

Identifying the Level of Schools' Readiness towards the Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in Medan Petisah District

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Abstract. Readiness is one of the indicators in the evaluation area to judge a context's condition to what extent they will succeed in the practicing of a new curriculum or anything else. The readiness indicator in this research includes teachers' understanding about the details of the new curriculum, lesson planning design, learning process, module development to support the learning process, infrastructures, and evaluation process. This research aims to evaluate the schools' readiness in the application of Merdeka Curriculum. There are fourteen kindergartens with both national and religious backgrounds located in Medan Petisah district that participated in this research. The research applied a mixed method research design employing an open questionnaire instrument, semi-structured interview guidelines, and documentation in terms of collecting data. The research was undertaken in May to June 2023 by inviting two representatives, both a teacher and a headmaster of the schools involved in this research. The data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The analysis results show that only one school is identified in the level of strongly ready to implement the new curriculum in their institution with their good understanding of the curriculum details and how to run the school under the implementation of Merdeka curriculum. Approximately the overall score says that the schools in the Petisah district are moderately seen to be ready to implement the curriculum. Teachers' understanding about the details of the curriculum, learning designs, and students' development evaluation appear to be concerning.

Keywords: School evaluation, Merdeka Curriculum, School's Readiness Indicator, Early Childhood

1 Introduction

Over the past decade, Indonesia has undergone four curriculum revisions, commencing with the 2013 curriculum, followed by the revised 2013 curriculum, an interim emergency curriculum, and most recently, the Merdeka curriculum [37]. These alterations were prompted by the rapid evolution and advancements in technology and science, necessitating individuals to acquire a diverse array of new and intricate skills to adapt effectively. Consequently, the overarching objective of national education must continuously evolve in tandem with these changes, aiming to prepare and equip students with the requisite capabilities to confront the

challenges of both their present and future lives [12]. The curriculum plays a pivotal role in realizing this objective, as underscored by Egan's assertion that it serves as a primary instrument in education, guiding the trajectory of educational practices within a nation [42]. This guidance encompasses a structured framework for learning, often referred to as a "plan for learning" (Van den Akker, 2004 [41]; Prideaux, 2003 [31]; Barnett, 2000 [4]). Such a plan comprises three fundamental components, including goals, pedagogy, and evaluation.

In the Indonesian educational landscape, the latest curriculum implemented across educational institutions spanning from Early Childhood Education to Higher Education is the Merdeka Curriculum. Originating as a response by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology to mitigate learning deficits exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, this curriculum aims to address the phenomenon of learning loss, characterized within this study by students' diminished proficiency in literacy and numeracy [15]. Learning loss itself in this research is characterized by students' low ability in literacy and numeracy [19].

Embracing a pedagogical ethos that prioritizes adaptability and contextual relevance, the Merdeka Curriculum positions educators as frontline facilitators in the educational process, empowering them with the autonomy to tailor instructional methodologies to suit the unique contextual exigencies, as well as the diverse needs and interests of their students [38]. Beyond foregrounding the pivotal role and professional agency of educators, the Merdeka Curriculum underscores a commitment to holistic student development, particularly through its innovative flagship initiative, the "Profil Pelajar Pancasila" or "Pancasila Profile" program. This program represents a multifaceted endeavor to foster students' character formation, anchored in the fundamental precepts of Pancasila, Indonesia's foundational philosophical framework. Notably, the Pancasila Profile embodies a spectrum of character attributes and competencies deemed essential for student attainment, including but not limited to, the cultivation of critical thinking skills, the acknowledgment of God as the divine architect of the universe, the cultivation of creativity, independence, and collaborative aptitudes [16]. This paradigm shift towards character-centric education epitomizes the Merdeka Curriculum's broader ambition to cultivate morally upright, socially responsible, and intellectually adept citizens poised to navigate the complexities of an ever-evolving global landscape.

Given that the Merdeka Curriculum supplants its predecessors, schools are presented with three distinct schemas, delineated as (1) Mandiri Belajar; (2) Mandiri Berubah; and (3) Mandiri Berbagi, each representing sequential phases of preparatory actions prior to full-scale implementation. Notably, adherence to these schemas is imperative, with schools necessitated to progress through them in a sequential fashion. Failure to comply with this sequential progression renders a school ineligible to partake in the subsequent phase, thereby precluding their ability to adopt the Mandiri Berbagi schema. The Mandiri Belajar schema connotes a transitional phase wherein a school has yet to effectuate a complete transition from its extant curriculum to the Merdeka framework. Nonetheless, schools operating within this schema retain the flexibility to selectively incorporate elements and principles of the Merdeka Curriculum into their existing educational framework. Conversely, the Mandiri Berubah schema signifies a pivotal juncture wherein a school has achieved full-fledged integration of the Merdeka Curriculum across all facets of its institutional operations. Concurrently, the Mandiri Berbagi schema epitomizes a stage wherein schools, having successfully embraced the Merdeka framework, are expected to disseminate their internally developed teaching resources and instructional modules to fellow educational stakeholders via government-facilitated platforms [15]. Consequently, elucidating schools' perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum and gauging their preparedness to navigate the complexities inherent in its implementation emerge as imperative imperatives warranting scholarly inquiry.

