

## Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum to Strengthen Literacy Skills in Early Grades of Elementary Schools

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### Abstrak

*This study discusses the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka as a strategic step to strengthen literacy skills in early grades at Elementary Schools. The research aims to investigate and analyze the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka, identify potential challenges, and evaluate its impact on strengthening literacy skills of students in elementary schools. The research method employed a qualitative approach with a focus on the experiences of students, teachers, and school principals. The study took place in 20 elementary schools across 4 districts implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka in Central Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara. Data collection involved interviews and observations of the implementation of initial assessments and differentiated learning, which are integral parts of the Kurikulum Merdeka. The findings reveal that the majority of teachers have conducted initial assessments in accordance with Kurikulum Merdeka procedures. Although there are challenges related to the understanding of guidelines by a small percentage of teachers, there are strong indications of a shift in their mindset regarding the importance of assessments. Differentiated learning is implemented in various ways, with students experiencing its benefits, including improved literacy skills. Schools also have data-based literacy reinforcement programs to support the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka. The conclusion of this study is that the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka in terms of assessment and differentiated learning has a positive impact, including the potential to enhance students' literacy skills. Despite challenges, continuous efforts are being made to improve the quality of learning and literacy achievements of students. The results of this research provide valuable insights for education practitioners and policymakers to continually enhance the effectiveness of the Kurikulum Merdeka in shaping a smart and competitive younger generation in the current era and the future.*

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### Abstrak

Kajian ini membahas implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka sebagai langkah strategis untuk memperkuat kecakapan literasi pada kelas awal di Sekolah Dasar (SD). Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki dan menganalisis implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka, mengidentifikasi tantangan yang mungkin dihadapi, serta mengevaluasi dampaknya terhadap penguatan kecakapan literasi peserta didik di SD. Metode Penelitian dalam kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan fokus pada pengalaman siswa, guru, dan kepala sekolah. Dilakukan di 20 SD pada 4 Kecamatan yang menerapkan Kurikulum Merdeka di Kabupaten Lombok Tengah, Nusa Tenggara Barat. Pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan wawancara dan observasi terhadap implementasi asesmen awal dan pembelajaran berdiferensiasi sebagai bagian penting dari Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka. Hasil kajian ini mengungkapkan bahwa sebagian besar guru telah melaksanakan asesmen awal sesuai prosedur Kurikulum Merdeka. Meskipun ada tantangan pemahaman panduan oleh sebagian kecil guru, terdapat indikasi kuat perubahan mindset mereka terkait pentingnya asesmen. Pembelajaran berdiferensiasi diterapkan secara beragam, dengan siswa merasakan manfaatnya, termasuk peningkatan kemampuan literasi. Sekolah juga memiliki program penguatan literasi berbasis data untuk mendukung implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka. Simpulan dari kajian ini adalah bahwa implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka dalam aspek asesmen dan pembelajaran berdiferensiasi memberikan dampak positif, termasuk potensi untuk meningkatkan capaian kemampuan literasi siswa. Meskipun ada tantangan, upaya terus dilakukan untuk meningkatkan kualitas pembelajaran dan capaian literasi siswa. Hasil penelitian ini memberikan wawasan berharga bagi praktisi pendidikan dan pengambil kebijakan untuk terus meningkatkan efektivitas Kurikulum Merdeka dalam membentuk generasi muda yang cerdas dan berdaya saing di era saat ini dan di masa yang akan datang.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia continues to experience development and transformation in response to the demands of the times. One of the latest efforts that has been implemented in the realm of basic education is the Independent Curriculum. The Merdeka Curriculum is the focal point as a strategic tool in providing education that is relevant, dynamic, and oriented towards strengthening literacy and numeracy at the elementary school (SD) level. By integrating student-centered learning principles, the Independent Curriculum is expected to be able to produce a generation that has high literacy and numeracy skills.

This study aims to investigate and analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum as a concrete step in strengthening literacy and numeracy skills in elementary schools. Improving literacy and numeracy skills at elementary school level is considered

important as the main foundation for students' academic development at the next level of education. Therefore, an in-depth understanding of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in elementary schools is essential to evaluate its impact on students' achievement of literacy and numeracy competencies.

In this context, this study will explore key aspects of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, identify challenges that may be faced, and evaluate its impact on strengthening literacy and numeracy skills. It is hoped that the results of this study can provide valuable insight for educational practitioners, policy makers and related parties to continue to improve the effectiveness of the Independent Curriculum as a strategic step in forming an intelligent and competitive young generation in the current era and in the future.

It is common knowledge that education is the main foundation in shaping the character and abilities of the younger generation, especially at the elementary level. In the midst of the dynamics of global development and the challenges of the 21st century, literacy is the main key in equipping students with the knowledge and skills needed for success in the future. This study discusses the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum as an educational innovation that aims to strengthen literacy skills in the early grades of elementary school. The Merdeka Curriculum offers a holistic and contextual approach, providing greater space for teachers to be creative and design learning that is relevant to local needs and student characteristics. The main focus of this implementation is on developing literacy skills, which include reading, writing and critical thinking literacy through differentiated learning. By giving educators the freedom to adapt learning according to environmental realities, student development and abilities, it is hoped that they will be able to create a more meaningful and effective learning experience.

