



The Role of Merdeka Curriculum in Developing Critical Thinking Skills of Primary School Students: Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Critical thinking skills are very important for students at the elementary school level as a foundation for students in understanding academic concepts and developing a more critical way of thinking. The form of efforts made by the government to develop these critical thinking skills is by implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. In the Merdeka Curriculum, students are encouraged to be more active in the learning process, students not only receive information, but also dig and explore the material in more depth. So that the teacher's role in the Merdeka Curriculum is a facilitator who helps students in the exploration process. The research was conducted with a qualitative approach, using the qualitative descriptive method. This article analyzes 25 primary references from national and international journals through a qualitative approach. The results of the literature state that the Merdeka Curriculum has a theoretical framework that supports the development of critical thinking skills of elementary school students. The Merdeka Curriculum assists in the development of the Pancasila Learner Profile, which includes critical thinking, creativity, independence, and mutual cooperation. One of the pillars of the Merdeka Curriculum is project-based learning (PjBL). In addition, differentiated learning is also emphasized in the Merdeka Curriculum, providing flexibility for teachers to adapt learning to student needs. In its implementation, of course, there are challenges that must be faced, but there are efforts that can be made so that the Merdeka Curriculum can be implemented optimally and is also able to develop students' critical thinking skills.

1. Introduction

Education is very important to create a generation that thinks critically, creatively, and adaptively to face the challenges of the times. One of the important skills that students must have is the ability to think critically, especially in the era of globalization which is full of rapid information flow. With this ability, students can analyze, evaluate, and make reasonable and in-depth decisions. Critical thinking skills are very important for students at the elementary school level as a foundation for students in understanding academic concepts and developing a more critical way of thinking (Tauhid et al. 2024). As a result, the education system must be able to provide more space for students to develop these skills. One of the efforts made by the Indonesian government to achieve this goal is to implement the Merdeka Curriculum, which is designed to provide greater learning freedom for students and teachers and emphasize competency development, including critical thinking skills. According to Bloom (1956), critical thinking includes the skills of analysis, evaluation and synthesis, which form part of the cognitive taxonomy he developed. This ability allows students to analyze, evaluate, and make decisions based on logical and deep thinking.

In the Merdeka Curriculum, students are encouraged to be more active in the learning process, students not only receive information, but also dig and explore the material in more depth. The Merdeka Curriculum allows students to learn with a more flexible approach, not fixated on memorized material, but emphasizes problem solving, exploration of ideas, and experiential learning. One of the main methods used in the Merdeka Curriculum is Project-Based Learning (PjBL) or project-based learning. Through this method, students are given tasks to complete certain projects related to real problems that exist around them (Sahnan and Wibowo 2023). Thus, students not only gain theoretical knowledge, but also develop analytical, logical, and solution skills in dealing with problems. In addition, the Inquiry-Based Learning method can also be applied to build students'

curiosity by providing questions that stimulate students' critical thinking and allow students to seek answers through research and discussion. In addition to more innovative learning methods, the form of tasks in the Merdeka Curriculum is also designed to train students in critical thinking. Students are not only given multiple choice or memorization questions, but more analytical and exploratory tasks (Jumanto, Sa'Ud, and Sopandi 2024). In addition, the freedom to choose project topics or learning activities in several subjects also allows students to develop their interests and talents, which in turn will increase students' learning motivation and critical thinking skills.

The role of teachers in the Merdeka Curriculum has also changed significantly compared to the previous curriculum. The teacher no longer acts as the only source of information, but also as a facilitator who helps students in the exploration process. According to Vygotsky (1978), social interaction between teachers and students plays an important role in students' cognitive development, where teachers act as scaffolding or support in guiding students towards more complex understanding. Teachers are expected to create a learning environment that supports open discussions, provide questions that stimulate students' critical thinking skills, and provide constructive feedback to students. In addition, teachers also play a role in guiding students to develop reflective skills, where students are invited to evaluate using their own way of thinking and learning strategies (Zahrotun and Kamal 2024). With this approach, students become more independent in learning, more confident in expressing their opinions, and more able to identify weaknesses and strengths in the way of thinking they use.

The transformation from the previous curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum brought significant changes in student learning patterns. If in the previous curriculum learning was more focused on textbooks, memorization, and exams as the main measure of success, then in the Merdeka Curriculum, learning is more contextual and exploratory. Students no longer just memorize material, but are more directed to understand concepts deeply and connect them to real situations. This change makes students more active in learning, more courageous in expressing opinions, and more skilled in analyzing information and making decisions based on logical and systematic thinking (Putri and Rachmadyanti 2024). With the Merdeka Curriculum, it is hoped that students can develop into individuals who have strong critical thinking skills, not only useful in the academic world but also in everyday life. The Merdeka Curriculum provides opportunities for students to explore more freely, develop creativity, and hone their critical thinking skills. Through innovative learning methods, challenging assignments, and an increasingly dynamic teacher role, Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to become an important instrument in creating a smart, creative, and adaptive generation in the future (Encabo-Fernández, Albarraçín-Vivo, and Jerez-Martínez 2023).

