



Implementing *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum: Strategies for Early Childhood Students at Yogatama Playgroup

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Abstract. There are still doubts about teachers implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum; several of the reasons include: (1) Teachers have not fully understood the *Merdeka* curriculum; (2) The spirit of curiosity of teachers about the *Merdeka* curriculum is still low so that training on the *Merdeka* curriculum through online are often ignored; and (3) Face-to-face training expected by teachers is still very minimal; (4) The assumption that the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum must be with complete facilities. However, the main problem is the low ability of teachers to master information technology. Of the six (6) personnel, both teachers and heads of PAUD institutions of the Yogatama Play Group, only two (2) people can operate laptops and access information through online media. The results of the study show that the strategy of implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum for PAUD students of the Yogatama Play Group has been well prepared and is by the expectations of all parties, even though in the application of the principles of the new *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum at the initial stage, namely the *Merdeka Belajar* stage whose learning tools still use the 13 curriculum or the emergency curriculum.

Keywords: Strategy, *Merdeka* Curriculum, *Merdeka Belajar*, Early Childhood.

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Merdeka* Curriculum at the Early Childhood Education Institution (PAUD) has the same structure as the educational institution above it, which consists of Intracurricular Learning Activities and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P.5). Intracurricular learning activities are designed so that children can achieve the abilities contained in the learning outcomes (CP) (Wantiana & Mellisa, 2023). The essence of extracurricular learning activities is meaningful play as a manifestation of "freedom of learning and play." Therefore, the chosen activity must provide the child with a fun and meaningful experience. Fun experiences make children want to repeat similar activities, while children will remember meaningful experiences for all time. This indicates the teacher's learning success (Angga et al., 2022; Suryani et al., 2023). This kind of situation and condition must be maintained by teachers in every learning process so as not to lose the moment. This is the primary goal of independent learning in the *Merdeka* curriculum.

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learning activities are designed so that children can achieve the abilities contained in the learning outcomes (CP) (Simon et al., 2023). The essence of extracurricular learning activities is meaningful play as a manifestation of "freedom of learning and play." Therefore, the chosen activity must provide the child with a fun and meaningful experience.

Fun experiences will make children want to repeat similar activities, while meaningful experiences will be remembered for all time. This indicates the teacher's success in the learning process (Aisyah et al., 2024; Astirini Swarastuti et al., 2024). Teachers must maintain this situation and condition in every learning process so as not to lose the moment. This is the primary goal of *Merdeka belajar* in the *Merdeka* curriculum.

Freedom of learning in extracurricular activities in the *Merdeka* curriculum is the concept of independent learning of Ki Hajar Dewantara, who states that education is a series of processes that humanize humans. This concept of independence, known as the among system, prohibits punishment and coercion on students because it can kill their independent spirit and creativity. *Merdeka Belajar* has proclaimed a new policy program based on the concept of the among-law system. With this concept of *Merdeka belajar*, both teachers and students are expected to have a free spirit in terms of developing and exploring their potential, talents, and abilities without being constrained by the rules and regulations that apply in learning (Budiyanto et al., 2024).

The concept of *Merdeka belajar* described above has been implicitly implemented in every curriculum, albeit with different terms and content. *The content is more significant in the Merdeka* curriculum. It even becomes the main topic so that the word "*Merdeka*" can be addressed to students as "*Merdeka belajar*" or teachers with the phrase "*Merdeka* teaching."

Freedom of teaching does not mean that teachers are free to teach but have a free spirit to develop and explore their potential, talents, and abilities in teaching. Purwanto et al. (2020) state that the concept of independent teaching is implemented by paying attention to the following steps: (1) Creating a technology-based educational environment; (2) Cross-party cooperation or cooperation between schools; (3) The urgency of data, namely preparing teachers to face the teaching system using technology.

The steps outlined above certainly need a mature strategy from the head of the institution because preparing planning is one of the points of the managerial competence of school principals, as reads point (a) in Permendiknas Number 13 of 2007 concerning school principal standards, which the managerial competence of school principals can prepare school planning for various planning, especially curriculum preparation planning strategies.

