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### IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM (IKM) IN ENHANCING STUDENTS' AUTONOMY AND CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AT SDN SUCI KASEMEN, SERANG CITY

Vina Sudistiana<sup>1</sup>, Fuad Abdul Baqi<sup>2</sup>, Andriani Sariwardani<sup>3</sup>

1,2,3Program Pasca Sarjana Universitas Bina Bangsa

Email: [sudistiana@gmail.com](mailto:sudistiana@gmail.com); [fuadbaqi80@gmail.com](mailto:fuadbaqi80@gmail.com); [rrandriani@gmail.com](mailto:rrandriani@gmail.com);

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#### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in enhancing student autonomy and critical thinking skills at SDN Suci Kasemen Kota Serang. Employing a qualitative approach with a case study method, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. The findings indicate that project-based learning, which is the core of IKM, effectively enhances student autonomy in taking initiatives and being responsible for their learning process. Furthermore, students' critical thinking skills develop through information analysis, logical argumentation, and data-driven problem-solving. However, challenges in implementing Merdeka Curriculum include teacher readiness, limited supporting facilities, and inadequate parental involvement. This study emphasizes the importance of teacher training, resource strengthening, and collaboration among schools, parents, and the government in supporting the successful implementation of Merdeka Curriculum. With the right strategies, the Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to become a crucial instrument in developing students' skills in 21st-century.

**Keywords:** *Autonomy, Basic education, Critical thinking, Merdeka Curriculum, Project-based learning.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Basic education plays a crucial role in shaping students' critical thinking skills and independence. In the context of an increasingly complex and dynamic global environment, critical thinking skills are not only necessary but also a prerequisite for facing future challenges (Agustina, 2019). These skills enable students to analyze information, make informed decisions, and solve problems creatively.

However, based on reports from various studies, students at the elementary school level in Indonesia, including those at SDN Suci Kasemen Kota Serang, still demonstrate low levels of critical thinking skills (Kemendikbud, 2022).

The Merdeka Curriculum (KM) launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia aims to address these challenges. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes project-based learning, technology utilization, and a more flexible approach to encourage student independence in learning (Aqodiah, 2024). This approach has the potential to provide space for students to develop critical thinking skills through exploration, reflection, and collaboration (Nuraida, 2019). However, the implementation of this curriculum in the field still faces various challenges, especially in the context of elementary schools in areas like Kota Serang.

SDN Suci Kasemen Kota Serang, as one of the elementary schools in the region, faces several obstacles in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Factors such as limited resources, teachers' understanding of the Independent Learning Curriculum (IKM) philosophy, and diverse student characteristics are the main challenges. Furthermore, the lack of in-depth studies on the extent to which IKM can improve students' independence and critical thinking skills at this school makes it essential to conduct this research.

Through this research, it is hoped that a clearer picture can be obtained regarding the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation at SDN Suci Kasemen Kota Serang. The results are expected not only to contribute to the development of education at the school but also to provide strategic input for the implementation of Independent Learning Curriculum (IKM) at the elementary school level in general. Therefore, this study is crucial in identifying the opportunities, challenges, and concrete impacts of the Independent Learning Curriculum (IKM) in fostering students' independence and critical thinking skills. A critical and logical approach in this examination will provide a solid foundation for improving education policies and practices in the future.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (IKM) in elementary schools requires a well-planned strategy to ensure success. Teachers play a central role as facilitators who can guide students in active and reflective learning (Prasetyo & Rosy, 2021). Support from technology and adequate learning resources are also crucial factors in optimizing project-based learning. However, challenges in implementing the IKM include teachers' limited understanding of the IKM concept, resistance to change, and limited school facilities (Siregar et al., n.d.). To overcome these obstacles, intensive training for teachers, policy support from local governments, and parental involvement in the learning process are necessary.

## **2. Review of Literature**

The Merdeka Curriculum was introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology as a response to the need for relevant education that aligns with the development of the times (Sabil & Pujiastuti, 2023). This curriculum aims to give freedom to schools, teachers, and students to determine the learning process that suits their needs (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). In the Merdeka Curriculum, project-based learning becomes the primary approach to encourage students to develop 21st-century competencies,

including critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication (Karomatunnisa et al., 2022). The projects given enable students to actively explore real-world issues, make decisions, and develop relevant solutions (Hartini, 2017; Ramadhan, 2023). The emphasis on differentiated instruction is also an essential part of the Merdeka Curriculum to tailor materials to individual students' needs, interests, and abilities (Brookhart, 2016). A study by Purwowododo & Zaini (2023) shows that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools has a positive impact on students' learning motivation, particularly in increasing independence. However, this implementation requires readiness from all parties involved, including teachers, students, and support from the school environment (Purwowododo & Zaini, 2023).