Although various previous studies have discussed the importance of developing critical thinking skills in elementary school students, most of them still focus on conventional learning approaches and have not deeply explored the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum as a new framework in the Indonesian education system. This research gap shows the need for studies that highlight how Merdeka Curriculum can concretely encourage critical thinking skills through independent, meaningful, and contextualized learning. Therefore, this article contributes to enriching the literature by examining the role of the Merdeka Curriculum in developing the critical thinking skills of elementary school students, as well as enriching educators' insights into how this curriculum can be optimally utilized to foster the critical thinking skills of elementary school students, while providing a more complete understanding of the potential of this curriculum in creating a learning environment that supports the development of students' critical thinking.

2. Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with the method used, namely descriptive qualitative. The research was conducted by collecting and analyzing various relevant literature sources, such as accredited national journals and scientific articles related to the Merdeka Curriculum and the development of critical thinking skills at the primary school level. The data

collection process is carried out by tracing reliable sources, published within a maximum period of the last five years to obtain actual information. The literature reviewed was selected based on the relevance of its content to the research topic, especially those that discuss the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, the learning model used, and its effect on developing students' critical thinking skills. Data analysis was conducted by finding the main topics in the literature review and then synthesizing them to gain a better understanding of how an independent curriculum helps primary school students develop critical thinking skills. Each finding from the literature is critically reviewed to see how it fits with the hypothesis that is implicitly written.

Table 1. The Table of Problem Formulation

Aspects	Functions
Independent curriculum affects students' critical thinking skills	How is the role of the independent curriculum in improving students' critical thinking skills in elementary schools
	How is the method applied by the independent curriculum so that it can improve students' critical thinking skills in elementary schools
	How is the form of independent curriculum assignments intended for students to train critical thinking skills
Teacher role transformation in the independent curriculum	How do teachers train students' critical thinking skills through the independent curriculum
	How is the transformation of the teacher's role from the previous curriculum to the independent curriculum

This research used a literature review method with a qualitative descriptive approach. The articles used were obtained through a systematic selection process, as shown in Table PRISMA.

Table 2. The Table of PRISMA

Aspects	Functions
Articles found from GoogleScholar & SINTA	40
Duplicates removed	-5
Articles screened by title & abstract	35
Articles not relevant	-5
Full-text articles checked	30
Articles not eligible (year, topic, discussion)	-5
Articles analyzed in review	25

The table describes the flow of article selection from identification, screening, eligibility checking, to inclusion in the final analysis. From a total of 40 articles identified, only 25 articles were deemed relevant and used in the article synthesis.

3. Results and Discussion

The results of the literature relevant to the topic reveal that Merdeka Curriculum has a theoretical framework that supports the development of critical thinking skills of elementary school students.

Table 3. The Table of Literature Results

Aspects	Functions
Methods in the independent curriculum that improve students' critical thinking skills	PjBL and differentiated learning methods are effective in improving students' critical thinking skills
The role of teachers in an independent curriculum to improve students' critical thinking skills	Teachers are seen as facilitators, motivators, and mentors who play a role in guiding students in the learning process.
Challenges in implementing an independent curriculum	Teacher readiness and resource availability

Project-based learning (PjBL) and differentiated learning are considered effective because they emphasize inquiry, real problem solving, and producing projects. PjBL is also considered to be in line with the principles of constructivism as it emphasizes students' active role in constructing their own knowledge (Nahak and Ndapa Lawa 2023). Differentiated learning, which is flexible learning, adapts learning to student needs. Merdeka curriculum is expected to create a pleasant learning atmosphere and make teachers and students feel comfortable during learning. The term “comfortable” in this context does not mean that learning takes place casually and as it is, but rather the concept of “comfort” which means that teachers and students are comfortable in implementing learning in accordance with predetermined goals and according to student needs .

Learning methods integrated in the Merdeka Curriculum, such as inquiry, problem solving, and structured discussions, have an effect on the development of students' critical thinking skills, where students are encouraged to ask questions, explore diverse ideas, and build reasoned arguments. In addition, the forms of tasks advocated in the Merdeka Curriculum, such as research projects, case studies, and argumentative essays, are designed to challenge students to apply their critical thinking skills. These types of tasks are in line with the principles of performance-based learning, which emphasizes the importance of authentic assessment that measures students' ability to apply their knowledge and skills in real situations.