In order to measure a school's readiness on implementing Merdeka curriculum in their institution, these following six indicators can be utilized (Al Kahar & Putri, 2023 [2]; Rahmawati, 2022 [34]; Rachmawati, et. al., 2022 [33]; Sugiri and Priatmoko, 2020 [37]).

Table 1. School Readiness Indicators in the context of Early Childhood Education

No	Indicator	Characteristics
1	Curriculum Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Intracurricular learning ● Extracurricular learning ● Student's Pancasila Profile ● Merdeka Belajar, Merdeka Bermain ● Play activity plans ● Play based Education Kit ● Learning outcomes
2	Lesson Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Themes ● RPPM (Weekly Learning Implementation Plan) ● RPPH (Daily Learning Implementation Plan)
3	Learning Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learning plan for every scenario ● Play monitoring ● Feedback ● Merdeka bermain
4	Teaching Module	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Supporting tools to Profil Pancasila ● Derived from Learning Outcomes ● Learning source ● Learning rules ● The design should be adapted from learning materials, learning needs, evaluation materials, and interesting.
5	Facilities and Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● School building area ● Playroom ● Supporting children's creativity development ● Classroom ● Garden and yard ● Educational game tools ● Instructional Media
6	Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Authentic assessment ● Portfolio

Drawing upon comprehensive data retrieved from the Merdeka Curriculum Implementation Dashboard in June 2023, it is discerned that a substantial cohort of 24,165 educational institutions have proactively registered to embrace the latest curriculum, indicative of a pervasive societal eagerness towards its adoption. However, within the purview of North Sumatra, particularly in the Medan Petisah sub-district, an exploratory investigation conducted by researchers unveils a disquieting revelation: among the 17 Kindergarten establishments scrutinized, merely a solitary institution has initiated the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This statistical anomaly, underscored by the glaring disproportion between the registered enthusiasm for the curriculum and its actualized adoption at the grassroots level, underscores a palpable exigency for a more nuanced inquiry into the prevailing perceptions and preparedness of educational stakeholders using the Merdeka Curriculum within the confines of the Medan Petisah sub-district.

Hence, in light of this incongruity, it becomes imperative to undertake a comprehensive analysis elucidating the multifaceted dynamics shaping stakeholders' attitudes towards the

Merdeka Curriculum, as well as the strategic measures employed to facilitate its seamless integration within the educational fabric of the Medan Petisah sub-district. This scholarly endeavor seeks to illuminate the underlying factors contributing to the observed implementation gap, thereby furnishing invaluable insights instrumental in informing policy formulations and pedagogical interventions geared towards fostering a more equitable and efficacious adoption of the Merdeka Curriculum across diverse educational contexts.

2 Research Method

The present study was conducted employing a mixed-method research approach, which endeavors to garner a more exhaustive, robust, and unbiased understanding of specific issues by integrating qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques [5]. This methodological framework is designed to yield comprehensive insights into the multifaceted dimensions of the research inquiry, ensuring the attainment of findings that are both valid and reliable. Within the context of this investigation, a total of 14 kindergartens situated in the Medan Petisah District of Medan, North Sumatra, were selected as the focal points of analysis. These kindergartens were chosen based on a set of predefined criteria, which served to ensure the representativeness and diversity of the sample. The characteristics of the selected kindergartens encompassed various facets, including but not limited to as follows.

