



Teacher's Journey in Understanding, Interpreting, and Applying the Concept of *Merdeka Belajar* in IPAS Learning

Received: 22-04-2024; Revised: 23-05-2024; Accepted: 01-06-2024

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Abstract: The concept of *merdeka belajar* is a characteristic of the *kurikulum merdeka*. This concept is the basis for teachers in implementing learning, including in the IPAS subject. The purpose of this study is to describe how teachers understand, interpret, and apply independent learning in IPAS learning as well as efforts to continue to fight for IPAS learning with interesting presentations. Data were obtained through interviews, observations, documentation at SDN Banaran 2 Kandangan Kediri which were then described qualitatively descriptively, analyzed using the Miles and Huberman technique, and validated by triangulation. The results of this study show that the *merdeka mengajar* platform is a medium for teachers to understand *merdeka belajar*, reflection on recognizing themselves and their role as educators as an effort to interpret *merdeka belajar*, and the obligation to complete independent training on the *merdeka mengajar* platform; binding policies from structural education authorities from sub-districts and school clusters; and the absence of guidelines that truly integrate science and social studies in learning are the difficulties of teachers in implementing *merdeka belajar*. This research can be a consideration for policy holders, curriculum developers, and education practitioners as an effort to optimally implement the independent curriculum.

Abstrak: Konsep *merdeka belajar* merupakan karakteristik kurikulum *merdeka*. konsep inilah yang menjadi dasar guru dalam melaksanakan pembelajaran termasuk pada mata pelajaran IPAS. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mendeskripsikan bagaimana guru memahami, memaknai, dan menerapkan *merdeka belajar* pada pembelajaran IPAS sekaligus upaya untuk tetap memperjuangkan pembelajaran IPAS dengan sajian yang menarik. Perolehan data melalui wawancara, obsevasi, dokumentasi pada SDN Banaran 2 Kandangan Kediri yang kemudian dideskripsikan secara kualitatif deskriptif, dianalisis dengan teknik Miles dan Huberman, serta divalidasi dengan triangulasi. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa platform *merdeka mengajar* adalah media guru memahami *merdeka belajar*, refleksi mengenali diri dan peran sebagai pendidik sebagai upaya memaknai *merdeka belajar*, dan kewajiban menyelesaikan pelatihan mandiri di platform *merdeka mengajar*; kebijakan yang mengikat dari struktural pemegang wewenang pendidikan dari kecamatan maupun gugus

sekolah; dan belum adanya panduan yang benar-benar mengintegrasikan IPA dan IPS dalam pembelajaran merupakan kesulitan guru dalam menerapkan merdeka belajar. Penelitian ini bisa menjadi pertimbangan bagi pemegang kebijakan, pengembang kurikulum, dan praktisi pendidikan sebagai usaha implementasi kurikulum merdeka secara optimal.

Keywords : *IPAS, Merdeka Belajar, Merdeka Curriculum*

INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (Kemdikbudristek) plans to implement *merdeka* curriculum as the national curriculum to replace the 2013 curriculum (Rizki & Fahkrunisa, 2022). This curriculum gives the trust to education units in implementing it (Daga, 2021). It's also applies to teachers, who have the freedom to develop the curriculum according to the potential, characteristics and needs of the school environment and students (Rizaldi & Fatimah, 2022). This is an opportunity for teachers to be creative and determine the essential content in realizing meaningful, fun, and in-depth learning (Nurhayati et al., 2022; M. P. Putri et al., 2023) while fostering the character of students in accordance with their nature and *fitriah*.

Independence in learning is a concern in the *merdeka* curriculum (Fannisa et al., 2023), resulting in the slogan merdeka belajar. The slogan is a concept of education by Ki Hajar Dewantara. The concept of *merdeka belajar* is important for teachers to understand theoretically and practically because this understanding will help teachers to think more innovatively and creatively and freely in learning (Efendi & Suastra, 2023). Teachers can utilize *merdeka mengajar platform* by Kemdikbudristek as a tools to understanding and interpreting *merdeka belajar* to be applied as a foundation in every learning process including in Natural and Social Sciences (IPAS) subjects.