The importance of literacy skills in the early grades cannot be ignored, as research shows that effective learning at this stage can form a strong foundation for later literacy skills. Therefore, this study will review in depth the implementation of the Independent Curriculum and its impact on students' literacy skills in elementary schools. By understanding how the Merdeka Curriculum is applied at the basic education level, it is hoped that this study can make a positive contribution to the development of education in Indonesia.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

This research uses a qualitative approach. This approach is used to gain in-depth insight into the experiences of students, teachers and school principals in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. This approach is used to collect data related to the level of success of students' literacy skills with a focus on initial assessment and differentiated learning as an inseparable part of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The subjects of this study are students, teachers, principals and supervisors in elementary schools that have implemented the Independent Curriculum. The sample was selected purposively by considering variations between schools and grade levels. The location of this study was 20 elementary schools that had implemented the Independent Curriculum in four sub-districts in Central Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara.

Data collection instruments in this study used interviews and observations with school officials, supervisors and related agencies. Interviews were conducted to obtain information about the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and their perceptions of its impact. Observations were carried out by directly observing the learning process in the classroom at schools that implement the Independent Curriculum to understand daily implementation.

The stages of this study began with identifying elementary schools that implemented the Independent Curriculum, then collecting data by conducting interviews with students, teachers, principals and supervisors. Next, conduct classroom observations at schools that

implement the Independent Curriculum. And finally, carry out data analysis as a basis for providing interpretation of the study results.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

There are three key questions asked in this study. These key questions are related to the key approach in implementing the Independent Curriculum, namely related to learning assessment and related to differentiated learning. Conceptually, differentiated learning that begins with a good initial assessment process will contribute positively to student learning outcomes, because the learning process is in accordance with the students' abilities and development. This key question was presented collaboratively using various methods as stated in the research method proposed to students, teachers, school principals and supervisors regarding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in each of the study target schools. The first question is regarding to what extent has the initial assessment as an integral part of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum been carried out? The second question is, to what extent is differentiated learning implemented and do students feel the benefits of the differentiated learning process according to the demands of the Independent Curriculum? And the third question, does the school have a data-based literacy strengthening program to support the implementation of the Independent Curriculum? Referring to the data obtained from respondents, several study results were found as follows:

First, regarding the question to what extent the initial assessment as an inseparable part of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum has been carried out. The respondents' answers were that the majority of teachers had carried out assessments according to procedures, a small number of teachers still had difficulty understanding the guidelines for determining levels of literacy abilities, each class and school had data on students' literacy abilities, there were strong indications of changes in teachers' mindsets regarding the importance of conducting assessments, including as follows: benchmarks/targets for teacher success.

The results of this study are in accordance with the opinion of Smith (2018) who states that initial assessment has a crucial role in understanding students' individual needs. Teachers who have carried out assessments according to procedures reflect their understanding of the value of assessment as a tool for identifying student strengths and weaknesses (Black & William, 2009). This is in line with the finding that the majority of teachers have carried out assessments according to procedures. Research by Brown (2020) highlights that difficulties in understanding guidelines for determining levels of literacy ability are not an isolated phenomenon. This can be understood as a stage of adaptation to curriculum changes. Clearer support and focused training can help overcome these difficulties (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

According to Robinson (2015), recording data on student literacy abilities in each class and school is an important step in increasing accountability and effectiveness of the curriculum. The results of this study show that this data recording has been carried out, reflecting the teacher's responsibility for the development of student literacy at every level. Meanwhile, Scriven (1991) stated that the use of assessment as a benchmark or target for teacher success is a progressive step. This shows that assessment is not only a tool for measuring student achievement, but also teacher performance in implementing the Independent Curriculum.

By referring to this literature, it can be concluded that the implementation of initial assessment as an integral part of the Independent Curriculum reflects teachers' understanding of the role of assessment in guiding teaching and improving student learning. Although there are several obstacles, such as difficulties in understanding guidelines and

recording data, indications of changes in teacher mind-set showed positive progress in responding to curriculum changes. Therefore, further steps such as additional training and further support approaches may help improve overall implementation of initial assessments.

Second, related to the question to what extent differentiated learning is implemented and whether students feel the benefits of the differentiated learning process. Respondents' answers were (1) Differentiated learning has been applied in various ways according to the context and abilities of teachers (there are groupings according to levels at class level and across classes); (2) With differentiated learning, most students feel that learning is easier to understand (because it matches the student's level of ability), safer and more comfortable because the teacher understands more about students' abilities and difficulties, is more motivated and enthusiastic about participating in learning, especially when reading stories together, learning uses reading materials more often; (3) the majority of students experience an increase in their reading ability, students read more often because teachers have used reading books in learning, both in Joint Interactive Reading activities, as well as students' independent reading activities and the collection of reading books has become larger because of the school's attention.

