THE IMPLEMENTATION OF *MERDEKA BELAJAR* POLICY IN EAST JAVA

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Abstract: This article presents an investigation into the planning, implementation, challenges and solutions of the Merdeka belajar policy in East Java. The research is based on fieldwork conducted using a qualitative case study approach. The data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis, and subsequently analysed using the interactive technique proposed by Miles and Huberman. The planning process comprised two distinct activities: firstly, the socialisation of the four pillars of the Merdeka Belajar policy by the Ministry of Education and Culture, and secondly, the preparation of the necessary infrastructure, including the Dapodik database and e-learning systems. The implementation process was conducted in three phases: firstly, the optimisation of Ministry guidelines; secondly, participation in the Motivating School programme; and thirdly, enhancement of student-centred online learning. The implementation of the Merdeka Belajar policy encountered several challenges, including discrepancies in the understanding of the policy among teachers and delays in the introduction of online learning due to the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of students and the varying levels of readiness of educational institutions. In order to address these issues, two solutions were implemented. The first of these was to strengthen teachers' comprehension through workshops and outreach, while the second was to incorporate limited face-to-face learning while progressing towards blended learning.

Keywords: East Java, *Merdeka Belajar*, *Sekolah Penggerak*.

Introduction

The National Education System Law is notable for its flexibility, as it affords each school the autonomy to administer final examinations and confer graduation upon its students.[1] Nevertheless, for reasons of national standards and maintaining quality, the implementation of the National Examination (UN) persists, despite various criticisms from academics and professionals. The state designates the UN as the ultimate determinant of students' success, with the consequence that the three-year learning process is condensed into a mere three days.

In accordance with the 2004-2006 curriculum (KBK-KTSP), students are expected to demonstrate proficiency in all domains, encompassing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. Furthermore, the examination should assess the three aforementioned domains. In practice, however, the UN only evaluates cognitive aspects, using a more straightforward approach with pencil and paper.

The 2013 curriculum (K-13) is regarded as a more comprehensive approach to assessment. The K-13 assessment is more holistic in its approach to measuring the competence of learners, taking into account a range of factors including attitudes, knowledge and skills. It is therefore recommended that, in the event of the government organising the UN, these four competencies should be carried out. However, in practice, the UN only assesses cognitive competence, while other competencies are overlooked.

The number of subjects that students must study in school is excessive, necessitating comprehensive knowledge of all scientific fields. Similarly, the UN exam is highly demanding, prompting students and teachers to prioritize memorization over critical thinking.[2]

Such circumstances invariably place the onus on the teacher to meet a number of material targets, which must be conveyed to students in preparation for examinations. Despite objections from students, who felt that they were required to master and understand a substantial amount of material through rote memorization and limited reasoning, Parents frequently express concern when their children

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[1] Departemen Pendidikan Nasional Republik Indonesia, "Undang-Undang Nomor 20 Tahun 2003 Tentang Sistem Pendidikan Nasional," Pub. L. No. UU 20/2003 (2003).

[2] Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia, *Merdeka Belajar* (Jakarta: Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia, 2019), 3.

progress to the sixth grade of SD/MI, the ninth grade of SMP/MTs, or the twelfth grade of SMA/MA. This is due to the necessity of seeking supplementary material to prepare for the UN, which is typically achieved through a series of additional lessons or private tuition. The National Examination should be employed as a national measuring tool and for mapping the quality of education in Indonesia, as opposed to being utilised as a tool for the assessment and determination of students' graduation.

Thus far, the teacher's primary responsibility has been the delivery of instruction within the classroom setting. Concurrently, teachers are tasked with the preparation of a comprehensive and intricate Learning Implementation Plan (RPP), which can prove onerous. The RPP is frequently required to encompass multiple pages, and in some instances, may exceed 20 pages in length.[3]

A significant number of highly regarded educational institutions are accessible only to students who demonstrate academic excellence and/or originate from affluent backgrounds. Conversely, students who are merely mediocre, particularly those from impoverished backgrounds, face significant challenges in gaining admission to highly regarded and elite educational institutions. This is contrary to the principle of equal distribution of education and equal rights to education in the community. It is incongruous that proximity to the school does not guarantee acceptance, on the grounds of insufficient academic ability or socio-economic background.

The constraints imposed on schools, teachers and students, and the burden borne by parents, are a significant impediment to the advancement of education. The *Merdeka Belajar* policy represents a promising avenue for reform. However, given its novelty, it is essential to ensure that all stakeholders are duly consulted during its implementation.

At the time of the preparation of this research proposal (2020), there had been relatively little research conducted on the subject of *Merdeka Belajar*. This may be attributed to the fact that the *Merdeka Belajar* policy is relatively recent. Consequently, the author has undertaken an investigation into a number of previous studies that are pertinent to *Merdeka Belajar*, with a view to confirming the novelty of this article.

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[3] Ibid., 4.