As a teacher's follow-up to the process of understanding and interpreting *merdeka belajar*, applying *merdeka belajar* in IPAS subjects by teachers in fact still experiences several obstacles. The applying *merdeka*

belajar can be seen from the aspect of learning orientation and an assessment system that suits the character, potential and needs of each student as well as the teacher's freedom to determine learning content. At SDN Banaran 2 Kandangan, teachers' freedom to learn is eaten by the administrative burden of the *merdeka mengajar platform*. The platform increases teachers' workload and has reduced teachers' independence (Rokayah et al., 2023). Meanwhile, students' independence is eaten up by the uniformity of exam questions. If continued, this uniformity will have an influence on students' understanding and scores because it is likely that the question makers do not understand the environmental factors, habits and dominant brain of students (Susanti et al., 2024).

This research is relevant to Fembriani's research which states that teachers' understanding of *merdeka belajar* is good but its implementation still needs to be improved (Fembriani, 2022). The research study also states that *merdeka belajar* still requires communication from various parties for implementation evaluation (S. A. Putri et al., 2024). Teachers need to learn more deeply to realize *merdeka belajar* in the portrait of *merdeka* curriculum (Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022). This study comprehensively describes the process of grade IV teachers of SDN Banaran 2 Kandangan in understanding and interpreting *merdeka belajar* and its application in IPAS learning.

The focus of this research is the concept of *merdeka belajar* from the perspective of the teacher as an educator because the teacher is the director who directs the implementation of learning. This research is also an evaluation for teachers and education

units to continue to develop to adapt the *merdeka* curriculum as a contribution to disseminating broader educational insights. Basically, the application of the concept of *merdeka belajar* in *merdeka* curriculum requires good cooperation, coordination, and collaboration from teachers, principals, education authorities (agencies), parents of students and related parties in order to be optimally realized (Lubis & Priyadi, 2022; Muharam et al., 2023).

The results of this study have the opportunity to provide information to policy makers, curriculum developers, and educational practitioners as well as provide perspectives and recommendations based on data and facts in the field. The contribution of this research can be used as a reference in implementing the IPAS teacher professional development program and ensuring the success of the *merdeka* curriculum to be the right means to actively develop the potential of students so that they have a religious character, character, competence, and other skills needed both for themselves and society (Almubaroq, 2023) as well as towards the golden generation of 2045 (Herdianto et al., 2022; Wardani et al., 2023).

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative research method on how the fourth-grade teacher of Banaran 2 Kandangan State Elementary School transforms the meaning of *merdeka belajar* in IPAS learning. Data is obtained in the form of written words, oral, and observable behavior without the subjectivity of the researcher. After collecting the data, the researcher analyzes and interprets it into narratives and descriptions without making numerical measurements or calculations.

The participants of this study were fourth-grade teacher supported by the principal of SDN Banaran 2 Kandangan and representatives of fourth-grade students. This research was conducted at SDN Banaran 2 which is located at Jalan Pengajaran No. 388, Putuk Hamlet, Banaran Village, Kandangan District, Kediri Regency, East Java. The

choice of research location is based on the consideration that the school has implemented the *merdeka* curriculum in various independent categories starting in the 2023/2024 school year after approximately one year of choosing the independent change option. The first classes to implement the *merdeka* curriculum were grades I and IV. As a new curriculum, this implementation requires an adaptation process and will find new things both as benefits and problems, especially in IPAS learning. Class IV was chosen because between class I and IV, those who receive IPAS subjects are class IV and students in class IV begin to strengthen self-awareness of the surrounding environment, both from natural and social aspects. Another consideration is that the existence of SDN Banaran 2 is located amid diverse religions, cultures, and customs. The existence of IPAS provides an opportunity for teachers to conduct learning according to the potential of the school environment and or local wisdom (Thaariq et al., 2023).