Table 2. Characteristics of Research Subjects

Code	Private Schools	Current Used Curriculum		Accreditation			Ideology	
		Merdeka	Curriculum 2013	A	B	C	Not Accredited	National
1	✓		✓			✓		✓
2	✓		✓				✓	
3	✓		✓		✓			✓
4	✓		✓		✓			✓
5	✓		✓		✓			✓
6	✓		✓		✓			✓
7	✓		✓		✓			✓
8	✓		✓		✓			✓
9	✓	✓		✓				✓
10	✓		✓			✓		✓
11	✓		✓		✓			✓
12	✓		✓				✓	✓
13	✓		✓			✓		✓
14	✓		✓			✓		✓

The selection of participants for this data collection process adhered to a purposive sampling technique, whereby the researchers judiciously determined the composition of the sample in accordance with the specific requisites and objectives of the research endeavor [10]. The criteria employed for sample selection pertained to individuals occupying roles as educators or school administrators within Kindergarten units situated in the Medan Petisah sub-district. To ensure methodological rigor and comprehensiveness, a multifaceted approach was employed to gather both qualitative and quantitative data, encompassing the utilization of

open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The questionnaire served as a primary instrument for assessing the readiness of schools in implementing the Merdeka curriculum, comprising six distinct indicators: (1) curriculum structure, (2) lesson planning, (3) instructional methodologies, (4) pedagogical resources, (5) infrastructural provisions, and (6) assessment and evaluation protocols. Each indicator was meticulously delineated into a series of open-ended question items, designed to solicit nuanced insights from participants. The readiness assessment instrument utilized in this study comprised a total of 24 question items, each assigned a scoring range from 1 to 3, with higher scores denoting greater readiness levels. To facilitate the interpretation of these scores and effectively map the readiness status of each participating institution, an assessment guide was devised. This interpretive framework delineated readiness levels into five distinct categories, each indicative of varying degrees of preparedness and proficiency in implementing the Merdeka curriculum. The utilization of such a comprehensive assessment framework enabled researchers to discern nuanced patterns and trends in school readiness, thereby enriching the analytical depth and robustness of the study outcomes.

Table 3. School Readiness Assessment Category

Score Range	Level of Interpretation	Interpretation Code
64-72	Strongly Ready	SR
54-63	Ready	R
44-53	Moderate	M
34-43	Not Ready	NR
24-33	Strongly Not Ready	SNR

To assess each answer, researchers developed an assessment rubric as a benchmark [30]. The instruments and rubrics for measuring school readiness in implementing the Merdeka curriculum have been validated by curriculum evaluation experts. Besides questionnaires, another data collection method is semi-structured interviews. The interview method was used to reveal information about the current state of kindergarten unit schools, the perceptions of school principals and teachers regarding the Merdeka curriculum, as well as supporting factors and challenges experienced in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum (Trainor, 2013 [40]; James & Busher, 2006 [17]). The document analysis method is used to gather data and information about curriculum documents, teaching materials, and evaluation instruments owned by subjects of this research [26].

The collected data in this research is qualitative data from interviews and documentation as well as quantitative data originating from school readiness questionnaires. Qualitative data was analyzed through the coding method using the NVIVO application, while quantitative data was analyzed through descriptive statistics (Maher et al., 2018 [24]; Noor, 2011 [27]). To increase the validity of the research results, researchers used a triangulation method [20]. According to Guion [11], triangulation is carried out by comparing and re-checking information that has been obtained and interpreted through different times and tools in a study. The triangulation method used in this research was comparing the results of interviews, documents and questionnaires.

3 Result and Discussion

Upon completion of rigorous data analysis procedures and employing triangulation methods to corroborate findings, numerous salient points emerged. These encompassed the classification of school readiness levels pertaining to the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum within early childhood education establishments situated in the Medan Petisah sub-district. Additionally, the analysis facilitated the elucidation of insights into stakeholders' comprehension and perception of the Merdeka curriculum, as discerned through an exploration of readiness indicators germane to curriculum implementation.

3.1 Level of School Readiness and Influencing Factors

Based on data that has been collected from the school readiness questionnaire and the results of analysis, data is obtained as shown in the graph 1 below:

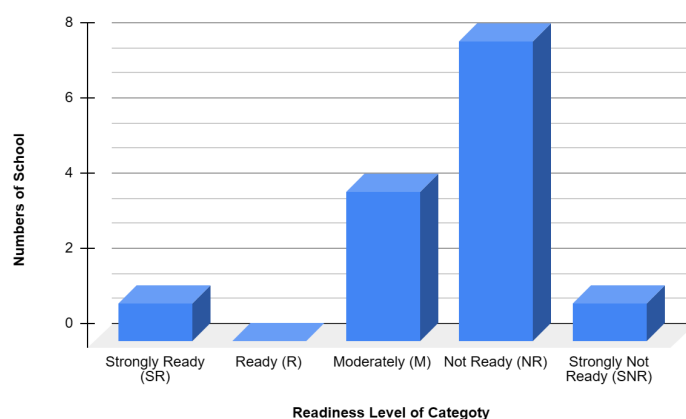


Fig. 1. Number of Schools Based on Readiness Category for Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