The first such study is that conducted by Rusmana. This study seeks to ascertain the relevance of Ki Hajar Dewantara's thoughts in the context of efforts to liberate students in education. It reaches the conclusion that education is not merely a matter of reflection and thought, but is in fact a form of cultural transformation of society, with the objective of effecting a change in the social environment of an independent society.[4]

Secondly, Houtman's research on the *Merdeka Belajar* community perspective 5.0 provides a conceptual analysis of *Merdeka Belajar* that extends beyond its practical application. The study's findings indicate the necessity for a more comprehensive benchmark for monitoring the progress of National Education.[5]

Thirdly, Mustaghfiroh's research elucidates the concept of *Merdeka Belajar* from the vantage point of John Dewey's progressivism. This study reaches the conclusion that a shift towards progress and enhancement in the calibre of education is an indispensable necessity. To attain this, it is imperative to undertake tangible measures, one of which is to liberate the learning process.[6]

It can be concluded from the available evidence that there is a lack of research on the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* in practice. In order to gain insight into the perceptions of all stakeholders and assess the impact of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy, it is essential to conduct a comprehensive study.

This article employs a qualitative approach, specifically a case study methodology. Moreover, data were gathered through the use of interview, observation, and documentation techniques.[7] The author conducted interviews and observations with a number of stakeholders from a variety of backgrounds, including officials from the East Java Provincial Education Office, representatives from several branches of the Education Office at the city and district levels, and educators

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[4] Fattah Amal Iko Rusmana, "Memerdekakan Siswa Melalui Pendidikan: Konsepsi Pemikiran Pendidikan Ki Hadjar Dewantara (1889-1959)" (Skripsi, Universitas Negeri Jakarta, 2016), http://repository.unj.ac.id/724/.

[5] Houtman Houtman, "Merdeka Belajar dalam Masyarakat 5.0" (Prosiding Seminar Nasional Program Pascasarjana Universitas PGRI Palembang, Universitas PGRI Palembang: Program Pascasarjana Universitas PGRI Palembang, 2020).

[6] Siti Mustaghfiroh, "Konsep 'Merdeka Belajar' Perspektif Aliran Progresivisme John Dewey," *Jurnal Studi Guru Dan Pembelajaran* 3, no. 1 (March 30, 2020): 141–47, https://doi.org/10.30605/jsgp.3.1.2020.248.

[7] Norman K. Denzin, *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 2017), 105.

from several schools in East Java. The data collected was then analysed using Miles and Huberman's qualitative data analysis technique. The process of interpreting this research data involved the collection, presentation, reduction, and verification of the data.[8]

Planning for the Implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* in East Java

Merdeka Belajar represents a novel approach to education. By facilitating a more autonomous and flexible learning environment, it is anticipated that students will demonstrate enhanced academic performance.[9] To achieve this, a series of tangible measures must be implemented, as initially proposed by the Minister of Education and Culture. To gain insight into the planning and implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* in East Java, researchers conducted a comprehensive data collection process involving multiple Education Offices and educational institutions in the region.

In the planning phase, the researcher identified two main activities that were undertaken to implement *Merdeka Belajar* in East Java. The initial activity is the dissemination of the four tenets of the *Merdeka Belajar* initiative. Socialisation activities have been conducted by stakeholders in East Java Province to facilitate the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy in the planning phase. The socialisation activity for the *Merdeka Belajar* plan was initiated by the East Java Provincial Office and subsequently disseminated to all branches of the Education Office at the city/regency level. This was followed by the delivery of the plan to all schools under their respective auspices, spanning the PAUD to SMA levels.

The initial phase of the *Merdeka Belajar* initiative involved the replacement of the USBN. In East Java, the USBN has been designated as an examination conducted exclusively at the school level, a practice that has been in place since 2020. The fundamental purpose of the USBN is to ascertain whether students have successfully completed their level of education and to confer authority upon the school in question, with the assessments being conducted by teachers.

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[8] Matthew B Miles and A Michael Huberman, *Analisis Data Kualitatif*, trans. Tjetjep Rohendi Rohidi (Jakarta: Universitas Indonesia, 1992).

[9] Nurul Istiq'faroh, "Relevansi Filosofi Ki Hajar Dewantara Sebagai Dasar Kebijakan Pendidikan Nasional Merdeka Belajar di Indonesia," *Lintang Songo : Jurnal Pendidikan* 3, no. 2 (August 31, 2020): 1–10.

The United Nations evaluation system is subject to periodic modification. The criteria for graduation are more flexible, accompanied by an increase in the percentage of students who pass the examination. This increase has led to the production of graduates who are frequently the subject of debate with regard to both quality and quantity. The final policy concerns the planned elimination of the National Examination and its replacement with a Minimum Competency Assessment and Character Survey that is aligned with the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) standards. The UN must be employed as a learning evaluation tool to ensure the equal distribution of education quality. Therefore, in addition to standardising results, the UN should also standardise processes, inputs and other relevant factors.[10]

It would be beneficial for each educational establishment to facilitate a greater degree of teacher involvement in the final assessment of students.[11] It is not necessary for the assessment to be conducted in the form of a written examination; it may alternatively be carried out through the submission of portfolios, assignments, projects, and so forth. A more comprehensive assessment of this nature would, of course, render student graduation a meaningful process.