In the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers are seen as facilitators, motivators, and mentors, whose role is to guide students in the learning process (Atin Sri Handayani, Kantri Nurlisa, and Mustafiyanti Mustafiyanti 2023). The concept of the Merdeka Curriculum has a relationship with 21st century skills, namely 4C skills, where the learning activities carried out are student-centered and the teacher is a support in the learning process. The 4C skills consist of four, namely critical thinking or solving problems by making rational decisions. Students are able to make creative and logical decisions from the problems faced. Second, communication is a skill that can be honed by the way teachers and students are open to each other to convey their thoughts. Third, collaboration is a skill that helps students establish social relationships with others. Fourth, creativity is a skill that can be developed

through social interaction, which encourages an open exchange of ideas or thoughts. Creative thinking skills make it easier for students to find solutions to problems (EFENDĪ, SUMARMĪ, and UTOMO 2020).

However, there are challenges experienced in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The literature results show that teacher readiness and resource availability are critical to the successful implementation of Merdeka Curriculum. The literature also identifies that assessment to assess students' critical thinking skills is a challenge because assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum focuses on two types of assessments, namely formative and summative assessments (Aminah 2024). Overall, the literature analysis shows that Merdeka Curriculum has a strong theoretical framework and has great potential to improve students' critical thinking skills in primary schools. However, the success of its implementation depends on how to overcome the problems mentioned in the literature, such as teacher readiness, resource availability, and the development of good assessment tools.

The function and role of the curriculum is very important in the education process. The curriculum helps teachers plan and implement learning and their students become creative and teachers can customize teaching materials with media and learning tools. The results of the literature analysis state that the curriculum has a strong theoretical framework, which can help students improve their critical thinking skills. The results of these findings are in line with the principles of constructivism, which emphasize the active role of students in constructing knowledge through meaningful learning experiences. The Merdeka Curriculum assists in the development of the Pancasila Learner Profile, which includes critical thinking, creativity, independence, and gotong royong (Suryaningsih and Desstya 2023). Project-based learning (PjBL) is at the core of the Merdeka Curriculum. A lot of literature shows that PjBL is an effective learning model to improve students' ability to think critically (Eka Yuliana and Restian 2023). PjBL encourages students to engage directly in inquiry, authentic problem solving, and produce a project, all of which are important components of critical thinking. The literature also shows in the development of the Pancasila Learner Profile there is a development of students' character and social-emotional skills that are as important as the development of academic skills (Kollo and Suciptaningsih 2024).

Differentiated learning, which is also emphasized in the Merdeka Curriculum, provides flexibility for teachers to adapt learning to student needs. This is in accordance with the principles of inclusive education which recognizes the diversity of students. Every student certainly has their own level of intelligence. A teacher's job is to find students' strengths to develop them into their potential. Professional teachers can provide inclusive learning, meaning that teachers are open to the fact that every student does not have to master everything. However, the role of the teacher is very important in helping students discover their interests. By understanding that it is important to have critical thinking skills, teachers can create a more supportive learning environment where all students have the opportunity to develop their critical thinking skills (Maskur 2023).

Learning methods such as inquiry, problem solving, and structured discussions, which are integrated in the Merdeka Curriculum, have a strong theoretical basis in the development of critical thinking skills. These methods encourage students to ask questions, explore diverse ideas and make logical arguments. The use of technology in learning can also help students to obtain information, as well as create a more interactive and engaging learning experience. Technology is very important for the sustainability of education, so both teachers and students are expected to utilize technology in the learning process. This is in accordance with developments in the 21st century which emphasize student-centered learning and creating meaningful learning (Noptario et al. 2024). Teachers are expected to be able to create meaningful learning by adapting to current conditions that are all digital. Assignments are usually research projects, case studies and argumentative essays that challenge students to use their critical thinking skills in various contexts.

Merdeka curriculum is different from the previous curriculum because the previous curriculum focused on the teacher. This is because the learning guidelines in the curriculum focus on teacher activeness in the learning process, so that students are only recipients of material and do not actively participate in the learning process. Meanwhile, in the Merdeka Curriculum, the learning guideline is that teachers make student-oriented learning (Heryahya et al. 2022). Students will become more active during learning. In Merdeka Curriculum, the teacher's role as a source of information has changed to a facilitator, motivator, and mentor. This shows that teachers are seen as supporters who help students understand their own knowledge. In order for students to master critical thinking skills, teachers must encourage independent learning and problem solving by:

- a) Starting the lesson with a problem or controversy
- b) Organizing the classroom so that interaction occurs in the lesson
- c) Adjusting the amount of learning time with learning activities
- d) Creating a comfortable learning environment.

