Teacher's Perception in Exploring the Merdeka Curriculum for Early Childhood Education

Ellya Rakhmawati[1*], Wiwik Kusdaryani[2], Suhendri[3], Tri Suyati[4] (iD)

[1] Early Childhood Teacher Education Program, University of PGRI Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia
[2,3,4] Guidance and Counseling Program, University of PGRI Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia

A B S T R A K

Wabah pandemi COVID-19 telah mengejutkan negara-negara di seluruh dunia dan menyebabkan gangguan pembelajaran global. Sebagai respon untuk mengendalikan wabah tersebut, pemerintah Indonesia mengambil tindakan tegas untuk mengubah proses belajar mengajar tatap muka menjadi pembelajaran daring. Tujuan penelitian ini yaitu menganalisis peran guru dalam mengeksplorasi kurikulum Merdeka untuk pendidikan anak usia dini di taman kanak-kanak. Jenis penelitian ini yaitu kualitatif dengan desain studi fenomenologi kualitatif. Pengumpulan data dilakukan dari dokumentasi dan wawancara mendalam dengan guru peserta. Instrument pengumpulan data dengan kuesioner. Teknik analisis data menggunakan analisis deskriptif kualitatif. Hasil penelitian yaitu lima temuan ditemukan dari peserta guru. Guru mempersilahkan siswa untuk menentukan tema pembelajaran sebagai bahan pembelajarannya. Selain itu, guru akan membuat rencana pelajaran untuk rutinitas harian dan modul pembelajaran mereka. Guru menyusun kegiatan berdasarkan modul pembelajaran. Kesadaran guru untuk memiliki teknologi harus ditingkatkan untuk mendukung proses pembelajaran. Selain itu, orang tua juga harus mendampingi dan menjaga anaknya saat bermain dan belajar.

A B S T R A C T

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has shocked countries around the world and caused a global disruption to learn. As a response to controlling the outbreak, the Indonesian government took decisive action to change the face-to-face teaching and learning process to online learning. This research aims to analyze the teacher's role in exploring the Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education in kindergarten. This type of research is qualitative with a qualitative phenomenological study design. Data collection was carried out from documentation and in-depth interviews with participating teachers. Data collection instrument with a questionnaire. The data analysis technique uses descriptive qualitative analysis. The study results, namely five findings, were found from teacher participants. The teacher allows students to determine the learning theme as the learning material. In addition, teachers will create lesson plans for their daily routines and learning modules. The teacher arranges activities based on learning modules. Teachers' awareness of technology must be increased to support the learning process. In addition, parents must also accompany and look after their children while playing and study.

1.   INTRODUCTION

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic has affected education worldwide. The governments in each country took firm action to contain the spread of the virus and changed face-to-face learning activities into online learning (Budianti & Damayanti, 2017; Gilbert et al., 2020; Miyanti, 2021). Online learning, which can be called learning from home (LFH), has an obstacle in achieving the learning goal of optimizing children's growth and development (Rakhmawati et al., 2022; Yustina et al., 2022). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning in school had not been tested and measured, especially in remote school areas, due to a lack of access to technology (Effendi et al., 2020; Hartono & Yusuf, 2021). Early childhood learning is based on a juridical, philosophical, and psychological basis. Early childhood education (PAUD) is directed to achieve five areas of child developments, as stated in Permendikbud No. 57 of the Year 2021. STTPA mentioned the five areas of child development are cognitive development, socio-emotional development, speech and

*Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: ellyarakhmawati@upgris.ac.id (Ellya Rakhmawati)

language development, fine motor skill development, and spiritual development (Britto et al., 2017; Imran & Suryani, 2018; Ozturk & Hill, 2020). The nature of early childhood is a unique individual who has a pattern of growth and development in the physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, creative, language and communication aspects that are specific to the stages that the child is going through (Arissantianti et al., 2017; Bagnall et al., 2021; Meinzen-Derr et al., 2017). At this time, almost all potential children experience a sensitive period to grow and develop quickly and violently (Birhan et al., 2021; Swanson et al., 2019). Childhood is a time when children cannot develop their potential. Children tend to like to play simultaneously, want to win alone, and often change the game's rules for their own sake (Anggraini et al., 2019; Izza, 2020). Thus, educational efforts are needed to optimize all aspects of development, both physical and psychological development.