The second fundamental element of *Merdeka Belajar* is the substitution of the National Examination with a Minimum Competency Assessment and Character Survey. One of the primary justifications for this replacement is that the UN is excessively cognitively oriented. All questions posed in the UN are designed to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. This approach ultimately compels students to rely on memorisation as a means of demonstrating their proficiency. It is also important to safeguard and evaluate the character of students in order to facilitate its internalisation.

The misinterpretation of the UN has the indirect effect of burdening not only students, but also teachers and parents. In society, UN scores are often used as a means of justifying whether a student is

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[10] Lutviyana Hidayah, "Asesemen Ujian Nasional Dari Masa Ke Masa Dan Solusinya: Indonesia," *Al-Mafahim: Jurnal Pendidikan Guru Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* 3, no. 2 (2020): 11–20.

[11] H. E. Mulyasa, *Menjadi Guru Penggerak Merdeka Belajar* (Jakarta: Bumi Aksara, 2021).

intelligent. However, the National Examination should function to map the quality of the national education system, rather than to assess learning success, let alone to determine student graduation.[12]

The abolition of the UN and the implementation of the National Minimum Competency Assessment and Character Survey have resulted in teachers becoming more independent in carrying out learning and assessing their students. Similarly, students are more at ease in their learning, without the apprehension associated with UN scores. The assessment is not based on the ability to master the material in accordance with the curriculum as in the UN, but is designed to map and enhance the quality of education as a whole. The Minimum Competency Assessment focuses on the mastery of literacy and numeracy competencies, which are measured.[13]

The third component of the *Merdeka Belajar* initiative is the policy of simplifying lesson plans, or RPP. Thus far, teachers have been required to prepare comprehensive lesson plans (RPP) with a high degree of detail. This frequently results in suboptimal performance on the part of teachers, given the considerable time investment required to prepare a comprehensive lesson plan (RPP). As a result of these demands, teachers experience exhaustion and are unable to implement learning methods that are more student-centred.

A single sheet of the RPP should be prepared while still meeting the minimum criteria that have been determined. Therefore, despite the limited number of sheets, the RPP can still be implemented optimally. The potential for optimising the lesson plans (RPP) lies in the suitability of the learning method used to deliver specific subject matter and the effectiveness of the lesson content in facilitating comprehension by each student.[14]

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[12] H. Fajri Ismail, "Pro Kontra Ujian Nasional," *Al-Riwayah : Jurnal Kependidikan* 7, no. 2 (September 1, 2015): 301–24.

[13] Dhina Cahya Rohim, "Konsep Asesmen Kompetensi Minimum Untuk Meningkatkan Kemampuan Literasi Numerasi Siswa Sekolah Dasar," *Jurnal VARIDIKA* 33, no. 1 (July 30, 2021): 54–62, https://doi.org/10.23917/varidika.v33i1.14993.

[14] Zainal Arifin, "Peningkatan Kemampuan Guru dalam Membuat Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran (Rpp) Tematik 1 Halaman Melalui Workshop Daring dengan Variasi Model Jigsaw di Unit Pelaksana Teknis Daerah (Uptd) Sekolah Dasar (Sd) Negeri Genteng 2 Bangkalan," *Re-JIEM (Research Journal of Islamic Education Management)* 3, no. 2 (December 31, 2020): 201–15, https://doi.org/10.19105/re-jiem.v3i2.4722.

The fourth tenet of Freedom of Learning is the optimisation of the zoning system employed in the New Student Admission (PPDB) process. The new zoning system has been disseminated by the Ministry of Education and Culture through the East Java Provincial Education Office. The current zoning system will continue to be applied uniformly. The objective is to establish a tri-centric education system, whereby students can attend school in their local neighbourhood. From a legal and formal standpoint, the zoning system does not accommodate the inherent differences between regional contexts, which are undoubtedly distinctive in their own right. Furthermore, the implementation of the zoning system has not been seamless across all regions. Furthermore, the distribution of teachers across regions is arguably not uniform.

The PPDB SMA/SMK zoning policy is designed to prevent the concentration of qualified prospective students in a single institution within a given area, thereby preventing the creation of exclusive educational environments. The implementation of the zoning system ensures the availability of a quality workforce by guaranteeing that students receive instruction from teachers and access to educational resources of the same quality. The absence of gaps in the quality of graduates will ultimately result in a more even distribution of quality human resources throughout East Java.[15]

The second activity in the planning phase of the *Merdeka Belajar* initiative in East Java is the preparation of infrastructure to facilitate the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar*. In order to facilitate the planning process for the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar*, the East Java Provincial Education Office engages in collaboration with all relevant parties in order to prepare the necessary educational infrastructure. The infrastructure in question is comprised of two key systems: the *Dapodik* (*Data Pokok Pendidikan*) system and the e-learning system. The *Dapodik* system is prepared at a central level in order to facilitate the synchronisation of data at a national level. The e-learning system is similarly designed to be adaptable, with schools granted autonomy to utilise alternative applications if they so choose.