This research collected information through interviews, observations, and documentation with SDN Banaran 2 Kandangan and previous studies with relevant topics to strengthen the science of this research. Interviews were obtained through direct question-and-answer activities with grade IV teachers and the principal of SDN Banaran 2 Kandangan. The topics of interviews with grade IV teachers as the main object of research include the *independent curriculum*, *merdeka belajar*, and IPAS learning. Meanwhile, the principal includes the *merdeka* curriculum, *merdeka belajar*, and IPAS in general. To students related to their responses about IPAS subjects. Then observation is carried out by observing when IPAS learning takes place and documentation to obtain data documented at school, namely teaching modules.

Data analysis was carried out by applying the Miles and Huberman technique which consists of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Mezmir, 2020). Data reduction is done by

focusing the data that has been collected according to the research topic without reducing and or adding the essence of the data. The results of the interviews clearly by the participants, both the fourth-grade teacher and the principal of SDN Banaran 2 Kandangan, were very extensive, then the researcher presented the data within the scope of the *merdeka* curriculum, *merdeka belajar*, and IPAS and its learning. The data analysis stage ends with drawing conclusions obtained from the scope that researchers have determined through observation, interviews, and documentation and the idealistic conditions contained in documents about the *merdeka* curriculum in the form of government documents, books, and scientific articles to obtain valid data at SDN Banaran 2 Kandangan. This analysis technique helps researchers organize, classify, and interpret qualitative data that has been collected systematically to draw research conclusions.

Data validation in this study uses triangulation, namely by checking data from various sources, various techniques, and various times, which is then known as source triangulation and technical triangulation (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). Source triangulation is used to test the credibility of data by checking data from various sources. In this case, the researcher chose the fourth-grade teacher and the principal of SDN Banaran 2 Kandangan. Meanwhile, technical triangulation is used to test the credibility of data by using different techniques to get data from the same source. In this case, researchers obtained data through interviews, observation, and documentation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study found that the presence of an *merdeka* curriculum was initially welcomed by teachers and principals because the socialization explained that the *merdeka* curriculum emphasizes independence for teachers and education units. This curriculum emphasizes flexibility and autonomy for teachers in managing learning and principals in managing education units. SDN Banaran 2 Kandangan

began implementing the *merdeka* curriculum in the *merdeka berbagi* category in the 2023/2024 academic year, starting with grades I and IV. Grades I and IV were chosen because they represent the low and high grades.

Independence in *merdeka* curriculum is known as *merdeka belajar*. *Merdeka belajar* is the result of Ki Hajar Dewantara's thinking about education which has the following essence:

1. *Merdeka belajar* does not prioritize cognitive abilities but focuses more on developing students' character and character to become lifelong learners with global capabilities according to the Pancasila learner profile;
2. Placing students, teachers, and education units as the main figures in the learning process so that they have the freedom to choose a learning process that suits student needs, especially in developing student character in terms of literacy and numeracy;
3. *Merdeka belajar*, which is flexible, gives education units the option to implement *merdeka* curriculum based on student learning development and the characteristics of the school environment;
4. *Merdeka belajar* emphasizes the Tut Wuri Handayani principle, namely the spirit of collaboration with parents, the surrounding community, and local and central governments (Ni'mah & Susanto, 2023).

In understanding the *merdeka belajar* above, the teacher of SDN Banaran 2 Kandangan utilizes the *merdeka mengajar platform* facility. Understanding in the context of this study is a cognitive process in the absorption and understanding of information or facts about *merdeka belajar*. *Merdeka mengajar platform* was initiated by Kemdikbudristek contains an independent training menu that helps teachers understand *merdeka belajar* before being applied in learning. The coherent arrangement of topics in the independent training menu includes an introduction to the basic principles and

concepts of student-centered new paradigm learning, information on curriculum implementation, profiles of Pancasila students, and learning outcomes in the *merdeka* curriculum which greatly helps teachers understand *merdeka belajar* in the era of *merdeka* curriculum. After completing the topics in the independent training, there is an evaluation in the form of a post test to measure the teacher's understanding of the topics studied. If there are still many post test scores that have not checked green, then the teacher must review the topic again. This process focuses more on the cognitive aspect or teacher understanding of *merdeka belajar* as a provision to be applied to IPAS learning.