At the beginning of the 2023-2024 academic year, the Yogatama PAUD (Play Group) Institution programmed the implementation or implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum because it is a government program in the context of restructuring the national education system in Indonesia. With the *Merdeka* curriculum, it is hoped that students can develop according to their potential and abilities; in addition to that, students also get quality, applicative, and varied learning. Therefore, in its implementation, the right strategy, strong commitment, and seriousness are needed (Mulyasa, 2023; Oktaviani & Ramayanti, 2023).

The strategy in implementing *the Merdeka* curriculum in PAUD Yogatama Play Group is to use the concept of strategy that can answer the question of 5 W + 1 H (what, why, where, when, who + how). Then, a strong commitment and seriousness must emerge from the teacher as the implementer and organizer of the learning process with the main task of educating, teaching, guiding, directing, training, and assessing and evaluating the students. Suppose this is associated with the implementation of *Merdeka belajar* in PAUD, the Yogatama Play Group should run. In that case, it is better, although it even seems slow and stagnant.

Based on the researcher's observation as a teacher at the institution, there are still doubts about teachers implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* program, even though a strategy has been prepared and agreed upon to start. This is based on the minutes of the meeting on June 16, 2023, at the end of the 2022-2023 school year, as well as the initial meeting of the 2023-2024 school year, which concluded to start implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum. However, the fact is that until now, it is still in the path of *Merdeka* learning implementation; in other words, the implementation of learning and assessment still uses the curriculum of the educational unit that is being implemented (curriculum 13). According to researchers, there are several reasons for doubts about implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum that has been prepared, including (1) Teachers have not fully understood the *Merdeka* curriculum; (2) The spirit of curiosity of teachers about the *Merdeka* curriculum is still low so that training on the *Merdeka* curriculum through online are often ignored; and (3) Face-to-face training expected by teachers is still very minimal; (4) The assumption that the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum must be with complete facilities.

From several causes of teachers' hesitation to implement the *Merdeka* curriculum, it turns out that the main problem is the low ability of teachers to master information technology (Pertiwi et al., 2023). In the current era of globalization, inevitably, whether they can or cannot, teachers must be ready to adapt to technology because everything needed in the learning process, from materials, methods, and learning strategies, is in online media, including the independent learning platform and the *Merdeka* teaching platform (Rahayu et al., 2022).

Of the six (6) personnel, both teachers and the Head of the Early Childhood Education Institution of the Yogatama Play Group, only two (2) people can operate laptops and access information through online media. So, it is natural for online training to be ignored. On the other hand, the position or location of the Yogatama Play Group area has no obstacles to the convertibility of the network or internet signal. Based on the description above, I desire to dig deeper and describe this thesis with Strategies for Implementing the *Merdeka Bajar* Curriculum in Early Childhood Education Students of the Yogatama Play Group.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Strategy

The definition of strategy, in general, is an effort by a person or group to design and make calculations to achieve the target or goal they want. In the Great Dictionary of Indonesian (online dictionary), it is stated that strategy has four (4) meanings, namely: (1) science and art using all the resources of nations to implement specific policies in war and peace (Riana, 2014); (2) the science and art of leading armies to face the enemy in war, to obtain favorable conditions (Wilson, 2010); (3) a careful plan regarding activities to achieve specific goals (Malapata & Wijayaningsih, 2019); (4) a good place according to the war strategy (Abuhaer, 2021). From the four meanings above, almost all strategy is associated with war; this is not surprising because, according to Martinsen & Furnham (2019), the word strategy etymologically comes from the Greek word Strategos, which is formed from the word Stratos or army and the word ego or leader, which means "generalship" or something that generals do in making plans to win the war.

Kurikulum Merdeka

Kurikulum Merdeka continues efforts to simplify the curriculum, which began with the emergency curriculum, and efforts to strengthen character and competence, which have started since the previous curriculum. Iskandar et al. (2023) state that the novelty of the independent curriculum is: (1) more in-depth learning, not rushed, so that every student can achieve minimum competence; (2) learning according to the level of student achievement; and (3) learning through projects to strengthen character in the Pancasila Student Profile (PAUD et al., 2022).