The graph above shows the number of schools involved in this research that are categorized by the level of readiness on implementing Merdeka Curriculum. Overall, most of the schools, eight out of fourteen, stand in the NR category, four schools are in the M category, and one school each is in SR category and the SNR category on implementing the Merdeka curriculum in their educational institutions, respectively. Schools with NR level category have low scores on five out of the six readiness indicators consisting of Lesson Plan, Learning Process, Learning Modules, Facilities and Infrastructures, and Evaluation. Rina, one of the teachers whose school is in the NR category explained that the lack of self-motivation as a professional to searching for Merdeka curriculum and the lack of learning facilities at school to execute Merdeka Bermain program were the reasons why her school was not confidently ready to implement the latest curriculum. However, as a school principal, Rina and her colleagues expect that her school can immediately try implementing the Merdeka curriculum through the scheme of Mandiri Belajar. This means that Rina's school can start implementing several parts and principles of the Merdeka curriculum, without forcing them to change the currently used curriculum at her school [7]. In line with Rina's opinion, Tari et al.'s

[39] stated that other factors that influence schools' readiness to apply the Merdeka curriculum are the limited socialization and workshops on the Merdeka curriculum, the lack of references related to the implementation of the curriculum in early childhood education contexts, low motivation and less agility of teachers to be able to catch up with rapid changes, as well as the impression of the Merdeka curriculum imposed as a sudden interest responding to the Covid-19 pandemic [8]. The limited references and uneven socialization of this Merdeka curriculum have affected teachers' low understanding of this curriculum [13]. As experienced by Asih, whose school is identified at the NR level, to implement the Merdeka curriculum.

Just like the number of schools in the SNR category, the SR category has only one school in it as well. This school is led by Siti, a middle-aged woman who is very enthusiastic about sharing her experiences in implementing the Merdeka curriculum. Siti's School is the only kindergarten that has implemented Merdeka curriculum with the scheme of Mandiri Berubah. This means that Siti's school has fully applied this Merdeka curriculum in organizing and managing the school. In fact, she added that her school is currently moving towards the Mandiri Berbagi scheme. This means that Siti's school is obliged to share the teaching tools used with other schools throughout Indonesia through the platform provided by the government. According to Siti, the factors that support the achievement of the independent learning to independent change scheme are solid teamwork and motivation to continue to become better as a professional and leader in their institution. At least Siti participated in more than five to ten seminars, workshops and sharing sessions held by the regional and/or central governments regarding the Merdeka curriculum in early childhood education context. This is also in line with the research results of Jannah and Rasyid [18] which found that there should be closed collaboration between teachers, as the front liner in daily learning process, and school officials in preparing the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum. For example, through sharing sessions with all school staff regarding the Merdeka curriculum, so that everyone is aware of what they want to achieve. Apart from that, the factors presented by Siti are related to teacher professional identity [25]. This identity factor refers to how a teacher sees themselves to be able to play their role immensely in the working environment.

3.2 School Readiness Seen from Each Indicator

The readiness of stakeholders in schools on implementing the Merdeka curriculum in this research was measured through six indicators, consisting of (1) curriculum structure; (2) readiness of learning plans; (3) readiness for the learning process; (4) readiness of teaching modules; (5) readiness of facilities and infrastructure; (6) readiness for learning evaluation. Based on the analysis results, each indicator has a different average score as written in table 1 below.

Table 4. Average Score of Each Indicator

No	Indicator	Average Score	Category
1	Curriculum Structure	29.6	M
2	Learning Plan	20	NR
3	Learning Proccess	22.25	NR
4	Teaching Modules	20	NR
5	Facilities and Infrastructure	25.67	M
6	Evaluation	17.33	SNR

The table above describes the average score and category for each indicator of school readiness towards implementation of Merdeka curriculum in early childhood education units in Medan Petisah sub-district. First, the curriculum structure indicator has the highest average score around 29.6. This means that approximately schools in the Medan Petisah sub-district have quite well understanding on the structure of the Merdeka curriculum and its differences from previous curricula, such as in the context of characteristics, objectives, curriculum implementation schemes, learning hours, and learning outcomes. This readiness indicator has the highest average score because nine out of fourteen schools or 64.28% of respondents have participated in the socialization of the Merdeka curriculum organized by the regional education officer. Socialization activities are known as a valid strategy to bring a big influence in shaping teachers' knowledge regarding the Merdeka curriculum in general (Husain, 2023 [14]; Nur and Hanum, 2023 [29]). In addition, according to Rasmani et al.'s [35], this socialization activity becomes more meaningful when the speakers have a solid background as Guru Penggerak, an individual who has implemented this type of curriculum.