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[15] Ahmad Mashudi, "Kebijakan PPDB Sistem Zonasi SMA/SMK Dalam Mendorong Pemerataan Kualitas Sumberdaya Manusia Di Jawa Timur," *Nidhomul Haq : Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam* 4, no. 2 (October 5, 2019): 186–206, https://doi.org/10.31538/ndh.v4i2.327.

The *Dapodik* system is designed to accommodate the digitisation of school operations at all levels, from PAUD to SMA. The *Dapodik* system is designed to accommodate a range of data management needs, including the procurement of infrastructure, the reporting of teacher and student numbers, and the data requirements of both educators and learners. It should be noted that the *Dapodik* system has undergone several software updates, and the current version is the 2022 iteration.

Dapodik plays a pivotal role in supporting the implementation of the Free Learning policy. The *Dapodik* system affords each school operator the ability to synchronise all of their respective school data with online cloud storage on a national scale. Despite initial difficulties, the system has since demonstrated consistent improvement. The *Dapodik* system is an open government data set designed to facilitate the implementation of effective policies. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure the provision of comprehensive, accurate, integrated, and transparent open data. In this context, transparency entails the utilisation of school quality data or education quality maps at the regional level.[16]

The second supporting infrastructure for the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* is the e-learning system. The Ministry of Education and Culture has prepared a learning platform namely *Belajar (dot) id* as an e-learning system that runs nationally. However, schools are given full authority in choosing other applications to support the IT-based learning process. The variety of applications chosen by each school is certainly a lot because it is tailored to the needs and desired complexity.

E-learning has a positive and significant effect on the quality of student learning. The influence is in a strong category. The more intensively e-learning is used, the quality of student learning will also increase. The utilization of web e-learning will improve learning outcomes indirectly.[17] The purpose of using e-learning in the learning

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[16] Nadia Mukhlisa and Azhar Kasim, "Open Government Data : Open Data Pada Sektor Pendidikan Dalam Mendukung Kebijakan," *Kolaborasi : Jurnal Administrasi Publik* 7, no. 2 (August 31, 2021): 125–43, https://doi.org/10.26618/kjap.v7i2.5489.

[17] Sufirmansyah Sufirmansyah et al., "Student's Preferences in Using Video-Based Learning Applications and Its Efficiency in Higher Education," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 4, no. 2 (June 30, 2021): 272–83, https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v4i2.1474.

system is to expand access to education for the wider community, as well as to improve the quality of learning.[18]

Implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* in East Java

In East Java, the *Merdeka Belajar* approach is implemented in three stages. The initial phase, *Merdeka Belajar*, is conducted in accordance with the capacity of each institution. The second step is to implement the Motivating School Program (*Sekolah Penggerak*), which has been initiated by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The third step is to optimise the implementation of student-centred online learning.

In practice, *Merdeka Belajar* is implemented in accordance with the four main pillars, namely aspects related to the implementation of the National Standard School Examination (USBN), the National Examination (UN), the Learning Implementation Plan (RPP), and the New Student Admission (PPDB). It is important to note, however, that the implementation varies considerably depending on the capabilities of each institution.

With regard to the initial *Merdeka Belajar* pillar, namely the implementation of USBN, which has been superseded by examinations conducted by their respective schools, there are still schools that prefer the written test system for reasons of ease of coordination. Nevertheless, a number of educational establishments have commenced integrating the preferences of their teaching staff, who have expressed a desire to conduct examinations in the form of assignments, portfolios or collaborative projects. The implementation of school examinations utilising the written test model is typically conducted towards the conclusion of the academic year. However, should a teacher elect to utilise an assignment format, such as a portfolio or project assignment, the school examination scores may be derived from the commencement of the odd semester.[19]

The implementation of school exams in a flexible manner allows for a more comprehensive assessment of students. This

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[18] Suharyanto Suharyanto and Adele B. L. Mailangkay, "Penerapan E-Learning Sebagai Alat Bantu Mengajar Dalam Dunia Pendidikan," *Jurnal Ilmiah Widya* 4, no. 3 (2018): 17–21.