The *Merdeka* PAUD Curriculum has diverse extracurricular learning where the content will be more optimal, so students have enough time to explore concepts and strengthen competencies (Suherman, 2023). Teachers have the flexibility to choose various teaching tools so that learning can be adjusted to students' learning needs and interests. The project to

strengthen the achievement of the Pancasila student profile is developed based on specific themes set by the government (Kahfi, 2022; Kemendikbudristek, 2022). The project is not directed to achieve a specific learning achievement target, so it is not tied to the subject content.

Kurikulum Merdeka (previously referred to as the prototype curriculum) was developed as a more flexible curriculum framework focused on essential materials and character development of student competencies. The *Kurikulum Merdeka* at the PAUD level is often called freedom of play because the learning process aims to make children perceive that learning is fun, not burdensome (Rahayuningsih & Iskandar, 2022). Activities also need to be supported by using natural learning resources and existing in the environment around the child. Learning resources that are not available in real life can be presented with the support of technology and children's reading books. Three options for implementing this curriculum in schools are *Merdeka belajar*, *Merdeka change*, and *Merdeka sharing*. The main characteristics of the *Merdeka* curriculum in the PAUD unit include strengthening meaningful play activities as a learning process and strengthening the relevance of PAUD as a foundation phase or an essential part of the development of children's character and abilities as well as children's readiness to attend school at the next level. According to the Director General of GTK Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia (Safitri et al., 2023; Sriyanto et al., 2023).

Merdeka Belajar

The term *Merdeka Belajar* is undoubtedly familiar to the ears of educators because this term has often been discussed after the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia introduced a new curriculum, namely the *Merdeka Curriculum*, as a replacement for Curriculum 13. Freedom of Learning is a program that is an effort to realize *Merdeka* in learning. In Early Childhood Education, freedom of learning is the freedom to play because playing is learning (Rusmiati et al., 2023). It is said that *Merdeka Belajar* means that students have the freedom to think and express. So, it does not mean that students no longer need to study. With this *Merdeka Belajar* program, the government hopes to provide high-quality education for all students in Indonesia (Simon et al., 2023).

The Directorate General of Education and Education Personnel explained the concept of freedom of learning, which is freedom of thought and innovation. The main essence of freedom of thought is to be an educator. This can happen to educators and students (Zakso, 2023). So far, students have been learning in the classroom; in the coming years, students can learn outside the classroom (outing class) so that students can discuss with the teacher not only listening to lectures from the teacher but encouraging students to be more daring to appear in

public, ingenious in getting along, creative, and innovative. Freedom of learning focuses on learning independently and creatively (Purwanto et al., 2023). Teachers are also expected to be the driving force to take actions that ultimately provide the best for students, and teachers are expected to prioritize students above their career interests.

Merdeka Belajar has a goal in addition to presenting high-quality education, it also has goals, among others, creating a pleasant learning atmosphere, providing flexibility in implementing the curriculum according to school conditions, and improving human resources with a *Merdeka* spirit. This is as stated in Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System: (1) Building a pleasant learning atmosphere for teachers and students (Desmaniar et al., 2020). (2) Providing flexibility to schools in implementing the curriculum according to conditions (Ningsih et al., 2020). (3) Meeting human resources needs in the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 (Marsinah et al., 2024). (4) Students should be created with an independent spirit to find their potential and abilities (Nasar et al., 2024). Thus, the goal of *Merdeka Belajar* is to present quality education by creating a pleasant learning atmosphere, providing flexibility in implementing the curriculum according to school conditions and increasing human resources with a *Merdeka* spirit.

The Ministry of Education and Culture initiated the concept of *Merdeka Belajar*. RI Research and Technology is inspired by Ki Hajar Dewantara's concept of independent learning, which states that education is a series of processes to humanize humans. This concept is based on independence, known as the *among* system, which prohibits punishment and coercion on students because it can kill their *Merdeka* spirit and creativity.