Second, the readiness of learning assessment and evaluation indicator has the lowest average score around 17.33. This shows that the average school in the Medan Petisah sub-district does not fully understand the techniques for assessing learning outcomes used in the Merdeka Curriculum. The assessment of aspects of early years' development in the Merdeka curriculum is determined and specifically different from the previous curriculum [1]. In the Merdeka curriculum, the assessment instrument is carried out through authentic assessments which are not commonly used by kindergarten teachers in this study. According to Rosidah, Pramulia and Susiloningsih [36], authentic assessment has not been widely used by teachers in early childhood education because it is considered too complicated as they are required to create rubrics and have to convert grades based on the developed rubrics. Besides it being complicated, authentic assessments cannot be carried out briefly, but instead must be done carefully through the stages of preparation, implementation, as well as analysis and reporting of the results [37]. Another factor that supports the low average score for this learning assessment readiness indicator is that there are not many workshops that focus on creating authentic assessment plans in early childhood education [3].

Third, indicators of facilities and infrastructure readiness and indicators of learning process readiness, which respectively have an average score of 25.67 and 22.25. These two indicators are for each other. Facilities and infrastructure indicators relate to instruments, media and educational game kits as the main tools in supporting the learning process in the classroom. This facility is an important aspect and is needed to support the implementation of inclusive education programs in the Merdeka curriculum. As mentioned in policy briefs, the Merdeka curriculum itself is objective to create a school as a safe space and environment for children with different characteristics, social and cultural background, and not limited to their physical appearances to learn in a playing based learning process. Regarding the concept of inclusive education, it turns out that 10 of the 14 informants interviewed in this research revealed that they were still unfamiliar with the word inclusion. The concept of inclusion that they understand is only limited to children with special physical needs. According to Kurniawati et al.'s [23] lack of understanding by school policy makers regarding the concept of inclusion and the implementation of inclusive education is an obstacle for students with special needs to obtain their rights in education [9]. So if this challenge is not resolved seriously, then the goal of a Merdeka curriculum will be hard to achieve [32].

Furthermore, the indicators of learning plan readiness and teaching module readiness have the same average score of 20. This score shows that schools need additional knowledge regarding learning plans and processes as well as teaching modules that support classroom learning activities according to the characteristics of the Merdeka curriculum. As it is known that the characteristics of the Merdeka curriculum are fundamentally different to other curricula with the existence of the concept of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila, extracurricular activities, project based learning and Merdeka Bermain. Apart from that, the disappearance of calistung in the Merdeka curriculum is of particular concern to respondents. From these characteristics, 93% of respondents to this study revealed that they still experienced confusion in designing the projects of Profil Pancasila for early years students. According to Khoeriah et al.'s [22] to be able to design a project for Profil Pelajar Pancasila, a teacher should be aware of the learning outcomes and the concept of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila itself. These two variables are very closely related [28]. For example, to realize the dimensions of a student profile with Pancasila characteristics, such as independent, globally diverse, collaborative, teachers can develop this profile through learning design. Therefore, this design can be implemented to help children know their identity, culture, and realize what Pancasila is. Moreover, early years students will be aware and genuine about themselves and their surroundings. Furthermore, project based learning undoubtedly stimulates their motor skills, increasing their understanding of living a healthy life, and collaborating.

Overall, schools' stakeholders in the Medan Petisah sub-district need to improve their understanding and skills to meet the criteria for the indicators for assessing learning outcomes, learning plan readiness, learning process readiness, and teaching module readiness.

4 Conclusion

In summary, the prevailing state of kindergarten institutions within the Medan Petisah sub-district of Medan reveals a predominant readiness level categorized as Moderate in response to the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum, with a notable preference among schools for the Mandiri Belajar scheme. The proactive engagement of both central government authorities and regional education officers in disseminating information about the Merdeka curriculum has exerted a substantial influence, compelling schools to consider transitioning from their existing curricular frameworks. Indeed, these socialization efforts have served as catalytic agents, galvanizing stakeholders towards the adoption of the Merdeka curriculum within their respective educational contexts. Furthermore, the analysis underscores several key determinants influencing stakeholders' readiness to embrace the new curriculum, including intrinsic motivation, collaborative endeavors, and the cultivation of a professional teacher identity. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that the current state of school readiness necessitates further enhancement, as evidenced by the observation that only two readiness indicators attain a status of Moderately Ready, with average scores of 29.60 and 25.67, respectively. This underscores the exigency for concerted efforts among policymakers and educators, who serve as frontline agents within educational institutions, to augment their knowledge and competencies, striving towards the attainment of optimal readiness levels across all pertinent indicators.

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