Interpreting *merdeka belajar* in the *merdeka* curriculum is carried out by teachers of SDN Banaran 2 Kandangan by reflecting to recognize themselves and their role as educators. In this case, there are two types of reflection carried out by teachers, namely individual and group reflection. Individual reflection is carried out by teachers through the *merdeka mengajar platform* after completing independent training topics. Meanwhile, group reflection is carried out through teacher participation in teacher working groups. Teachers discuss and share experiences with fellow teachers related to IPAS learning which is something new in the world of education in Indonesia. Group reflection materials are about how to plan learning according to the potential and needs that exist in each student, create a competency-based assessment system with various strategies so as to be able to measure the competencies needed and provide feedback for learning improvement, and open opportunities for parental involvement in the success of student learning (Sufyadi, 2022).

After going through the process of understanding and interpreting, SDN Banaran 2 Kandangan teachers apply the concept of *merdeka belajar* in IPAS learning. In this case, applying is the real practice of teachers in learning. The application of *merdeka belajar* in IPAS learning in reality experiences several

difficulties including: 1) *merdeka mengajar platform* began to become an administrative burden for teachers because it became mandatory to obtain a certificate; 2) the teacher's guide textbook which still separates IPAS into science and social studies; 3) structural control of the education authority both at the sub-district and school cluster level.

Based on the research results, it shows that the teacher's journey in understanding, interpreting, and implementing *merdeka belajar* in IPAS learning is a teacher's process in maximizing *merdeka belajar* in an *merdeka* curriculum. As a new curriculum, the implementation of the *merdeka* curriculum certainly requires an adaptation process. This is in line with the principal's statement that the curriculum adaptation process is a common thing in the direction of a better educational transformation and basically curriculum changes do not completely change the essence of the curriculum in Indonesia. Its is only a few things that change like change the names. The class teacher added that the big thing he felt from the *merdeka* curriculum was the adjustment to the digitalization of education or technological adaptation.

Merdeka curriculum with the concept of *merdeka belajar* with the aim of improving the quality of learning has not been fully felt by teachers, learners and education units. Teachers realize that the *merdeka mengajar platform* encourages and helps teacher groups to be more productive, but this obligation makes teachers' tasks increase. In addition, the uniformity of questions for students within the scope of a cluster or sub-district which indirectly generalizes their abilities and knowledge but is basically different due to the student itself, family, environmental factors, and the presentation of IPAS from the teacher. The presentation of the teacher's IPAS in the classroom is still done separately because there is no teacher's book guide that truly integrates science and social studies. The limitations of this teacher's book guide will affect the quality of learning and student learning outcomes and

make it difficult for teachers to evaluate and assess student learning progress (Mamuaja et al., 2023).

Over time, education units must be able to implement *merdeka* curriculum well (Fransiska et al., 2023). Do not let the curriculum control and limit the intellectual participation of teachers and students in exercising learning autonomy and flexibility for a democratic future (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020). In practice, implementing an *merdeka* curriculum requires coordination from stakeholders so that the implementation runs more effectively, more mature and significant in every aspect, especially the quality of education (Ndari et al., 2023). The principles in implementing *merdeka* curriculum in elementary schools are simple, easy to understand and implement. The meaning of simple is that significant changes can be implemented gradually by following policies and a series of good practices that have been regulated, have a clear design, get various support and assistance to implement *merdeka* curriculum (Nursyaidah et al., 2023).