3. RESEARCH METHOD(S)

The place of this research is PAUD Yogatama Play Group, which is located in Tanjung Makmur village, Sinar Pereviewuan District, Ogan Komering Ulu Regency. This research lasts approximately four (4) months, namely from December 2023 to March 2024. The informants in this study are one (1) head of the institution and five (5) teachers of the Yogatama Play Group PAUD so there are six (6) people. This study uses a qualitative method to determine the strategy for implementing the independent learning curriculum in early childhood education students of the Yogatama Play Group. In the analysis of this study, there are four (4) stages, namely data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and the last step, drawing conclusions and verification.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Strategies for Implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum for Early Childhood Education Students in the Yogatama Play Group

- 1) This study discusses the strategy for implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum for PAUD students of the Yogatama Play Group.
- 2) Then, in more depth, this study discusses the strategy of implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum reviewed from 5 W + 1 H (*what, why, where, when, who, and how*) in the Yogatama Play Group PAUD.

The data source for this research comes from the interviews with research informants, in this case, one (1) head of the institution and 5 PAUD teachers of the Yogatama Play Group, so there are six people. Meanwhile, the data collection analysis technique used is the procedure that was set out in the previous chapter using the following methods: (1) Interview, (2) Observation, and (3) Documentation. From the implementation of the three methods, detailed information was obtained and compiled in the results of this study.

Strategies for Implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum for Early Childhood Education Students in the Yogatama Play Group:

- 1) The application of P.5 with the theme I love the earth is always given to students.
- 2) The application of P.5 with the theme I love Indonesia is always given to students.
- 3) Students are always given the application of P.5, which is the theme of playing and working together / we are all brothers.
- 4) The application of P.5 with the theme of imagination and creativity is always given to students.
- 5) In every learning process, the teacher presents in a structured manner from opening to closing.
- 6) In every learning process, teachers always prioritize comfortable conditions.
- 7) In every learning process, teachers always prioritize happy conditions.
- 8) In the learning process, teachers balance *in and out of the door*.
- 9) The implementation of the new Kumer is limited to learning Mandarin
- 10) Teachers have implemented an independent curriculum.
- 11) Heads of institutions and teachers prepare KI/KD.
- 12) Heads of institutions and teachers prepare syllabi.
- 13) Heads of institutions and teachers prepare RPPM/RPPH.
- 14) Heads of institutions and teachers prepare character strengthening.

15) Heads of institutions and teachers prepare KTSP.

16) Heads of institutions and teachers have prepared *Merdeka* curriculum learning tools.

Strategies for Implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum for Early Childhood Education Students in the Yogatama Play Group.

- 1) In every learning process, teachers always provide new experiences to their students.
- 2) In every learning process, teachers always make their students feel happy and satisfied.
- 3) In every learning process, teachers always give their students their students the freedom to create and innovate.
- 4) Teachers always teach their students
- 5) by applying P.5 with the theme I love the earth.
- 6) Teachers always teach their students
- 7) by applying P.5 with the theme I love Indonesia.
- 8) In the application of P.5 with the theme of playing and working together/we are all brothers, teachers always teach their students.
- 9) Teachers always teach their students to apply P.5 with the theme of imagination and creativity.
- 10) In every learning process, teachers always prioritize comfortable conditions.
- 11) In every learning process, teachers always prioritize pleasant conditions.
- 12) In every learning process, teachers always present material in a structured manner from opening to closing.
- 13) In the learning process, teachers always balance between *indoors* and *outdoors*.
- 14) The natural conditions in the PAUD institution of the Yogatama Play Group are ready to implement the *Merdeka* curriculum.
- 15) Guardians of students can collaborate to educate children at home, primarily through digital media.
- 16) Heads of institutions and teachers are ready for digital learning.
- 17) Students are ready, at any time, for online learning.
- 18) Financially, the institution is ready to implement the *Merdeka* curriculum.
- 19) The institution has partnerships with other parties, for example, health centers co, community organizations, or other agencies.
- 20) The institution has prepared the facilities needed to implement the *Merdeka* curriculum.
- 21) Implementing the new *Merdeka* Curriculum is limited to the *Merdeka Belajar* stage, whether in 2024-2025 it will be upgraded to *Merdeka* change or *Merdeka* sharing.
- 22) Heads of Institutions and teachers master the *Merdeka* curriculum.

