

Teacher pedagogical competence in the implementation of the independent curriculum in The Pilot State Kindergarten of South OKU District

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Abstract

Background: This research aims to describe in depth the pedagogical competence of teachers in implementing the independent curriculum. This research is qualitative research with a descriptive approach, in this case observing the pedagogical competence of teachers in implementing the independent curriculum in the Pilot State Kindergarten, South OKU Regency.

Aim: This approach aims to provide a comprehensive overview of teachers' pedagogical competence in implementing the independent curriculum in the Pilot State Kindergarten, South OKU Regency.

Method: This research uses observation, interview and documentation data collection techniques. Meanwhile, the data analysis technique in this research uses three stages according to Miles and Huberman, in the form of data reduction, data presentation, drawing conclusions.

Results: This can be seen from several indicators such as mastery of students' character, educational learning, curriculum development, development of students' potential, communication with students, as well as assessment and evaluation. However, there are some teachers who have not fully mastered the pedagogical competency indicators. In implementing the independent curriculum, learning is divided into three main activities, namely opening, core and closing, which must be integrated into one learning series.

Conclusion: The results of this research indicate that the pedagogical competence of teachers in implementing the independent curriculum in the Pilot State Kindergarten in OKU Selalan Regency is in the good category.

INTRODUCTION

Education serves as the cornerstone of a nation's progress. The importance of education for children begins at an early age, particularly during the critical *Golden Age* period, which lays the foundational framework for developing a child's potential. According to psychologists, early childhood occurs only once and cannot be repeated, making it a decisive phase for shaping the quality of individuals in later stages of life (Tadjuddin 2018; Sukemi, R. S., & Amin 2024; Fahimah, Nasem, and Rohyaningsih 2021). Education also plays a pivotal role in enhancing human resources, fostering reasoning abilities, and developing thought patterns derived from life experiences. This aligns with the principles outlined in Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which emphasizes the importance of the learning process in supporting students to develop their spiritual potential, self-control, personality, intelligence, noble character, and skills that benefit themselves, society, the nation, and the state.

Furthermore, Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, Law No. 14 of 2005 on Teachers and Lecturers, and Government Regulation No. 19 of 2005 on National Education Standards define educators as professionals. To become an educator, one must meet the minimum academic qualifications of a Bachelor's degree or Diploma IV (S1/D-IV) in a relevant field and master competencies as a learning facilitator. These competencies include pedagogical competence, personal competence, social competence, and professional competence, as evidenced by a teaching certification. This requirement is detailed in Article 8 of Law No. 14 of 2005 on Teachers and Lecturers, which states: *"Teachers must possess academic qualifications, competencies, teaching certificates, physical and mental health, as well as the ability to achieve national education goals"* (Lestari, Bahrozi, and Yuliana 2023; Purwasih 2022; Astuti 2016).

An educator must possess four competencies: professional competence, personal competence, social competence, and pedagogical competence. Among these, pedagogical competence—defined as an educator's ability to manage student learning—is the most crucial. Pedagogical competence plays a central role in the learning process, which forms the core of the overall educational process and involves various aspects of a teacher's expertise (Rosni 2021; Nurarfiansyah et al. 2022; FITRI 2021). Teachers with strong pedagogical competence demonstrate excellence in managing students effectively and efficiently. This competence places students as vital elements with rights and responsibilities within a comprehensive and integrated educational system. (Ismail 2015; Nirmalawaty et al. 2021; Haedaroh and Aulia 2022).

Teacher competence is closely related to the curriculum applied in schools. Each educational unit or group of units is responsible for curriculum development, which must be based on the principle of diversification, tailored to the conditions of the educational unit, regional potential, and students' needs.