Teachers should enhance their competencies in technology to support online learning methods (Siti Syarah et al., 2020). The use of the emergency curriculum was an option to adapt meaningful learning (Rahayu et al., 2022; Rofiq & Arifin, 2021). Teachers in the 21st century face various challenges due to the growing possibility of ICT integration in every aspect of school life (Jufri et al., 2018; Prayogi & Estetika, 2019; Warsita, 2017). This method is very appropriate for educational institutions to optimize learning during the Covid-19 pandemic so that educational goals run optimally and are achieved and break the chain of the spread of the coronavirus. In addition, in this way, students can recognize and know how to communicate technology in various aspects, especially in learning activities at home and school (Hudayati et al., 2021; Yufita et al., 2021).

Therefore, Nadiem Makarim, as The Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, simplified the curriculum into special conditions so that no students were left behind during the COVID-19 pandemic. The curriculum is now called The Merdeka Curriculum. The Merdeka curriculum allows students to learn anywhere and anytime and promote freedom of thought for teachers. The Merdeka Curriculum is a curriculum with various intra-curricular learning. The content will be more optimal, so students have enough time to explore concepts and strengthen their competence (Evy Ramadina, 2021; Manalu et al., 2022). Teachers have the flexibility to choose various teaching tools so that learning can be adapted to students' learning needs and interests (Pertiwi et al., 2022; Sasmita & Darmansyah, 2022). The researchers conducted an interview with a school principal as a starting point to reveal the building history of Pertiwi 31 Kindergarten in Gunungpati, Semarang. The kindergarten was built in 1980 with a construction permit in 1997. The school used to implement the 2013 curriculum and Loose Parts learning model. After the Merdeka curriculum had been tested, the school changed its curriculum in the first semester of the 2022/2023 academic year. The Pertiwi 31 Kindergarten is a mover school for the Merdeka curriculum, initiated by The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology to focus on the development of the students' learning result holistically.

The Pertiwi 31 kindergarten realized the importance of child development and satisfying children's needs adjusted to a child's age. Therefore, the school implements the Merdeka curriculum for their learning process and the loose parts as their learning model. The Pertiwi 31 kindergarten also provides an expert to accommodate their students to acquire concrete knowledge and deliver their creativity.Besides, the teachers also stimulate children by giving trigger questions (5W + 1H) related to the theme (Susilawati & Satriawan, 2018). The theme is a project topic that comes from children's ideas, adjusted to the age level of learning outcomes. It is in accordance with KH Dewantara, who stated that in educating children, teachers should give children opportunities to grow naturally (Fadlilah, 2020; Ningsih & Mahyuddin, 2021; Wandi & Mayar, 2020). This study determined to find out the roles of kindergarten teachers in exploring the Merdeka curriculum in a sustainable and appropriate manner.

Previous research findings also state that the role of the teacher is vital for early childhood (Fadlilah, 2020; Nurgiansah & Pringgowijoyo, 2020). Other research also states that qualified teachers can stimulate children's development (Hulukati & Rahmi, 2020; Pitaloka et al., 2021). It was concluded that teachers must be able to apply their curriculum in order to provide stimulus to children. The main objective of this research is to analyze teachers' understanding in exploring the Merdeka curriculum learning for PAUD in Kindergarten. Meanwhile, the aim is to examine the teacher's role in exploring the Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education in kindergartens. The teacher's role is to form a better understanding in exploring and implementing the Merdeka curriculum for early childhood that is adapted to the needs and development of children.