[19] Agus Sarifudin, "Peningkatan Kinerja Guru Dalam Implementasi Penilaian Sistem SKS Melalui Supervisi Akademik Pengawas Sekolah," *Edukasi Islami: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 8, no. 02 (August 29, 2019): 417–34, https://doi.org/10.30868/ei.v8i2.539.

provides students with numerous opportunities to demonstrate their competence, while also affording teachers greater autonomy in conducting examinations in accordance with the specific needs of their students and the circumstances prevailing in their respective classes or schools. Consequently, teachers are able to further develop their professional competencies, particularly in the area of student assessment.[20]

Moreover, the second component of the *Merdeka Belajar* initiative entails the substitution of the UN with a Minimum Competency Assessment and Character Survey. The last administration of the UN was in 2020. In 2021, a Minimum Competency Assessment was initiated in accordance with directives from the Ministry of Education and Culture and the East Java Provincial Education Office. The UN is an ineffective tool for identifying student learning needs when used as a means of assessment at the conclusion of the academic level, as it does not align with the needs of students in the future. The Minimum Competency Assessment, conducted midway through the academic level, is a more suitable method for identifying future learning needs.[21]

Initially, there were doubts about the content of the minimum competency assessment which only covered aspects of literacy and numeracy. Literacy and numeracy are basic competencies that must be understood by students. Maturity of language and mathematics is always related to various contexts of life, both personal and social.[22] The implementation of literacy and numeracy assessments also breaks assumptions and concerns about the increasing burden of student learning. This is because the arena of literacy and numeracy competencies can and needs to be developed through all subjects.[23]

With regard to the Character Survey, the Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for coordinating the process at the national level. The objective of this survey was to assess other aspects that reflect the implementation of Pancasila in schools. These included the

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[20] A. Muri Yusuf, *Asesmen Dan Evaluasi Pendidikan* (Jakarta: Prenada Media, 2017).

[21] Nurhikmah Nurhikmah, Isti Hidayah, and Sri Kadarwati, "Persepsi Dan Kesiapan Guru Dalam Menghadapi Asesmen Kompetensi Minimum," *Cokroaminoto Journal of Primary Education* 4, no. 1 (April 30, 2021): 78–83, https://doi.org/10.30605/cjpe.412021.1294.

[22] Janner Simarmata et al., *Literasi Digital* (Jakarta: Yayasan Kita Menulis, 2021).

[23] Ridwan Abdullah Sani, *Pembelajaran Berorientasi AKM: Asesmen Kompetensi Minimum* (Jakarta: Bumi Aksara, 2021).

character of students, such as their personal attributes and their capacity for collaboration, as well as the school environment, including the level of diversity, instances of bullying, and the quality of learning.[24] As a quality mapping tool, the survey did not necessarily require competency assessments or Pancasila coaching surveys to be conducted on an annual basis, nor were they mandatory for all students.

The third component of the *Merdeka Belajar* programme is the streamlining of the process for creating lesson plans (RPP). The RPP currently under preparation is based on the principles of effectiveness, efficiency and student-orientation, while ensuring that the core components are fulfilled.[25] The core components of the RPP are still being drafted in a concise and clear language. The components that must be included are learning objectives, learning steps, and assessments. If all of the components are included on a single sheet, the RPP will still be considered valid. This allows teachers to allocate more time to prepare for learning and to experiment with the application of various learning methods and evaluation tools.[26]

The fourth component of the *Merdeka Belajar* initiative is the optimisation of the zoning system employed in the PPDB. Previously, the PPDB was determined with a distribution of at least 80% for the zoning line, a maximum of 15% for the achievement track, and a maximum of 5% for the transfer route. The current regulations stipulate that the zoning path must comprise a minimum of 50%, the affirmation path a minimum of 15%, the transfer path a minimum of 5%, and the achievement path a minimum of 0% and a maximum of 30%, contingent upon the specific conditions of each region.[27] So the Regional Government is given the authority to determine the final proportion used and the determination of the zoning area.

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[24] Ayang Sari et al., "Penghapusan Ujian Nasional Tahun 2021 Dalam Perspektif Guru SMA Di Kota Tebing Tinggi," in *Prosiding Seminar Nasional Pembelajaran Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia (SemNas PBSI) - 3* (FBS Unimed Press, 2021), 213–20, http://digilib.unimed.ac.id/41244/.

[25] Heppy Puspitasari, "Standar Proses Pembelajaran Sebagai Sistem Penjaminan Mutu Internal Di Sekolah," *Muslim Heritage* 2, no. 2 (January 1, 2018): 339–68, https://doi.org/10.21154/muslimheritage.v2i2.1115.

[26] Iskandar Tsani et al., "Evaluasi Model Cipp Pada Pembelajaran PAI dan Budi Pekerti di SMA Negeri 7 Kota Kediri," *Al-Tadzkiyyah: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 12, no. 1 (July 11, 2021): 17–45, https://doi.org/10.24042/atjpi.v12i1.8165.

[27] Mulyasa, *Menjadi Guru Penggerak Merdeka Belajar*.