Student autonomy refers to the ability to learn independently, take responsibility for one's learning process, and make decisions without relying entirely on teacher guidance (Suhartono et al., 2024). In the context of basic education, developing autonomy is crucial for building the foundation of lifelong learning skills. According to Imanuha (2016), self-determination theory states that student autonomy can develop if basic needs such as competence, social relationships, and autonomy are met (Imanuha, 2016). The Merdeka Curriculum approach, which gives students the freedom to choose project topics and learning methods, is believed to fulfill these autonomy needs. A study by Purwowododo & Zaini (2023) shows that the project-based approach in the Merdeka Curriculum significantly increases student autonomy in managing time, completing tasks, and evaluating their learning outcomes (Purwowododo & Zaini, 2023).

Critical thinking is the ability to analyze, evaluate, and conclude information logically and deeply (Rendi et al., 2024). In the context of education, critical thinking skills are essential to help students understand complex concepts, evaluate arguments, and solve problems creatively (Zubaidah, 2016). A study by Rofi'uddin et al. (2022) states that critical thinking can be developed through a learning process that involves discussion, exploration, and reflection (Rofi'uddin et al., 2022). The Merdeka Curriculum, with its project-based learning approach, encourages students to ask questions, seek answers independently, and present logical arguments. This aligns with Brookhart's (2017) view that a well-designed curriculum can facilitate students' critical thinking through intellectually challenging activities. Research by Qonita et al. (2023) at the elementary school level shows that the implementation of project-based learning in the Merdeka Curriculum significantly improves students' critical thinking skills, particularly in analyzing information, evaluating ideas, and developing solutions (Qonita et al., 2023).

### **3. Methods**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (IKM) in enhancing student autonomy and critical thinking skills at SDN Suci Kasemen Kota Serang. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to understand the phenomenon holistically in a real-world context

(Waruwu, 2023). The study was conducted at SDN Suci Kasemen Kota Serang, which has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum. The research subjects included:

- a. Teachers: Teachers who implemented the Merdeka Curriculum.
- b. Students: Students from a specific class who were sampled for the study.
- c. School Principal: As the party responsible for curriculum implementation.
- d. Parents: To gain perspectives on the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on students at home.

Data were collected through various methods, including in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018).

- a. In-depth Interviews: Conducted with teachers, students, school principals, and parents to understand the implementation process of the Merdeka Curriculum, challenges faced, and its impact on student autonomy and critical thinking skills.
- b. Participatory Observation: Observed the learning process in the classroom, including interactions between teachers and students, project-based learning activities, and student behavior in completing tasks independently.
- c. Documentation: Collected data in the form of lesson plans (RPP), student projects, learning outcome reports, and school policies related to IKM.

Data analysis was performed using a thematic analysis approach, which involved data reduction, coding, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Nartin et al., 2024). In this process, data obtained from various sources were analyzed to identify main themes, such as IKM implementation strategies, student autonomy, and critical thinking skills. To ensure data validity, triangulation of sources, techniques, and time was used, allowing the researcher to validate information from various perspectives.

This study also considered research ethics aspects, including obtaining consent from research subjects, maintaining confidentiality, and providing clear explanations of the research objectives. Although this study was conducted in a limited context, i.e., in one school, the results are expected to provide in-depth insights into IKM implementation and its impact, while also serving as a basis for developing more effective educational practices.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

### **1. Implementation of IKM in the Learning Process**

Teachers at SDN Suci Kasemen have implemented the Merdeka Curriculum, focusing on project-based learning, allowing students to choose project topics according to their interests. This has increased student engagement in learning, creating an interactive atmosphere through discussions, explorations, and project presentations. Documentation shows that most projects are designed to integrate various disciplines, such as science, mathematics, and art, enabling students to see the relevance between subjects.

However, interviews with teachers revealed that not all teachers fully understand the philosophy and implementation methods of the Merdeka Curriculum (IKM). Most teachers still require further training to effectively integrate project-based learning in a consistent manner. Additionally, another constraint is the limited availability of facilities, such as technology devices and learning resources, which hinders the optimal implementation of IKM.

### **2. Enhancing Student Autonomy**

One positive impact of IKM implementation is the enhancement of student autonomy. Teachers report that students demonstrate better time management, task completion, and decision-making skills during the learning process. Classroom observations show that students are more confident in completing projects independently and only seek teacher

assistance when necessary. This reflects the development of essential self-directed learning skills for future challenges (Thana & Hanipah, 2023).