The curriculum plays a pivotal role in the educational process. In the context of national education standards, the curriculum is one of the main elements linked to content standards, serving as the foundation and guideline for designing learning activities in schools. Without a curriculum, the direction and goals of school learning would be difficult to determine. The success of curriculum development includes its implications and evaluation steps (Indahwati et al. 2023; Nyoman 2022; Badrus Sholeh, Kamsan, and Aliyah 2023). In this regard, Nadiem Makarim introduced and implemented the Merdeka Curriculum as an enhancement to the 2013 Curriculum, aiming to refine its implementation and address existing challenges in the educational system.

The Merdeka Curriculum has brought significant changes to Indonesia's education system, particularly in terms of the demands placed on teachers' pedagogical competence. Under this curriculum, teachers are required not only to master subject matter but also to develop innovative and interactive teaching skills tailored to the needs of each student. This involves adopting a more flexible and student-centered approach, promoting active learning through projects, discussions, and other creative activities. Consequently, teachers are expected to comprehend relevant learning theories and implement diverse teaching methods (Qurtubi, Rukiyanto, and ... 2023; Husin and Harianto 2020; Susilowati 2022).

The 2013 Curriculum focused on developing students' knowledge, understanding, skills, values, attitudes, and interests, aiming to enable them to engage meaningfully with various learning resources. On the other hand, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes individualized learning tailored to students' abilities while providing greater opportunities for character development and the enhancement of fundamental competencies (Pratyca et al. 2023; Hajar and Pratiwi 2024; Windayanti et al. 2023).

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) introduced these curriculum changes with the aim of fostering innovation in learning. These changes are expected to create a millennial generation that can quickly and accurately grasp knowledge or material. The curriculum changes have both positive and negative impacts on the quality of education. On the positive side, students can adapt to technological advancements and changing times, supported by school principals, teachers, peers, and educational institutions. On the negative side, some students may struggle to quickly adapt to the new curriculum system, potentially leading to a decline in educational quality (Indarta et al. 2022; Jannah and Rasyid 2023; Asmah 2024).

The Merdeka Curriculum, initiated by Education Minister Nadiem Makarim, provides students with greater freedom to explore and develop their abilities. It aims to create space for children to nurture their potential through a variety of intradisciplinary learning activities, where content is optimized to allow ample time for concept mastery and competency strengthening (Marsela Yulianti et al. 2022; Tuffahaty et al. 2022; Yulmiati et al. 2024). Centered on students, teachers, and schools, the Merdeka Curriculum promotes the concept of "Merdeka Belajar" (Freedom to Learn), granting autonomy to determine learning methods that best suit their needs (Dewi Rahmadayani 2022; Ashfarina, Soedjarwo, and Wijayati W 2023; Wicaksana and Rachman 2018). This program provides room for educators and students to innovate, enhancing classroom learning quality and optimizing individual potential. Initially implemented in select *Sekolah Penggerak* (pilot schools), the Merdeka Curriculum is now being developed for broader application across schools based on their readiness and conditions (Rahayu et al. 2022; Arisanti 2022; Angga et al. 2022).

A core feature of the Merdeka Curriculum is the development of the *Pancasila Student Profile*. This initiative involves project-based learning activities designed to embody the dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile. Schools can prepare specific themes aligned with their capabilities to implement these projects, either through habitual practices or practice-based learning activities. The six dimensions of the *Pancasila Student Profile* are: 1) Faith, devotion to God Almighty, and noble character; 2) Global diversity; 3) Collaboration; 4) Independence; 5) Critical thinking, and 6) Creativity.

Integrating these values into subjects such as Bahasa Indonesia reinforces character education and strengthens students' moral foundations. The application of Pancasila values is critical for nurturing well-rounded individuals (Sari, Sunedar, and Anshori 2022; Ardy Wiyani 2022; Amir, Nursalam, and Mustafa 2022).