Affirmation pathways are provided for students who receive programs for handling poor families from the Central Government or Local Governments (for example, recipients of the Smart Indonesia Card/KIP). This pathway represents a commitment on the part of the Central Government and Regional Governments to enhance access to quality education services for children from underprivileged families. Local governments are at liberty to determine the proportion of students who are accepted through this route by reference to the percentage of students who receive programmes for handling poor families from the Central Government or Local Governments in the area.[28]

The *Merdeka Belajar* programme in East Java is also implemented through the Motivating School Programme (Program *Sekolah Penggerak*). The aim of the Program *Sekolah Penggerak* is to realise the vision of Indonesian Education, namely the creation of an advanced Indonesia that is sovereign, independent, and has personality, through the development of Pancasila Students.[29] The programme focuses on the holistic development of student learning outcomes, encompassing competencies (literacy and numeracy) and character. It begins with the training of superior human resources (principals and teachers).

In order to be eligible for selection at the national level, educational institutions are required to meet a number of criteria. At present, 19 cities and regencies in East Java are engaged in the Program *Sekolah Penggerak*. This is a collaborative programme between the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Regional Government, which is implemented in a holistic manner. The interventions are conducted with regard to a number of key areas, including the human resources of the schools, the curriculum and teaching methods, the digitisation of processes, and the provision of assistance to local government. Mentoring is conducted over a three-year period and is integrated with the wider ecosystem, with dissemination occurring through word-of-mouth channels. Therefore, the Program *Sekolah Penggerak* will effectively eliminate the concept of a "favourite school,"

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[28] Masduki Duryat, *"DEWA" Mengabdi Untuk Negeri; Membangkitkan Kejemawaan Dan Konsistensi* (Sleman: Deepublish, 2020).

[29] Wijaya Kusumah and Tuti Alawiyah, *Guru Penggerak: Mendorong Gerak Maju Pendidikan Nasional* (Surabaya: Penerbit Andi, 2021).

as all participating schools will be integrated into a unified system and supported collectively over time.

The four principal objectives of the Program *Sekolah Penggerak* can be delineated as follows: Firstly, in regard to the outcome of learning, it is anticipated that within the next three years, the target will be exceeded and the expected level attained. Secondly, with regard to the learning environment, it is hoped that improvements will be made in the areas of safety, comfort, inclusivity and enjoyment. Thirdly, in terms of the learning aspect, there is the potential for greater implementation of student-centred learning. In addition, it is anticipated that the programme will enable the formulation of plans and budgets based on self-reflection, teacher reflection and the improvement of learning, with the objective of influencing other schools.

Subsequently, the intervention of Program *Sekolah Penggerak* encompasses five key elements: consulting assistance, human resource strengthening, learning with a novel paradigm, data-driven planning, and digitisation of educational institutions. Furthermore, the Program *Sekolah Penggerak* confers several advantages upon educational institutions. The initial objective is to enhance the quality of educational outcomes. Secondly, the digitisation of schools is to be accelerated. Thirdly, the programme will facilitate the rapid attainment of the Pancasila student profile. Fourthly, the competence of principals and teachers is enhanced. In addition, the programme offers schools the chance to act as agents of change, influencing the development of other educational institutions. The sixth item on the agenda is the provision of intensive assistance for school transformation. Furthermore, additional funding should be allocated for the acquisition of instructional materials aligned with the new pedagogical approach. Despite the fact that the project is still in its infancy, some benefits have already been observed.

Moreover, the Program *Sekolah Penggerak* will result in a shift from a centralized to a decentralized pattern of educational transformation, with the driving teacher acting as the agent and the school as the leader of the transformation process. The driving teacher assumes the role of disseminating the transformational vision to all relevant parties. The change process is initiated and guided by the driving teacher, who employs an appreciative inquiry approach to identify and leverage the inherent potential and capacity for change

within the school. This is achieved through a dialogue process that aims to minimise the occurrence of counterproductive resistance.[30]

The utilisation of information technology is also a principal factor in participation in this programme, *Sekolah Penggerak*. The utilisation of technology platforms for learning and school management is intended to provide support for the implementation of education policies that will be applied to education units as implementers of the Driving School Program. Two distinct categories of technology platforms are available for use by teaching staff in educational institutions. The initial technology platform is designed to facilitate the implementation of a novel pedagogical approach through the utilisation of digital tools. The second technology platform is designed to facilitate the management of teacher profiles and support the development of teacher competencies through digital media.

Subsequently, a technology platform for school resources has been developed with the objective of assisting the head of education units, treasurers, and supervisors in the more precise, straightforward, and efficient management of education unit resources. Finally, a technology platform for education profiles and education report cards has been designed with the aim of facilitating the development of quality improvement programmes by heads of education units and supervisors that are more targeted and data-based.[31]

The new paradigm of learning is oriented towards the strengthening of competence and character in accordance with the profile of Pancasila students. The new paradigm of learning is implemented through four key methods. Firstly, a curriculum is employed which is specifically designed to facilitate the development and reinforcement of competencies and characters in accordance with the profile of a Pancasila student. Secondly, learning is conducted in a manner which aligns with the stage of learning achievement of the student. Thirdly, a range of teaching tools are utilised, including textbooks and lesson plans, which are adapted to suit the distinctive characteristics of the educational unit and the student population.