- 23) The implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum has reached the stage of changing *mandir*.
- 24) The implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum has reached the stage of *Merdeka* sharing.
- 25) The head of the institution has begun to develop a *Merdeka* curriculum in stages.
- 26) Heads of institutions and teachers have implemented the *Merdeka* curriculum in stages.
- 27) Heads of institutions and teachers have prepared a *Merdeka* curriculum evaluation plan.
- 28) If the institution is still in the *Merdeka Belajar* stage, do you prepare KI/KD?
- 29) Do you compile a syllabus if the institution is still in the *Merdeka Belajar* stage?
- 30) If the institution is still in the *Merdeka Belajar* stage, do you prepare RPPM/RPPH?
- 31) Do you organize character strengthening if the institution is still in the *Merdeka Belajar* stage?
- 32) If the institution is still in the *Merdeka Belajar* stage, do you (the head of the institution) and the teacher prepare the KTSP?

Strategies for Implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum for Early Childhood Education Students in the Yogatama Play Group:

- 1) Heads of institutions and teachers have KI/KD.
- 2) Heads of institutions and teachers have a syllabus.
- 3) Heads of institutions and teachers have RPPM/RPPH.
- 4) Heads of institutions and teachers have strengthened their character.
- 5) Heads of institutions and teachers have ID cards.
- 6) Heads of institutions and teachers have *Merdeka* curriculum learning tools.

Discussion

Varied answers were obtained based on the researcher's analysis of the data from interviews conducted with the head of the institution and teachers of the Yogatama Play Group PAUD. Of the 30 questions presented, 18 had the same answers, and the rest, 12 questions had different answers. The difference in answers between the head of the institution and the teacher is only one (1) question, namely question number 11, with the following question: In the learning process, do teachers always balance in and out of the door? (the head of the institution answered "no," and the teacher answered "yes").

The other 11 questions differed in answers but not absolutely; in other words, not all teachers answered differently from the answer of the head of the institution, including the same answer as the head of the institution. For example, in question number one (1), the following question is asked: In every learning process, does the teacher always give new experiences to

his students? (the head of the institution answered "yes/no," and the teacher answered "yes"). The Head of the Institution answered "yes/no," meaning that there are teachers in every learning process who always give new experiences to their students. However, there are also teachers who, in every learning process, do not give new experiences to their students. While all teachers answer in every learning process, they always provide new experiences to their students.

Providing new experiences in the learning process is the main activity of intracurricular learning, as explained in the Ministry of Education and Culture of Research and Technology Number 56 of 2022, that the structure of the independent PAUD curriculum consists of intracurricular learning activities and projects to strengthen the Pancasila student profile. The extracurricular learning activities are designed so children can achieve the abilities contained in the learning outcomes. The essence of intracurricular learning at the PAUD level is meaningful play as a manifestation of "*Merdeka Belajar, Merdeka play*." Learning activities that can be chosen must provide a fun and meaningful experience for children.

Based on the researcher's analysis of the data from direct observation results to the head of the institution and teachers of the Yogatama Play Group PAUD from the 16 points observed, 15 points are based on the interview results. However, one point is based on something other than the interview results, namely point number 11: In the learning process, the teacher balances indoor and outdoor activities. All teachers answered "yes," while the researcher's observation was the opposite, namely "no." The fact that the results of the observation are the same as the answer of the head of the institution. In the *Merdeka* curriculum, the learning process of going out or out classes must be more frequent, as stated by Hapizoh et al. (2020) that through outing class activities, children can directly explore the environment, which can eliminate children's boredom during the teaching and learning process. This outing class learning strategy can make learning activities more enjoyable for children (Darusman et al., 2020; Harapan et al., 2022).

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the analysis of the data of the research results that have been described in the previous chapter, both the data from interviews, observation data, and documentation data show that: 1) The strategy of implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum for PAUD students of the Yogatama Play Group, has been well prepared and has been by the expectations of all parties. However, the implementation still needs to be completed. 2) The implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum in the Yogatama Play Group is only at the initial stage of the three

stages of the *Merdeka* curriculum prepared by the government; in other words, the education unit has applied the principles of the *Merdeka* curriculum in the implementation of learning and assessment but still uses the curriculum of the educational unit that is being implemented, namely Curriculum 13 or the emergency curriculum. 3) The realization of the independent learning program for PAUD students of the Yogatama Play Group is only in the experimental stage because it is related to learning tools still using Curriculum 13.

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