2. METHOD

This study used a phenomenological study. A phenomenological study is a qualitative study that describes a phenomenon. A qualitative method begins with assumptions and interpretive frameworks to shape the research problems which relate to the meanings of individuals or groups of people in a human social problem (Clark & Creswell, 2017). A descriptive qualitative approach describes a real phenomenon,

symptom, existing conditions, events, thoughts, or attitudes shown while the study was conducted. In this study, a descriptive qualitative approach described the exploration of the Merdeka curriculum in early childhood education conducted by teachers at Pertiwi 31 Kindergarten, Semarang. The phenomenology of the study was to explore the Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education in Pertiwi 31 Kindergarten, Semarang.

The participants of the study were teachers and parents who have children aged 5-6 years old at Pertiwi 31 Kindergarten, Semarang. The study used purposive sampling to access specific criteria, a) participants have at least five years of experience in teaching early childhood, 2) participants understand the Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education, and 3) participants do not use *callistung* to teach students. The study focused on the exploration of the Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education in the Pertiwi 31 kindergarten, Semarang. The procedure of this study used the paradigm of phenomenological research from (Clark & Creswell, 2017). In brief, the first stage is determining problem statements. At this stage, the researchers set a focus on a phenomenon, do a literature review that is relevant to a particular issue and conduct pre-surveys to obtain information related to the Merdeka curriculum in the kindergarten. The data was collected from interviews, observation, and documentation of participants (Lexy, J, 2019). Triangulation of data sources, techniques, and time was conducted to test the credibility of the data. An in-depth interview was conducted with a school principal, teachers, and parents who have children aged 5-6 years old in the Pertiwi 31 Kindergarten, Semarang. A research instrument is needed to obtain data from the school. Research Instruments showed in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Instruments

Subject	Required Information	Research Instruments
Kindergarten teachers	1. Perceptions about the Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education. 2. The implementation of learning methods and mediums to explore teaching and learning activities in Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education. 3. Ways to explore the Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education. 4. Obstacles in the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education.	Interview guide, observation, and documentation.
Parents	1. Responses related to the new curriculum. 2. The impact of curriculum changes. 3. Development of science and technology.	Interview guide and documentation.

After collecting data from the participants, the researchers analyzed the data using Miles approach (Miles et al., 2014). The data analysis was carried out in three stages: (a) reduce the data by sorting data based on concepts, themes, and categories. Then, code the data; (b) present the data into charts, relationship charts between categories, and narrative text; and (c) draw a conclusion and data verification. Literature references to prove that the research results are appropriate and credible.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The result of the study is presented in three sections, namely participant descriptions, study results from all participants, and discussion. The participant description presents the participant data, showed in Table 2.

Table 2. The participant description

No	Participant Initials	Age	Educational background	Occupation	School name
1	RT	42	S-1	Kepala Sekolah	TK Pertiwi 31, Semarang
2	HA	46	SMA	Guru	TK Pertiwi 31, Semarang
3	DS	28	SMA	Guru	TK Pertiwi 31, Semarang
4	MT	36	SMA	Guru	TK Pertiwi 31, Semarang
5	IS	30	SMP	IRT	TK Pertiwi 31, Semarang
6	IY	30	SMA	IRT	TK Pertiwi 31, Semarang
7	KK	34	SMA	IRT	TK Pertiwi 31, Semarang

The table above shows that there were two teachers ranging in age from 42 to 46 and two teachers ranging in age from 28 to 36. There were three people ranging in age from 30 to 34. The age range of teachers corresponds to the developmental stages of Erikson's theory which is categorized into middle adulthood (Santrock, 2019). Middle adulthood starts from 40-50 years old and is considered generativity, which tends to help the younger generation to develop their live (Santrock, 2019). On the other hand, teachers and parents range in age from 28 to 36 years and are considered as early adulthood. There is intimacy at this stage. People at this stage will face their children's social development that requires active, directed, and responsible behavior (Santrock, 2019).