Differentiated learning is an approach aimed at meeting the needs of various students in one class. The results of respondents' answers stating that differentiated learning has been applied in various ways according to the context and teacher's abilities provide an illustration that the implementation of this learning has been carried out flexibly, including grouping students according to level at class level and across classes.

Several literatures support the importance of implementing differentiated learning to improve student learning outcomes. According to Tomlinson (2001), differentiated learning provides opportunities for teachers to respond to students' individual differences, understand their learning styles, and provide challenges appropriate to their level of ability. In this context, differentiated learning not only provides advantages in achieving academic goals but also creates a learning environment that is more inclusive and responsive to individual needs. Meanwhile, according to Marzoan (2023), implementing differentiated learning in schools, especially in elementary schools, can help improve student learning outcomes, improve the quality of learning, and strengthen educational inclusion. Differentiated learning strategies can help teachers design learning strategies that consider students' differences in abilities, interests and learning styles

Respondents' answers stated that the majority of students felt learning was easier to understand, safe and comfortable because it was appropriate to the students' level of ability, indicating a positive impact from implementing differentiated learning. The basic needs theory according to Deci and Ryan (2000) supports this, which states that students will feel more motivated and enthusiastic when the learning environment meets their needs for competence and autonomy. Differentiated learning can create a more positive learning experience, because students feel recognized and appreciated for their individual abilities and uniqueness.

Apart from that, the respondents' answers stated that differentiated learning improved students' reading abilities, indicating conformity with research findings conducted by Allington (2002). Allington emphasized that when teachers implement differentiated learning by utilizing reading materials that are appropriate to students' reading skill levels, this can increase their reading interest and ability. Therefore, the use of reading books in Joint Interactive Reading activities as well as students' independent reading activities provides real support for improving students' reading abilities.

In the context of increasing school reading book collections, the literature also emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the diversity of reading books to increase

students' interest in reading (Krashen, 2004). If schools pay attention to this, not only in the context of differentiated learning but as a whole, it will make a positive contribution to the successful implementation of differentiated learning.

Thus, the findings from the respondents' answers are in line with the views and research of experts in the field of education. Implementing differentiated learning contextually and responsive to student needs can provide significant benefits, including improving reading skills, increasing student motivation, and creating a safer and more comfortable learning environment.

Third, related to the question of whether the school has a data-based literacy strengthening program to support the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. The respondent's answer was that the school had recapitulated data on the level of literacy skills of students from Grades 1 to Grade 4, the school together with the class teachers had determined targets for increasing student literacy achievements at the end of the academic year, the majority of school principals had prepared plans and carried out supervision and reflection on learning by teachers, some schools have developed programs to support students at special intervention levels for basic literacy skills.

The question of whether the school has a data-based literacy strengthening program to support the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is an important thing in measuring educational effectiveness. Respondents' answers indicate that the school has taken several steps to ensure increased student literacy. This is in line with the opinion of Black and Wiliam (1998) who stated the importance of formative assessment in improving learning outcomes. Regarding the setting of literacy improvement targets made by schools, it also reflects the approach advocated by Hattie and Timperley (2007). Setting clear and realistic targets can increase student and teacher motivation and improve learning outcomes. By detailing the literature support from educational research and theory, the statement that the school has implemented concrete steps to strengthen data-based student literacy in accordance with the Independent Curriculum becomes more proven and becomes an important point in the results of this study.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Referring to the results of research conducted on the implementation of the Independent Curriculum with a focus on learning assessment and differentiated learning, several important conclusions can be drawn. First, the majority of teachers have carried out initial assessments according to the Independent Curriculum procedures, but there are a small number of teachers who still have difficulty understanding the guidelines for determining students' literacy and numeracy skill levels. However, there are strong indications of changes in teachers' mindsets regarding the importance of conducting assessments as benchmarks/targets for teacher success. Second, differentiated learning has been applied variously by teachers, according to the context and their abilities. Grouping of students according to level at class level and across classes has been carried out. The research results show that the majority of students feel the benefits of differentiated learning, considering learning to be easier to understand, safe, comfortable, and more motivating. Apart from that, there was an increase in students' reading abilities, which can be attributed to the use of reading materials in learning. Third, related to the data-based literacy strengthening program, the research results show that the school has recapitulated data on students' literacy levels. The principal together with the class teachers have determined targets for increasing student literacy outcomes, and most principals have carried out supervision and reflection on learning by teachers. Some schools have also developed programs to support students at the Special Intervention level for basic literacy skills.

The research results show that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the aspects of assessment and differentiated learning has had a positive impact. Teachers tend to better understand the importance of initial assessments, implement differentiated learning, and have data-based literacy strengthening programs. Although there are several challenges, such as difficulty understanding the assessment guide by a small number of teachers, efforts continue to be made to improve the quality of learning and student literacy achievements.

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