In the era of *merdeka* curriculum education transformation, there is a need for careful preparation in organizing education. Agents of change, in this case teachers, have the ability to bring great changes to learners, learning, and education (Jahari, 2020). This can be done by utilizing *merdeka mengajar platform* as much as possible. *Merdeka mengajar platform* is an evidence of the digitalization of education. It can be used by teachers to explore differentiated learning (Gusteti et al., 2024), as a reference in conducting formative, summative, and diagnostic assessments (Aritonang et al., 2023) because the content in it is not only sourced from one teacher, but from various good practices of all teachers throughout Indonesia. After exploring, teachers can identify strengths and areas that need to be developed according to the characteristics of students and the potential of the school environment (Lisdawati, 2024). Another advantage of *merdeka mengajar platform* is that teachers can collaborate learning with

technology and differentiated learning. This will have a good impact especially on teacher professionalism and how the teaching process is carried out by teachers to students (Mafazi & Madhakomala, 2023).

As in the learning of IPAS in the *merdeka* curriculum, teachers can create technology-integrated IPAS learning teaching materials such as multimedia (Alifiyah et al., 2023), virtual reality (Hui et al., 2022), e-Learner Worksheets (LKPD) (Jannah & Suciptaningsih, 2023), flipbooks (Bayat et al., 2023; Zainulloh et al., 2022), videoscribe (Usmaedi et al., 2021) and other audiovisual media such as Canva, KineMaster (Sulasmi, 2022). Although the documents from the Ministry of Research and Technology in the form of curriculum documents and IPAS textbooks are not suitable, teachers should not reduce the freedom of students to have fun learning without pressure (Bukit et al., 2023). Utilizing the above technology can be an option for teachers to continue to optimize the implementation of the concept of *merdeka belajar* in *merdeka* curriculum. But it would be better if education units that implement *merdeka* curriculum get a clear blend from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research (Arung et al., 2023).

IPAS learning can be implemented in a simple way that links social events with natural events (Fannisa et al., 2023). In more detail, grade 4 IPAS learning, for example, students determine questions about home and school conditions, students identify simple problems related to daily life, students optimize their five senses, students recognize parts of the human body, students explain functions and how to care properly, students distinguish between animals and plants according to shape, general characteristics, students can describe family trees, roles, and responsibilities as family/ group/ school members, students can distinguish healthy and unhealthy (Wulandari et al., 2023). If IPAS learning can be done well, IPAS learning can train students' independence because IPAS learning aims to train students to think critically, curiosity according to the

profile of Pancasila students in the *merdeka* curriculum (Fatonah et al., 2023).

As the journey of educational transformation in Indonesia continues through the *merdeka belajar* in *merdeka* curriculum movement driven by the adoption of the right technology, this movement not only makes progress, but also encourages long-term acceleration of the future. As like *merdeka mengajar platform* as one of the *merdeka* curriculum facilities in technology adaptation. It turns out that it is not only Indonesia that utilizes technology in supporting educational sustainability, but there are several countries that also use the same strategy including, in Estonia there is the *eKool platform* and in Singapore there is the Student Learning Space (SLS) (Wang et al., 2023). In the global education monitoring report on technology in education by UNESCO in 2023 states that technology has a huge impact on the sustainability of education (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2023). Therefore, it is hoped that *merdeka* curriculum will motivate all parties, together, to actively lay the foundation for a future where educational excellence becomes the norm rather than the exception, ensuring a culture and mindset that values knowledge, and pursues innovation and excellence for generations to come.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results described above, it can be concluded that the teacher's process of understanding, interpreting, and implementing *merdeka belajar* in IPAS learning has been carried out as much as possible. *Merdeka mengajar platform* is a medium for teachers to understand the concept of *merdeka belajar* in *merdeka* curriculum. Meanwhile, reflections on recognizing themselves and their role as educators both individually and in groups are carried out by teachers to interpret *merdeka belajar*. However, in its implementation, teachers experience several difficulties such as the obligation to complete independent training on *merdeka mengajar platform*,

binding policies from the structural authority of education from sub-districts and school clusters; and the absence of guidelines that truly integrate science and social studies in learning. *Merdeka* curriculum is a new transformation in the world of Indonesian education so that in practice it requires an adaptation process. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a follow-up to find out the reality of teachers in striving for *merdeka belajar* in *merdeka* curriculum in schools, especially IPAS subjects at the elementary school level.

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