In this section, the researcher will discuss the results of the study that was conducted for three months in Pertiwi 31 Kindergarten, Gunungpati, Semarang. The researcher obtained some information about the exploration of the Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education (PAUD). According to four teacher interviews, the Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education (PAUD) brought enthusiasm to the learning process and flexibility to choosing and compiling teaching tools. As a result, teachers can provide a more varied learning process. Additionally, children can learn what they like based on their needs, which still applies to the rules. Another teacher said that the Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education focuses on learning material. The teacher would take their time with their students while they were playing. Besides, the teacher could postpone the class discussion and continue it for the next day. Last, a teacher mentioned that the Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education could inspire children to learn many skills and provide varied learning processes.

Based on four teacher interviews, it was found that kindergarten teachers who participated in the Merdeka curriculum training shared their knowledge with their colleagues. A teacher participant also revealed that other teachers have implemented the Merdeka curriculum in their class and prepared their teaching modules. Thus, they can arrange their class activities through lesson plans and do activities based on learning modules. Other teachers added that teachers would make lesson plans and other requirements to prepare teaching modules that will be used weekly. Those are steps that teachers had to prepare before delivering materials to the class. Moreover, RT, a kindergarten principal, mentioned that teachers in her school should promote the Merdeka curriculum to parents. The principal implemented the Merdeka curriculum by discussing it with children and parents as other school members to determine learning characteristics and context.

The interview results with teacher HA showed that (a) teachers use Loose Parts learning by using videos as a medium to tell children's stories; (b) teachers inform learning plans students because the class is based on child-centered learning and children have to decide the material contents; (c) teachers create a concept map before teaching; and d) teachers use mediums such as seeds, water pipe, and many more to play. A teacher participant, DS, added that teachers often use natural materials such as leaves, wood, gravel, egg shells and apply learning methods such as storytelling and experiments for their class. A teacher participant, MT, mentioned that kindergarten teachers implemented STEAM and Loose Parts learning and utilized materials around them as learning mediums.

Two out of four teachers shared their opinions about the positive and negative impacts of the Merdeka curriculum. First, RT mentioned that positive impacts of the Merdeka curriculum, namely (a) children become more excited to learn. Sometimes, teachers pause the class discussion and continue it for tomorrow; (b) the Merdeka curriculum does not judge children. The assessment aims to reflect on themselves children and parents, and (c) the Merdeka curriculum is more flexible and enjoyable. The essential part is that the learning process should meet children's needs. If the learning process does not meet the children's needs, the teacher can redo it the next day. There was no more extended target, so the learning process was more enjoyable. Second, HA added that the Merdeka curriculum positively impacted children and teachers. Children can determine learning themes for their class, and afterward, the teacher will make a concept map before teaching.

On the contrary, RT, a teacher participant, mentioned that the Merdeka curriculum has negative impacts. (a) parents' perception of the Merdeka curriculum is that children could not do anything; and (b) the Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education should include accordance with contexts such as children as a learner, human beings, or different characteristics of children. A teacher with initial DS added that teachers do not have proper knowledge of technology (IT). However, teachers at her school tried to learn it every day. A teacher participant shared her opinion about the difference between Curriculum-13 and the Merdeka curriculum, including (a) the curriculum-13 learning uses pictures or books as mediums, while the Merdeka curriculum uses vídeos; (b) the curriculum-13 gets children tired, while the Merdeka curriculum makes children enjoy their learning process; (c) the curriculum-13 did not please children because of its tedious learning process, but the Merdeka curriculum makes children happy because of its fun learning process.

Discussion

The results showed there were four teacher participants in exploring of Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education. Teacher's understanding of the Merdeka curriculum includes first, Teachers are more flexible in choosing and compiling teaching materials, so they can provide more varied learning process which adapted to children's needs. Second, children can learn what they like adjusted to their needs. Third, the meaning of Merdeka itself is to be free, but there is still a rule in it. The Merdeka curriculum is related to independent learning. The concept of independent learning is to create a pleasant learning atmosphere for all involved in the learning process, such as teachers, parents, and children. In line with the research findings, the Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education creates a pleasant atmosphere for teachers, children, and parents.

