

A Case Study: Integration of Local Wisdom in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Elementary School

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Abstract

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is the government's effort to create learning that is more contextual, flexible, and student-centered in order to meet the challenges of 21st-century education. This study aims to describe how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented at SDN Gumuksari 02 and how it influences the classroom atmosphere and students' character. The Merdeka Curriculum provides teachers with the flexibility to design learning activities that align with the students' conditions and needs, including incorporating local wisdom values such as village culture and agricultural activities. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method with classroom teachers as the main subjects. Data were collected through interviews, documentation, and observation, and then analyzed in depth to identify successes, obstacles, and strategic solutions in its implementation. The results of the study show that despite certain challenges, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has succeeded in creating a more active and meaningful learning environment for students. This research contributes to strengthening cultural identity and enhancing student engagement in contextual, meaningful learning that is aligned with their socio-cultural environment.

Keywords : Contextual Learning; Elementary School; Local Wisdom; Merdeka Curriculum.



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1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental process in shaping students' character, skills, and knowledge to enable them to face the challenges of the times. Improving the quality of education, as a vital means of developing human resources, continues to be pursued in accordance with the progress of the era. This aims to enlighten the nation and produce skilled individuals in their respective fields, making education an essential need in human life (Sutisna et al., 2023). Qualified human resources can be developed through education, as indicated by the improvement of critical and creative thinking skills in solving problems encountered in daily life (Damayanti & Imaduddin, 2024). In order to achieve these educational goals, the government continues to innovate in the curriculum system, one of which is through the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The concept of the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes freedom in learning, allowing students to study independently and creatively. This is in line with the ideals of Ki Hajar Dewantara (Ardianti & Amalia, 2022). The Merdeka Curriculum transforms educational perspectives to be more contextual and flexible in meeting students' needs (Putri & Aliyyah, 2024).

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools presents its own challenges, particularly in shifting the learning paradigm from teacher-centered to student-centered. Teachers are given the autonomy to design and select teaching modules that are relevant and suited to the characteristics of their students and the conditions of their schools (Ramadhani et al., 2024). One important approach in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum is the integration of local values into the learning process. This aligns with the mission of the Pancasila Student Profile, which encourages the strengthening of national cultural identity through education. The character of the Pancasila Student Profile in learners can be shaped through learning based on local wisdom, especially by finding solutions to real-life problems in their surrounding environment (Pandiangan et al., 2024). Integrating local wisdom into elementary school learning is crucial because it helps students better understand lesson

concepts when taught from familiar, close-to-home contexts (Damayanti et al., 2022).

Previous studies have found that the Merdeka Curriculum generates new and interesting ideas in learning practices, although its implementation still faces several obstacles. For instance, teachers are often unaccustomed to designing creative and innovative lessons, as they continue to rely on conventional teaching methods (Zulaiha et al., 2020). Both teachers and students still lack preparedness and understanding of the learning flow in the Merdeka Curriculum, which affects students' comprehension of the material (Oktaviani et al., 2023). Teachers also face challenges in determining effective learning strategies, especially in selecting appropriate learning materials, which in turn causes students to struggle in grasping the content being taught (Ikhsandi & Erlisnawati, 2023).

A practical example that can be directly observed in relation to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is at SDN Gumuksari 02. This elementary school has begun applying a flexible, contextual learning approach focused on developing students' character. However, the implementation process inevitably involves various dynamics, including both successes and obstacles. Although many studies have examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, most of them focus only on general impacts and barriers such as lack of teacher preparedness, limited understanding of the learning flow, and difficulty in selecting suitable strategies and materials. There is still a limited number of studies that thoroughly explore how the Merdeka Curriculum can be contextually adapted and implemented through the integration of local wisdom values, especially in elementary schools. Therefore, this study aims to describe the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum through a local wisdom-based approach at SDN Gumuksari 02. It focuses on describing how the Merdeka Curriculum is applied at SDN Gumuksari 02 and provides empirical insights into the effectiveness and challenges of implementing the curriculum at the elementary school level, particularly those that incorporate local values.

2. Method

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at illustrating the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools. The qualitative approach aims to explain phenomena, perceptions, and behaviors, and to present them based on actual facts in the field (Waruwu, 2024). This qualitative method is used to view a reality, phenomenon, or observed symptom (Sa'adah et al., 2022). It also analyzes its relevance to local wisdom values through a literature review. This approach was chosen to enable the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of curriculum implementation based on direct field experiences and to strengthen the analysis with relevant theories. The subjects of this study are classroom teachers at SDN Gumuksari 02 who are directly involved in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Data collection was conducted through interview techniques. The researcher developed an interview guide as an instrument to gather information on various aspects of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation, such as learning strategies, challenges faced by teachers and students, and the integration of local wisdom values into the learning process. The relationship between curriculum implementation and local wisdom was examined directly through interviews and analyzed contextually through a literature review of relevant journals and academic sources. The interview data were analyzed qualitatively through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. To ensure validity, source triangulation was conducted by comparing interview results with field observations and school documentation.

