participation in question-and-answer discussions and group activities, although the teacher still plays a leading role in guiding the learning activities. Some students are indeed active in participating in the learning process by engaging in discussions, but there are still students who remain passive toward learning activities. These students tend to be less involved and remain silent, not daring to ask questions or answer. These findings indicate that student-centered learning has begun to be implemented, but its implementation is not yet optimal, as evidenced by the disparity in student participation (Sari et al., 2021).

The above conditions indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum which employs a student-centered learning approach requires a gradual adaptation process on the part of both teachers and students in order to establish more active learning patterns (Salamah & Rifayanti, 2023). The independent curriculum places greater emphasis on students' active involvement; in other words, students become the primary agents in the learning process to achieve more meaningful learning experiences (Kurniawan, 2023). Therefore, the success of this student-centered learning is highly dependent on teachers' ability to create a supportive learning environment (Ilma & Handayani, 2023).

School support is the most critical aspect of the entire curriculum implementation process. The principal noted that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is carried out gradually through teacher mentoring and regular discussions during evaluation meetings. This

demonstrates the school's commitment to ensuring that teachers understand the concept of student-centered learning. The phased adaptation process is an effort to optimize the implementation of the elementary school curriculum (Sucipto et al., 2024).

Teachers' Strategies for Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

The research findings indicate a shift toward student-centered learning. This is characterized by teachers acting as facilitators, with students at the center of learning activities. Furthermore, based on observations, teachers were found to increasingly employ methods that provide opportunities for student discussion, simple project-based learning, and collaboration among students. As a result, students are actively engaged in their learning.

This is done solely to increase student participation in the learning process, and teachers also employ these methods to encourage students to be more active and prevent them from getting bored. This approach aligns with the demands of the 21st century, where learning places greater emphasis on student collaboration and communication (Saleh, 2024). During the learning process, interaction between teachers and students is quite effective. Teachers provide prompts, guidance, and immediate feedback to students. These conditions are considered sufficient to create a more lively learning atmosphere and certainly make it possible to place students at the center of the learning process. However, as explained earlier, there are still some students who remain inactive.

This teaching approach reflects the implementation of a differentiated instruction model, which is often a hallmark of the Merdeka Curriculum (Hapsary et al., 2025). Through differentiated instruction, teachers are able to adapt to students' needs by differentiating the process, content, and products (Agung, 2024). According to Fitrianingtyas et al. (2023), in the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum, there are certainly still challenges in the form of differences in students' abilities to process incoming material as well as time constraints in delivering the material. This situation indicates that teachers must possess the competence to manage heterogeneous classrooms (Pratami et al., 2025). The continued presence of passive students suggests that strategies need to be revised or optimized to effectively address the diverse characteristics of all students.

On the other hand, while students did demonstrate cooperation and task-sharing during group discussions, some students still tended to dominate the activity. This indicates that collaborative learning is proceeding smoothly, but further efforts are needed to ensure an equitable distribution of roles among group members to prevent dominance (Ilma & Handayani, 2023). If not properly addressed, this dominance can hinder the participation and engagement of other students. Therefore, teachers need to implement more structured learning strategies from managing the material and organizing discussion groups to distributing participation so that all students have equal opportunities to contribute to classroom learning activities (Wardana, 2024).

Assessment of Learning and School Support

The results of the observations indicate that assessment is conducted through formative and summative evaluations, formative assessment takes the form of teacher observations during instruction, while summative assessment is carried out through assignments or evaluations at the end of the learning process. Teachers noted that assessing their students' learning is quite challenging, as the focus is now not only on the final outcome but also on the learning process itself. This underscores that assessment within the Merdeka Curriculum is comprehensive. Additionally, when working on assignments, students demonstrated independence in completing them, although some still required direct guidance from the teacher. This finding indicates that

assessment in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum focuses on a comprehensive evaluation that encompasses both the learning process and the learning outcomes (Budiono & Hatip, 2023). In formative assessment, feedback is provided continuously to improve the quality of learning (Intantri et al., 2025). Supported by research by Salsabila & Sofia (2024), there is a positive impact demonstrated by student independence in the process of implementing student-centered learning.

From an institutional perspective, the school provides full support, including through teacher development, mentoring, discussions, training, and the provision of learning facilities. This support reflects the school's commitment to implementing the Merdeka Curriculum effectively to minimize obstacles (S. Susanti et al., 2024). Teacher mentoring and training are the most critical elements, as teachers are the ones who implement the entire planning process, ensuring the new curriculum functions optimally (Rahayu et al., 2022). Furthermore, providing teachers with the space to innovate can serve as a catalyst for creating more creative and effective learning (Verniati et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, several challenges remain, such as the varying levels of teacher readiness in implementing the curriculum. These varying levels of teacher readiness significantly impact the learning process in the classroom (Aulia et al., 2025). Teachers who are not yet prepared to implement the curriculum will face difficulties both in developing instructional materials and in applying the most appropriate learning strategies (Andina et al., 2023). Therefore, a continuous professional development program is needed, which is expected to improve teachers' varying levels of readiness (L. Susanti et al., 2024). Evaluating curriculum implementation through these routine meetings serves as a strategic step in identifying obstacles, thereby ensuring that continuous improvements to the learning process are well-directed (Rahayu et al., 2022).

Overall, the results of this study indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has supported student-centered learning, although there are still some challenges that need to be addressed. However, with school support, appropriate strategies, and improvements in teacher professionalism and readiness despite variations among teachers the implementation of the curriculum has the potential to be more effective and optimal in improving the quality of learning in elementary schools.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools is moving toward a student-centered approach to the learning process. This is evident in its application, which employs differentiation in content, process, and products, thereby ensuring that students' diverse learning needs are well accommodated. The learning strategies employed also begin to provide space for students to explore more actively and creatively. Although implementation is not yet fully optimal, this is due to ongoing disparities in student participation and creativity, as well as varying levels of teacher readiness in consistently understanding and implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools has been successful and has had a positive impact on the quality of learning; however, its effectiveness may need to be enhanced, particularly in terms of teacher competencies and ensuring equitable student engagement so that no student dominates or remains passive in the classroom. Therefore, it is essential to undertake sustained efforts through training, mentoring, and the development of more adaptive and inclusive strategies. The benefits of this research are to provide an overview of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools and to serve as a reference for teachers, schools, and policymakers in improving the effectiveness of learning.

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