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[30] Wahyu Satriawan, Iffa Dian Santika, and Amin Naim, "Guru Penggerak Dan Transformasi Sekolah Dalam Kerangka Inkuiri Apresiatif," *Al-Idarah : Jurnal Kependidikan Islam* 11, no. 1 (June 4, 2021): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.24042/alidarah.v11i1.7633.
[31] Sri Gusty et al., *Belajar Mandiri: Pembelajaran Daring di Tengah Pandemi Covid-19* (Jakarta: Yayasan Kita Menulis, 2020).

Finally, learning is conducted through projects, with the objective of strengthening the achievement of the Pancasila Student profile.[32]

The learning activities undertaken in support of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy are designed with the student as the focal point. At the time of the research, the ongoing pandemic meant that online learning was the only viable option. This is due to the fact that certain regions of East Java are still implementing PPKM at varying levels. Consequently, online learning was selected as a means of containing the spread of the coronavirus.

On-the-ground evidence indicates that a significant number of individuals continue to experience difficulties in accessing belajar.id. Consequently, numerous educational institutions have adopted alternative applications. In East Java, a considerable number of schools have utilised third-party applications, including Moodle, Zoom, Google Meet, WhatsApp, and even Facebook Messenger. It is important to note that each educational institution encounters unique challenges. Therefore, schools are permitted to employ alternative applications that can better accommodate the needs of their students.[33]

Obstacles in the Implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* in East Java

The comprehension of the concept of *Merdeka Belajar* by teachers has an impact on the learning process that takes place in educational institutions. In East Java, the teachers who are employed at *Sekolah Penggerak*, on average, demonstrate a superior understanding of the manner in which the *Merdeka Belajar* concept can be applied to facilitate learning. Conversely, in educational establishments that have not yet been designated as Driving Schools, the teachers lack the requisite understanding of how to implement the *Merdeka Belajar* concept within the learning process.

Teacher understanding has implications for teacher readiness in implementing learning that is aligned with the aims and objectives of

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[32] Anif Istianah et al., "Integrasi Nilai-Nilai Pancasila Untuk Membangun Karakter Pelajar Pancasila di Lingkungan Kampus," *Jurnal Gatranusantara* 19, no. 1 (April 3, 2021): 62–70.

[33] Pipit Putri Hariani and Sri Ngayomi Yudha Wastuti, "Pemanfaatan E-Learning Pada Pembelajaran Jarak Jauh di Masa Pandemi Covid-19," *Biblio Couns : Jurnal Kajian Konseling dan Pendidikan* 3, no. 2 (July 31, 2020): 41–49, https://doi.org/10.30596/bibliocouns.v3i2.4656.

the *Merdeka Belajar* policy.[34] The researchers discovered that some teachers may not be adequately prepared to implement learning that aligns with the objectives of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy. This was primarily due to the age factor, which was associated with a reluctance to learn IT. Some are reluctant to adopt variations in learning methods due to competing demands on their time.

In the context of the ongoing pandemic, online learning remains the primary strategy for containing the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. However, this approach encounters challenges in several domains. Subsequent investigation revealed that the primary factor was the diverse economic backgrounds of students' guardians and the uneven preparedness of educational institutions to conduct online learning.

It is accurate to conclude that the government has indeed provided quota assistance to facilitate access to learning applications. Nevertheless, the issue of the guardian's economic status is inextricably linked to the implementation of online learning.

From the aforementioned information, the researcher concluded that the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* in East Java encountered two significant challenges. The first is the inconsistency in the understanding and preparedness of teachers in applying the *Merdeka Belajar* concept. The second is the delay in the implementation of online learning due to the diverse economic backgrounds of students' guardians and the uneven readiness of institutions in conducting online learning.

Solutions to Overcome Obstacles to Implementing *Merdeka Belajar* in East Java

In light of the various obstacles to the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* in East Java that have been previously described, the researchers have identified several potential solutions that have been attempted. The initial solution is to conduct a series of outreach activities and workshops on the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar*. This is done with the objective of reinforcing teachers' comprehension of the concept and practice of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy.

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[34] Kadek Ari Wisudayanti, "Kesiapan Menghadapi Perubahan Pada Guru Sekolah Dasar Terhadap Pendidikan Multikultural," *Edukasi: Jurnal Pendidikan Dasar* 2, no. 1 (July 5, 2021): 75–86.

The East Java Provincial Education Office liaises with all branches of the Education Office at the regency/city level to facilitate socialisation activities and *Merdeka Belajar* workshops for teachers and school principals. This is intended to facilitate an enhancement in teachers' comprehension of the concept and practice of *Merdeka Belajar.*

On several occasions, the East Java Provincial Education Office has conducted socialisation activities regarding *Merdeka Belajar* for all local governments. Subsequently, the branch of the Education Office at the city or district level conducts a series of *Merdeka Belajar* workshops through the Group for School Principals (K3S) and the Group for Teachers (KKG) networks on an ongoing basis. *Merdeka Belajar* workshops for teachers and school principals are held on a regular basis, at least once every six months.