The theory of constructivism and the ideas of Jean Piaget are used in this self-learning process, which explains that every student has the ability to develop their own knowledge (Дирюгина and Ясвин 2024). Self-learning can be defined as tailoring learning to the individual characteristics of students. Learning can be said to be independent if it meets four criteria. First, students must have curiosity. Second, they must actively seek, find, process, and solve problems. Third, the confidence and courage to do things without fear of being wrong began to emerge. Fourth, students are no longer dependent on the teacher because students have been accustomed to learning independently. The self-learning system must be able to accept various types of students, including various interests, talents, abilities, intelligence, and learning styles.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is inseparable from the challenges in its implementation, which include teacher ability, resource availability, and evaluation of students' critical thinking skills. It is very important for teachers to be involved in the curriculum development process so that the curriculum content can meet the needs and characteristics of students in the classroom. It is also important for teachers to understand student psychology as well as appropriate learning methods and strategies. As a result, teachers must be prepared to be able to implement Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers must strive to encourage and familiarize students to use critical thinking skills, not just remember, recite, or retrieve information without processing. In today's digital era, teachers must be adept at using technology to carry out the learning process according to the times (Muthmainnah, Dwi Pertiwi, and Rustini 2023). However, at the elementary school level, teachers often experience confusion in determining teaching materials that are in accordance with core competencies and basic competencies. In addition, teachers are often not creative when designing teaching materials, which causes students to have difficulty understanding the subject matter. Creative teachers will motivate their students to be innovative, but also keep in mind that each student has different potential. One of the teacher's responsibilities is to foster student potential and provide opportunities for students to develop their own potential. The Merdeka Curriculum is centered on assessment, both formative and summative. Formative assessments provide constructive feedback that is used to improve the learning process and evaluate how well students master each competency. Meanwhile, summative assessment refers to evaluations conducted to determine student learning achievement and the effectiveness of classroom learning (Waruwu et al. 2024). Thus, problems arise such as students' ability to analyze, evaluate, and compose arguments critically is not always the focus of assessment because assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum includes formative and summative assessments. As a result, there are many components that must be assessed, not just critical thinking skills.

The literature shows that Merdeka Curriculum has great possibilities to improve students' critical thinking skills in primary schools. The successful use of this curriculum depends on how to overcome the problems that have been mentioned. Therefore, to ensure that the Merdeka Curriculum functions properly and achieves its goals, it must involve various parties, starting from the government, schools, teachers, parents, and the community (Rizki and Fahkrunisa 2022). In

particular, to realize the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, a big role is needed from parents who support their children.

3.1. Conclusion

A comprehensive literature analysis shows that Merdeka Curriculum has a strong theoretical framework to support the development of critical thinking skills of elementary school students. This curriculum emphasizes a student-centered learning approach through PjBL and differentiated learning, which is supported by the principles of constructivism and performance-based learning. Methods of inquiry, problem solving, structured discussions and challenging tasks are encouraged in this curriculum to encourage the development of critical thinking skills (Sutiani, Situmorang, and Silalahi 2021). The role of teachers in the Merdeka Curriculum transforms into facilitators, motivators, and mentors, who guide students in the process of independent learning and problem solving. This curriculum also emphasizes the development of 21st century skills (4C), which are essential to prepare students for future challenges (Susanti, Sumarno, and Dwijayanti 2024). In addition, the use of technology in learning is an important element in supporting an interactive and meaningful learning process. However, the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum largely depends on the ability to overcome various problems. These challenges include teachers who are ready to accept the new paradigm, adequate resources, and an assessment system that is compatible with Merdeka Curriculum (Hunaepi and Suharta 2024). Therefore, structured teacher training and authentic-based assessments are needed to support the strengthening of critical thinking. Research on the role of Merdeka Curriculum in developing the critical thinking skills of elementary school students is important to understand the impact of implementing this education policy (Lubis et al. 2023). The results of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and related parties in an effort to improve the quality of education in Indonesia, especially in preparing young people who are able to think critically and adaptively to changing times. Suggestions for future research, researchers can further explore the role of the Merdeka Curriculum in developing the critical thinking skills of elementary school students by looking at the results of the cognitive development of elementary school students when using the Merdeka Curriculum and the previous curriculum (Annam et al. 2023).

Author Contributions

Sapta Rahmania: Conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis, writing – original draft, editing, and finalization of the manuscript.

Candra Utama: Review of the manuscript, feedback provision, and critical revisions.

All authors have equal contributions to the paper. All the authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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