3. Result and Discussion

Observation results show that SDN Gumuksari 02 has gradually implemented the Merdeka Curriculum over the past three years using the "IKM Mandiri Berubah" model. This implementation involves the use of central government-provided teaching tools, such as the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM) and Rumah Pendidikan, while also allowing room for adaptation according

to the characteristics and needs of students. Based on an interview with the 4th-grade teacher, Mrs. Istiqhomatul Laili, the curriculum focuses more on the development of students' character and morality. Teachers are free to develop flexible and relevant learning activities that suit the students' interests. This indicates a paradigm shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered learning approach.

The learning process in the classroom appears more active and diverse. Students are not merely passive recipients of information but are engaged in discussions, group projects, experiments, and even peer assessments. These activities reflect the application of meaningful and differentiated learning principles emphasized by the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers have also begun to adopt learning approaches that connect subject matter to daily life. For example, mathematics lessons are related to market shopping or managing pocket money. This strategy shows that teachers understand the importance of contextualizing material to enhance the relevance of learning. From the assessment perspective, evaluation is not solely done through written tests but also through projects, presentations, and group discussions. Teachers provide space for students to demonstrate their understanding and skills in ways that align with their individual learning styles. In line with this, Sari (2024) stated that the evaluation approach in the Merdeka Curriculum is designed to reflect students' holistic abilities, not just academic outcomes.

However, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum does not proceed without challenges. Some of the obstacles identified include students' low self-confidence in expressing opinions, limited learning facilities (such as projectors and internet access), and a lack of parental support in learning. Teachers address these issues through creative methods, such as using visual media, educational games, and positive reinforcement to build student confidence. Another challenge is the varying levels of teacher understanding regarding the structure of the Merdeka Curriculum. This finding supports the study by Ningsih & Hidayatullah (2023), which stated that one of the main

challenges of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools is the lack of readiness among teachers in understanding the concepts and learning tools. Nevertheless, the positive impact of the curriculum's implementation is significant. Students become more aware of their interests and potential through exploratory and project-based learning. They are also more accustomed to collaboration, reflection, and responsibility in learning. Teachers reported that the classroom atmosphere has become livelier and more enjoyable, and has strengthened the teacher-student relationship.

Students' responses to the changes in learning methods under the Merdeka Curriculum at SDN Gumuksari 02 have been very positive. They have shown significant shifts in attitudes towards learning. Previously passive and dependent on the teacher, students are now more active, confident, and willing to share their opinions. Many students stated that learning has become more enjoyable because it relates to real-life experiences and is no longer solely focused on memorization. This change aligns with the principle of student-centered learning, which places students as the main subjects in learning activities. According to Kusumah and Wahyudi (2021), student-centered learning can increase emotional engagement and intrinsic motivation, which in turn enhances conceptual understanding and shapes independent learner character.

Since the Merdeka Curriculum was implemented, learning has become more varied. Students no longer simply sit and listen but engage in discussions, group work, project creation, and personal reflection. This aligns with constructivist learning theory, where students construct their own understanding through active involvement in learning activities (Widodo & Rachmadtullah, 2022). In this context, students learn not only for grades but also for meaning. Some real activities experienced by students at SDN Gumuksari 02 include: 1) collaborative environmental projects where students create posters or cleanliness campaigns; 2) small group discussions, such as during themes involving local events, where students are asked to express opinions, listen to peers, and summarize the discussion—training their critical thinking and

communication skills; 3) self-reflection and peer assessment, where after completing group tasks, students reflect on their roles and provide feedback and appreciation to group members. These activities show deep emotional and cognitive engagement in the learning process.

These activities are in line with the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) approach, which, according to Hermawan and Agustin (2023), can enhance creativity and higher-order thinking skills among elementary school students. PjBL also helps students develop social and leadership skills through authentic and collaborative learning experiences. Overall, the students' responses and experiences with the Merdeka Curriculum at SDN Gumuksari 02 have been highly positive. They experience learning as more enjoyable, meaningful, and relevant. The variety of learning activities not only strengthens subject understanding but also shapes 21st-century character and skills. The application of modern learning theories such as student-centered and project-based learning proves to be in line with classroom realities.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SDN Gumuksari 02 also provides ample opportunities for schools and teachers to connect learning materials with local culture that thrives around the students. Based on observations and interviews, it is evident that several learning activities have intentionally integrated elements of Jember Regency's local wisdom—both in content, methods, and learning media. One of the most tangible integrations of local culture is seen in Indonesian Language and Regional Language subjects. Teachers use local folktales such as *The Origin of Puger Wetan*, *The Legend of Kawah Wurung*, and *The Story of Mount Argopuro* for reading comprehension, story rewriting, and even role-playing. This approach aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum principle of meaningful and contextual learning. Susanti & Rosyidah (2021) stated that using local folklore can strengthen students' cultural identity and increase their engagement in the learning process because the content feels close and relevant. In Art and Craft subjects, teachers incorporate local cultural practices into project-based learning. One example is the use of teak leaves and