Early childhood learning activities invite children to play. Playing helps children optimize their development aspects (Cheung, SCheung & Kwan, 2021; Fadlilah, 2020). In line with the findings, the Merdeka curriculum allowed children to learn while playing and decide their learning themes which adjusted to children's needs. On the other hand, early childhood education should consider its learning approaches, strategies, and models to achieve meaningful learning and learning goals (Satrianingrum et al., 2021; Yustina et al., 2022). Teachers could use their learning methods freely in the Merdeka curriculum (Nurjanah, 2020; Waruwu et al., 2022).

However, the researchers found that only a few learning methods and mediums support this school's Merdeka curriculum. For instance, teachers use Loose Parts as a learning model by watching videos to tell children's stories. Teachers needed help choosing the proper learning method to convey remote learning (C. Dong et al., 2020; Foti, 2020; Nuraini & Agung, 2022). In line with the research findings, teachers faced difficulty operating computers and other technology support while creating teaching materials and other activities related to curriculum changes. In addition, remote or online learning has some advantages. 1) It helps the students to understand abstract concept; 2) It involves parent participation in learning activities and 3) Children can access learning materials easily without being limited by space and location (Chuanmei. Dong et al., 2020; Kim, 2020). In line with the findings, implementing the Merdeka curriculum made children happy. The children did not want to end the learning process, so the discussion continued the next day. This study found a positive impact of the Merdeka curriculum. The assessment was done for children's and parents' reflection. Moreover, the learning process in the Merdeka curriculum was more fun and adjusted to children's needs.

The results of five findings correlate with four main programs of the Merdeka curriculum released by The Ministry of Education and Culture, namely USBN comprehensive assessment, national exams changed to assessment, shortened lesson plan, PPDB zonation becomes more flexible (Nugrohadi & Anwar, 2022). The advantages of the Merdeka curriculum are (a) implementing project-based learning to develop children's soft skills and characters based on Pancasila Student Profile, (b) focusing on essential material such as literacy and numeration, and (c) giving teachers the flexibility to convey contents for children. The Pancasila student profile aims to maintain the noble values and morals of the nation, global citizen readiness, embody social justice, and achieve competence in the 21st century. Unfortunately, the Merdeka curriculum has yet to be applied thoroughly. The Decree of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology No. 56 of the Year 2022 stated that the Merdeka curriculum will be implemented in all schools in 2024. Therefore, the Merdeka curriculum can be implemented as a preparatory curriculum.

Conversely, the changes from curriculum-13 to the Merdeka curriculum as a breakthrough in the education system impacted teachers. The result findings showed the differences between curriculum-13 and Merdeka curriculum, such as (a) learning mediums differences. The curriculum-13 uses books or pictures, while the Merdeka curriculum uses vídeos, (b) The curriculum-13 drained children's energy, but the Merdeka curriculum satisfies children in the learning process, and (c) the learning process atmosphere. The learning process in curriculum 13 makes children unhappy, while the Merdeka curriculum makes children happy at school. This study contributes to other mover schools implementing the Merdeka early childhood education curriculum, which The Ministry of Education and Culture initiated in 2021. The Pertiwi 31 kindergarten is a mover school for early childhood education-kindergarten in the second batch of 2022.

4. CONCLUSION

Implementing the Merdeka curriculum in Pertiwi 31 Kindergarten learning process made children happy. In this new curriculum, children feel comfortable learning in an atmosphere where they can freely express their ideas and creativity. However, unfortunately, teachers in this school still use limited learning mediums and methods. Moreover, teachers can communicate directly with parents and children to explain the change of curriculum-13 into the Merdeka curriculum. These changes were not easy for parents and teachers because the learning process teachers at school initially carried out changed to learning and

playing with parents at home. The curriculum changes stressed teachers and parents because only a few can access technology.

5. ACKNOWLEDGE

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