The goal of the Merdeka Curriculum policy is to create an enjoyable educational experience for both students and teachers. This curriculum emphasizes the development of skills and character in line with Indonesian values. Allah SWT illustrates this teaching concept in the Qur'an, Surah Al-Baqarah, verse

وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى الْمَلَائِكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنْبِئُونِي بِأَسْمَاءِ هَؤُلَاءِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

Translation: "And He taught Adam the names—all of them. Then He presented them to the angels and said, 'Inform Me of the names of these, if you are truthful.'" (Surah Al-Baqarah 2:31)

Based on this verse, the Merdeka Curriculum signifies learning that fosters the freedom to express thoughts and liberates individuals from any fear in accessing knowledge to the fullest extent of their abilities. Students are expected to grow and develop according to their potential and capabilities. This is why Ki Hajar Dewantara envisioned schools as a *taman siswa* (student garden), a beautiful, enjoyable place that makes individuals feel at home and

free from fear.(Leu 2022; Nofia 2020; E-mail 2020).

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum as a national curriculum shares similarities with its predecessors. However, its application places greater emphasis on Pancasila Education to cultivate individuals who are competent, possess strong character, and behave in alignment with Pancasila values. To achieve this, teachers are required to act professionally and demonstrate the ability to plan and design effective and enjoyable learning experiences. The Merdeka Curriculum represents a reconstructed learning approach introduced by the government through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek), accompanied by new policies aimed at developing or reconstructing the curriculum. (Rizal et al. 2022; Ita et al. 2024; Suryaman 2020).

In efforts to enhance the quality of early childhood education, educators' ability to master fundamental teaching skills plays a vital role. Teachers are expected to possess these competencies to ensure that classroom learning processes run optimally and provide enjoyable experiences for children. These abilities reflect the integration of various interrelated teacher competencies that form a cohesive whole. Thus, teaching skills serve as a core element of pedagogical competence, requiring a holistic and comprehensive approach.(Jaya 2017; Hairunnisa, Riyawati, and Winarti 2024; Monica Munthe and Naibaho 2024).

Teachers play a crucial role both in curriculum development and its implementation. Similarly, they are pivotal in executing the Merdeka Belajar policy. Teachers can contribute collaboratively and effectively by working with school curriculum developers to organize and design materials, textbooks, and learning content. Their involvement in curriculum development is essential to align the curriculum content with students' needs in the classroom.As educators, teachers understand student psychology and are knowledgeable about teaching methods and strategies. They also act as evaluators in assessing children's learning outcomes. In developing the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers need to embody qualities such as planners, designers, managers, evaluators, researchers, decision-makers, and administrators (Tama Erlanda Putri, Parisyi Algusyairi, and Salfen Hasri 2023; Putra 2023; Lestari, Bahrozi, and Yuliana 2023). Teachers can apply these roles at every stage of the curriculum development process.

Teachers, including early childhood educators, are expected to continuously develop professionally through collaboration with fellow teachers. This development involves improving teaching practices, conducting research, and deepening their understanding of relevant policies and knowledge. High-quality teachers with strong foundational teaching skills are key factors in determining the success of early childhood education. Therefore, continuous improvement of teacher quality is essential to support the achievement of optimal learning outcomes.

Pedagogical competence encompasses essential skills that teachers must master in managing children's learning. These skills include understanding children's characteristics, designing and implementing effective learning activities, evaluating learning outcomes, and maximizing children's potential. In practice, this competence requires mastery of various teaching methods, as the success of material delivery greatly depends on the application of appropriate methods.(Caron and Markusen 2016; Alkornia 2016; Zahro, Atika, and Westhisi 2019). Therefore, teachers' understanding of the pedagogical competencies they need to possess and develop is crucial to ensure the optimal implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the teaching and learning process (Hamdi, Triatna, and Nurdin 2022; Lestari, Bahrozi, and Yuliana 2023; Alkornia 2016). Pedagogical competence includes several key

indicators, such as understanding the characteristics of learners, mastering learning theories and principles of educational teaching, curriculum development, engaging learning activities, developing learners' potential, effective communication with learners, and conducting assessment and evaluation. (Crisnawati, Hermansyah, and Purwanty 2022; Wita Junita and Adela 2023; Anwar 2019).