banana stems for crafts, reflecting local habits of utilizing natural resources simply. Local wisdom integration is also visible in Physical Education (PJOK) activities, where traditional games like engklek and gobak sodor are revived as part of gross motor skills learning. Language plays a crucial role in cultural preservation. At SDN Gumuksari 02, Javanese language teachers actively teach the regional language through short stories, poems (pantun), and traditional Javanese verse (geguritan).

SDN Gumuksari 02 faces several challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum that affect classroom learning effectiveness. One major challenge is students' low self-confidence when asked to speak or perform in front of the class. Many students still feel shy and afraid of making mistakes, which makes them less active in discussions or presentations. This condition is worsened by the lack of family support. Some students do not receive sufficient guidance or attention from parents when completing assignments or reviewing lessons at home. The absence of family involvement leads to low motivation and difficulty understanding materials independently. On the other hand, teachers at SDN Gumuksari 02 also face obstacles in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Although teachers actively participate in training and use teaching tools from Merdeka Mengajar and Rumah Pendidikan platforms, there are still challenges in creating comprehensive learning innovations, resulting in less optimal student outcomes. Teachers also struggle with implementing literacy, numeracy, and learning reflection practices—key components of the curriculum. Furthermore, not all teachers have a deep understanding of the curriculum structure, leading to unclear and ineffective material delivery at times.

In addition, the application of the Merdeka Curriculum that emphasizes local wisdom still faces practical challenges. Teachers often find it difficult to integrate cultural values and local potential into learning processes due to a lack of teaching materials that suit the local context. The unavailability of systematically compiled modules or references on local wisdom forces teachers to develop their own, which requires more time and knowledge. Yet, learning

based on local context is essential for strengthening students' identity with their environment and culture. The lack of collaboration with local figures or cultural experts further hinders the development of authentic and meaningful learning content. Therefore, there is a need for enhanced teacher training, strengthened collaboration with parents and communities, and provision of relevant local teaching materials and facilities so that the Merdeka Curriculum can be implemented more effectively, contextually, and equitably across all educational units. Another challenge is the limited learning facilities. Not all classrooms have adequate learning media such as projectors, cultural videos, or internet access. Yet, such media are very helpful in delivering cultural content in an engaging way. Additionally, some teachers still find it difficult to deeply understand the Merdeka Curriculum, especially in connecting teaching materials to local cultural values. This lack of understanding may result in unfocused and monotonous learning experiences for students.

To address these challenges, several solutions can be implemented. Teachers need to frequently attend training sessions and be active in learning communities to share experiences and cultural-based teaching inspiration. Lessons can be linked directly to students' daily lives to increase relevance. Furthermore, involving parents and community figures in school activities and adding learning facilities such as regional storybooks or traditional musical instruments can strengthen the learning process. Evaluation should not rely solely on written tests but also include projects, discussions, and student-created work. This approach allows students to feel more appreciated, build confidence, and develop love for their own culture.

4. Conclusion

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SDN Gumuksari 02 has shown positive progress, although it is being carried out gradually. The school has adopted the "IKM Mandiri Berubah" model by utilizing various teaching tools such as the PMM (Merdeka Teaching Platform) and Rumah Belajar. This indicates that

student-centered learning and project-based learning approaches have been well implemented, helping students to understand the material in a more relevant and enjoyable way. The Merdeka Curriculum also provides space for the integration of local wisdom into learning activities. Teachers connect lesson content with regional culture, such as using Jember folktales in Indonesian or local language lessons, as well as incorporating traditional games and local materials in craft subjects. However, the implementation of this curriculum does not come without challenges. Obstacles remain, such as students' low self-confidence when speaking in public, limited learning facilities like projectors and internet access, and the suboptimal role of parents in supporting learning at home. On the teachers' side, there are still differences in understanding the structure of the Merdeka Curriculum, which affects the quality of its implementation. Future research is recommended to conduct controlled experiments comparing the effectiveness of local wisdom-based learning with conventional approaches in terms of students' academic achievement and character development.

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