The value of workshops such as this lies in their ability to enhance the competence and understanding of teachers. A case in point is an evaluation technique workshop that formed the basis for implementing *Merdeka Belajar* at SMA NW Narmada in West Lombok. Through workshop activities, teachers gained a deeper insight into the concept and application of evaluating the quality of implementation, which serves as the foundation for implementing *Merdeka Belajar.*[35]

An additional case in point is the enhancement of teacher pedagogic capability through the utilisation of 21st-century learning tools, with training based on the *Merdeka Belajar* programme in Pelalawan Regency, Riau. Through a series of workshops, teachers can develop their pedagogic capability in the creation of comprehensive learning tools.[36]

The next solution is to implement Limited Face-to-face Learning (PTMT). Because if you continue to force online learning in its entirety, there will be other, more complex obstacles. The implementation of PTMT is more or less an effort to implement

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[35] Sudirman Wilian, Nyoman Sridana, and Dadi Setiadi, "Workshop Teknik-Teknik Evaluasi Proses Pelaksanaan Pemenuhan Mutu Sebagai Dasar Pelaksanaan Merdeka Belajar di SMA NW Narmada Lombok Barat," *Jurnal Pengabdian Magister Pendidikan IPA* 4, no. 1 (February 2, 2021), https://doi.org/10.29303/jpmpi.v4i1.610.

[36] Ahmal Ahmal et al., "Peningkatan Kompetensi Pedagogik Guru Melalui Pelatihan Perangkat Pembelajaran Abad-21 Berbasis Merdeka Belajar Di Kabupaten Pelalawan Riau," *Unri Conference Series: Community Engagement* 2 (December 30, 2020): 432–39, https://doi.org/10.31258/unricsce.2.432-439.

blended learning. Blended learning can be used to increase the effectiveness of learning.[37] Blended learning is also good for increasing motivation to learn amid the current pandemic conditions.[38] Therefore, blended learning deserves to be optimized in its implementation.

Conclusion

The socialisation activity of the *Merdeka Belajar* plan was initiated by the East Java Provincial Office and subsequently disseminated to all branches of the Education Office at the city/regency level. Thereafter, it was extended to all schools under their respective auspices, spanning the entire educational spectrum from PAUD to SMA. Meanwhile, in order to facilitate the planning process for the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar*, the East Java Provincial Education Office is engaged in collaborative efforts with all relevant parties to ensure the necessary educational infrastructure is in place. The infrastructure in question is comprised of two distinct systems: a *Dapodik* system and an e-learning system. The *Dapodik* system is prepared at a central level in order to facilitate the synchronisation of data at a national level. The e-learning system is identical in structure, but schools are permitted to utilise alternative applications should they so desire.

The Program *Sekolah Penggerak* represents a pivotal component in the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* in East Java. To date, 19 cities or regencies in East Java have participated in the Program *Sekolah Penggerak*. It is anticipated that, through this programme, teachers and school principals will be able to disseminate their understanding of *Merdeka Belajar*, thereby ensuring that all schools are able to implement it in an optimal manner at a later stage.

The level of understanding among teachers has an impact on their preparedness to implement the *Merdeka Belajar* programme in their respective schools. The primary issues pertain to age-related factors, a reluctance to develop one's own capabilities or learn IT, and

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[37] Walib Abdullah, "Model Blended Learning Dalam Meningkatkan Efektifitas Pembelajaran," *FIKROTUNA* 7, no. 1 (July 29, 2018): 855–66, https://doi.org/10.32806/jf.v7i1.3169.

[38] Yani Fitriyani, Irfan Fauzi, and Mia Zultrianti Sari, "Motivasi Belajar Mahasiswa Pada Pembelajaran Daring Selama Pandemik Covid-19," *Jurnal Kependidikan: Jurnal Hasil Penelitian dan Kajian Kepustakaan di Bidang Pendidikan, Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran* 6, no. 2 (July 4, 2020): 165–75, https://doi.org/10.33394/jk.v6i2.2654.

a reluctance to apply a variety of learning methods and media. Conversely, the lack of access to a standard device or laptop represents a further challenge to the implementation of online learning, which remains the primary option during the ongoing pandemic. Geographical factors also constitute a separate obstacle, due to the difficulty of obtaining signals in mountainous or coastal areas.

The concept of *Merdeka Belajar* was disseminated by the East Java Provincial Education Office to all branches of the Education Office at the city or district level. Subsequently, each branch office conducted a series of *Merdeka Belajar* workshops for school principals and teachers via the K3S and KKG networks. This was done with the objective of enhancing comprehension of the concept and practice of *Merdeka Belajar* in schools. Concurrently, the implementation of PTMT is being further refined as part of the endeavour to facilitate student-centred blended learning while maintaining rigorous adherence to health protocols.

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