Some challenges faced by teachers in meeting these demands include limited mastery of modern learning theories and active teaching techniques. Many teachers are still accustomed to traditional teacher-centered methods, requiring time and effort to adapt to more student-centered approaches. Another challenge is the lack of confidence among some teachers in utilizing technology or digital media in learning. This is unfortunate, as technology and digital media are vital components of the Merdeka Curriculum to facilitate more varied and engaging learning activities.

Pedagogical competence involves mastering learning theories and educational teaching principles. Teachers must be able to facilitate the development of students' potential through appropriate approaches and conduct effective assessment and evaluation of the learning process and outcomes. The ability to manage learning is a hallmark that distinguishes the teaching profession from other professions. Therefore, to adapt to changes and developments in the curriculum, teachers need to continuously enhance their pedagogical competence to translate curriculum content into effective learning processes.

In the context of the development of the Merdeka Curriculum, educators teaching in schools play a pivotal role in the successful implementation of this curriculum. Teachers, as educators, must be the primary focus since they directly interact with students during the learning process. This interaction significantly impacts students' success in completing their learning tasks (Lestari, Bahrozi, and Yuliana 2023; Buchari Agustini 2018; Apriyantika and Dea Mustika 2023). Hence, teachers' understanding of pedagogical competence is essential to comprehend what they need to possess and do. This understanding is crucial for teachers to optimally implement the Merdeka Curriculum in classroom learning activities.

In this study, the researcher conducted observations and interviews. Observations were carried out to gather various data and information to address issues in the classroom, while interviews aimed to assess educators' pedagogical mastery in the classroom and determine whether they had applied the principles of pedagogical competence. Based on the observations and interviews conducted at the Model Kindergarten, the researcher obtained necessary information and data for further research. The data revealed that the Model Kindergarten employed seven educators, with six selected as the sample. The results indicated that four teachers met the pedagogical competence requirements, while two teachers had not yet achieved this standard.

This shortfall was attributed to an unfulfilled indicator in pedagogical competence, specifically the mastery of learning theories and teaching principles. Additionally, the development of students' potential was less than optimal, as some students were less active during the learning process. Teachers experienced difficulties in implementing the indicator of mastering learning theories and principles. The researcher found that teachers still relied on lecture and question-answer methods and lacked creativity in engaging students. There was also a lack of effort by teachers to help students analyze their abilities, talents, interests, and potential.

This issue necessitates that teachers become more creative in implementing learning processes to foster student creativity and engagement. Professional educators must continuously adapt to changing times and develop themselves in alignment with their field of expertise, ensuring synergy with their duties and responsibilities (Hidayah 2018;

Nurarfiansyah et al. 2022; Alim Muin et al. 2023). Furthermore, with the ongoing development of curricula in Indonesia, teachers are required to enhance their pedagogical competence to implement the curriculum effectively. In the current educational landscape, the government is promoting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, also known as "Merdeka Belajar" or "Independent Learning."

This study introduces a novel focus on the pedagogical competencies of teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the early childhood education (PAUD) level. Unlike previous studies by (Apriyantika and Dea Mustika 2023; Adolph 2016) which predominantly concentrated on curriculum implementation at primary or secondary school levels, this research explores how PAUD educators navigate unique challenges in supporting child-centered learning. The emphasis on differentiated learning capabilities and the use of project-based approaches to develop the Pancasila Student Profile adds an innovative dimension that has not been extensively explored. With the findings of this study, it is expected that teachers will be better equipped to face the challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, while policymakers can design interventions to sustainably support the development of pedagogical competencies.

METHOD

The type of research used in this study is qualitative research with a descriptive approach, which does not rely on statistical figures but rather provides an overview of the observed object or research focus by describing phenomena, events, and occurrences happening in the present. According to Kirk and Miller, qualitative research is defined as a specific tradition within social sciences that fundamentally depends on human observation, both in their natural settings and in their terminologies (Hasviani, Handayani, and Fitri 2022; Nursanjaya 2021; Safrudin et al. 2023).