However, interviews with some parents indicate variations in students' autonomy levels. Some students still require encouragement and additional guidance, especially those struggling to understand tasks or facing challenges in their projects. Home environment and parental support seem to influence the development of student autonomy.

### **3. Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills**

IKM also has a positive impact on students' critical thinking skills. In-class discussions and project presentations require students to analyze problems, evaluate solutions, and present logical arguments. Teachers note that students more frequently ask critical questions and seek answers from various sources. Observations show that activities like group debates and post-project reflections help students hone their critical thinking skills.

However, challenges persist. Some students still struggle to construct logical and in-depth arguments, mainly due to limited exposure to rich information sources. Teachers acknowledge that they need to provide more exercises and guidance to help students develop these skills consistently.

### **Discussion of Research Findings in Relation to Theories**

The findings of this study align with theories that support the effectiveness of project-based learning in enhancing student autonomy and critical thinking skills. Brookhart (2017) states that a well-designed curriculum can facilitate the development of critical thinking skills through intellectually challenging activities. This is evident in the students at SDN Suci Kasemen who are more active in discussions and problem-solving during project implementation.

Furthermore, the self-determination theory by Imanuha (2016) emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and social relationships in motivating students to learn independently (Imanuha, 2016). The implementation of IKM, which gives students the freedom to choose project topics according to their interests, reflects the fulfillment of this autonomy need. However, the success of developing student autonomy is also influenced by external factors, such as support from teachers and parents.

### **Student Autonomy as an Output of IKM**

The increased student autonomy is in line with the self-determination theory proposed by Imanuha (2016). The Merdeka Curriculum, which gives students the freedom to determine their approach to completing tasks, meets the basic autonomy needs of students (Imanuha, 2016). This is also supported by the differentiated learning approach applied by teachers, enabling students to learn according to their needs and interests. As found in the study by Andriani and Kusumaningrum (2022), this freedom enables students to take more responsibility for their learning process, which is the core of autonomy.

However, it is essential to note that student autonomy does not develop automatically. Teacher support in guiding students to make informed decisions is crucial. In this context, teacher training becomes vital to ensure a deep understanding of the philosophy and strategies for implementing IKM.

### **Critical Thinking in the Context of IKM**

The improvement in students' critical thinking skills reflects the effectiveness of the project-based approach implemented in the Merdeka Curriculum. As stated by Rofi'uddin (2022), critical thinking involves the process of analysis, evaluation, and decision-making based on deep logic (Rofi'uddin et al., 2022). This study shows that students are encouraged to search for and analyze information independently, developing high-level thinking skills in line with the goals of 21st-century education. However, critical thinking skills are heavily influenced by the quality of projects designed by teachers. Challenging and relevant projects can stimulate critical thinking, while overly simplistic or irrelevant projects yield minimal results. Therefore, training and mentoring teachers in designing high-quality projects are essential.

### **Challenges in Implementing IKM**

Although IKM shows positive impacts, the challenges faced by teachers in understanding and applying the curriculum's principles become a primary concern. More intensive training is necessary to ensure teachers can design and implement project-based learning effectively. Additionally, the limited facilities in schools are a significant obstacle. Without adequate infrastructure support, the full potential of IKM is difficult to realize.

Parental support also plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of IKM. Some parents reported difficulties in assisting their children during the learning process at home, especially if they do not understand the project tasks assigned. Therefore, communication between schools and parents needs to be enhanced to ensure better synergy in supporting student development.

### **5. Conclusion**

This study evaluated the effectiveness of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum (IKM) in enhancing student autonomy and critical thinking skills at SDN Suci Kasemen. The results showed that project-based learning in the Merdeka Curriculum had a positive impact on both aspects. Students demonstrated increased initiative, autonomy in completing tasks, and critical thinking skills through logical analysis and solutions. Student autonomy was fostered by providing freedom in completing tasks relevant to their lives, in line with self-determination theory. Critical thinking skills also improved, as students were given the opportunity to analyze and evaluate information from various sources and develop creative solutions. This reflects the achievement of the Merdeka Curriculum's goal to support 21st-century skills.

However, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum faced challenges, such as teachers' difficulties in applying project-based approaches due to limited understanding and training, as well as inadequate supporting facilities like internet access and teaching materials. Parental involvement also needs to be increased. The conclusion of this study is that the success of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum depends on teacher preparedness, facility support, and collaboration among schools, parents, and the government. By addressing challenges through training, resource strengthening, and community involvement, the Merdeka Curriculum can become a relevant and competitive education transformation tool. This study also provides a basis for other schools to consider adapting the Merdeka Curriculum according to their local context.

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