This research was conducted at Taman Kanak-Kanak Negeri Percontohan Kabupaten OKU Selatan, located at Jalan Serasan Seandanan Gang Pustu Perumahan Pemerintahan Kabupaten OKU Selatan, Desa Pelangki, Kecamatan Muaradua, OKU Selatan, over two weeks, from July 22 to August 5, 2024. The subjects of the research were six teachers at Taman Kanak-Kanak Negeri Percontohan Kabupaten OKU Selatan. Data collection techniques included observation, interviews, and documentation. Data analysis involved organizing and identifying patterns, categories, and basic descriptive units to uncover themes and formulate working hypotheses based on the data.

To gather data, the researcher employed three methods:

Observation

Observation is a systematic process of monitoring human activities and the physical settings where those activities take place, producing facts from natural activity locations. According to Morris, observation involves recording phenomena with the aid of instruments for scientific or other purposes. In this study, non-participant observation was used, where the researcher did not actively engage in the teaching and learning process in the classroom. The researcher observed children's activities inside and outside the classroom and how teachers demonstrated their pedagogical competencies. The aim of the observation was to understand the reality of the pedagogical competencies of teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the model kindergarten.

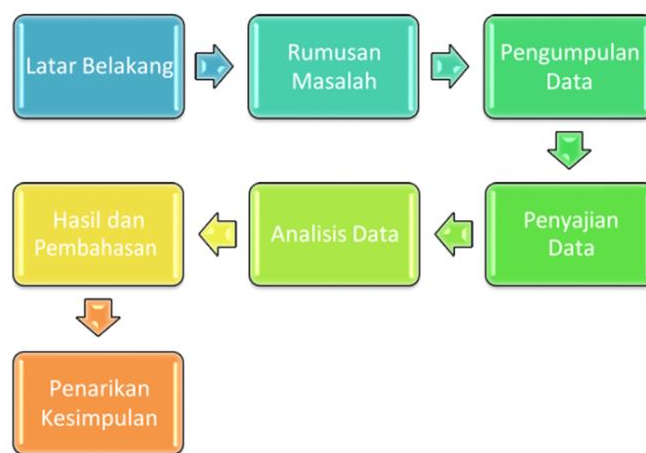
Interviews

Interviews are a communication or interaction process used to collect information through questions and answers between the researcher and informants or subjects. Interviews are conducted to explore research problems and gain deeper insights into

phenomena that cannot be observed directly. This study used structured interviews, where the researcher prepared a set of questions to be asked to respondents. Each respondent was asked the same questions, and the researcher recorded their answers using tools such as tape recorders, notebooks, or other aids to facilitate smooth interviews. Interviews were conducted with teachers at Taman Kanak-Kanak Negeri Percontohan Kabupaten OKU Selatan.

Documentation

Documentation involves obtaining data in the form of records or documents. The researcher collected documentation at the school, including school data, teacher data, and student data. In this study, the documentation included teaching modules, assessments in the Merdeka Curriculum (e.g., checklists, anecdotal records, student work, photo series), and institutional documents such as the school’s vision, mission, and goals.



Source: (Asmuddin et al., 2022)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

The data collected in this study utilized observations conducted by the researcher to examine the pedagogical competence of teachers in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Taman Kanak-Kanak Negeri Percontohan Kabupaten OKU Selatan. Interviews were conducted with the principal and class teachers of K1, K2a, and K2b to understand their pedagogical competence during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the school. This process was carried out to analyze the research findings, using observation as the primary method and employing triangulation techniques. Triangulation is a data validation method that leverages external sources to verify or compare the data (Pratiwi et al. 2022; Husnullail et al. 2024; Fahri, Lubis, and Darwin 2022). The data were processed based on information provided by educators at Taman Kanak-Kanak Negeri Percontohan Kabupaten OKU Selatan.

Interview with the Principal about the Merdeka Curriculum at TK Negeri Percontohan Kabupaten OKU Selatan

Date : Monday, July 23, 2024

Name : Subarkah

No	Pertanyaan	Jawaban
1.	What is the meaning of the Merdeka Curriculum?	The Merdeka Curriculum is a curriculum with diverse intracurricular learning where content is optimized to provide students with sufficient time to deepen concepts and strengthen competencies.
2.	How is the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum carried out at the Model State Kindergarten in OKU Selatan Regency?	Teachers and principals must independently learn through the <i>Merdeka Mengajar</i> platform. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teachers and principals learn the Merdeka Curriculum by attending webinar series. 2. Teachers and principals participate in learning communities to understand the curriculum. 3. Teachers and principals learn from best practices shared by recommended resource persons. 4. Teachers and principals utilize support centers to access information and strategies. 5. Teachers and principals collaborate with development partners for implementation.
3.	What are the main characteristics of Merdeka in educational institutions?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus on essential material. 2. More time for competency development. 3. Learning outcomes per pace and enjoyable learning hours. 4. Flexibility for educators to develop institutional curricula. 5. Emphasis on collaboration to support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.
4.	What are the advantages of the Merdeka Curriculum?	Focuses on essential materials and developing students' competencies at their pace
5.	What are the benefits of the Merdeka Curriculum for teachers?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increased inspiration for teaching. 2. Enhanced teacher competencies. 3. More creative student activities. 4. A more enjoyable classroom environment. 5. Freedom to express creativity.
6.	What are the benefits of the Merdeka Curriculum for students?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Development of students' interests and talents. 2. Freedom for students to express themselves. 3. Reduced learning burdens.
7.	What teaching modules are used in the learning process?	Teaching modules include topics like: "Let's Get Acquainted," "Working Together," "I Am a PHBS Child," "My Country," "Diversity," "Heroes," "P5 Celebrating Independence," "During a Fire," "During a Flood," "During an Earthquake," "Outer Space," and "The Sun."
8.	How are teaching modules developed in educational institutions?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish learning goals. 2. Conduct assessments. 3. Determine assessment techniques and instruments. 4. Create a sequence of learning activities from start to finish. 5. Prepare worksheets, materials, and learning media.

		6. Attach assessment instruments.
9.	How are learning objectives and pathways developed in educational institutions?	They describe learning objectives and pathways based on: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Institutional characteristics. 2. Students' needs and interests. 3. Environmental conditions. 4. Alignment with learning outcomes (CP)
10.	What teaching models can be used?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Project-based learning models. 2. Inquiry-based learning models. 3. Index Card Match learning models.
11.	What is the teacher's role in understanding the Merdeka Curriculum?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Exploring students' potential. 2. Designing personalized learning. 3. Developing active learning. 4. Encouraging creativity and innovation. 5. Strengthening character and ethics. 6. Connecting learning with local contexts. 7. Developing student independence.
12.	What is the teacher's role in applying the Merdeka Curriculum?	In the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers help students learn independently, manage time, and utilize learning resources.
13.	Is this change too rapid, giving the impression of "new minister, new curriculum"?	The national curriculum framework should not change too rapidly but should allow for quick adaptations at the school level. The pace of national curriculum changes has slowed and is now more gradual.
14.	What should parents prepare when their child's educational institution adopts the Merdeka Curriculum?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide concrete support and become learning companions for their children. 2. Understand the competencies their child needs to achieve. 3. Study the books used in the Merdeka Curriculum.
15.	What are the positive and negative impacts of learning under the Merdeka Curriculum?	Positive impact: Students can learn in line with increasingly advanced times. Negative impact: Rapid curriculum changes create new challenges, potentially lowering student achievement.
16.	Why is the Merdeka Curriculum optional and not implemented in all schools immediately?	First, the government (Kemendikbudristek) emphasizes that schools have the authority and responsibility to develop their curriculum. Second, by making the curriculum optional, the national curriculum change process can proceed smoothly and gradually.
17.	How can the Merdeka Curriculum be sustained over time?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establishing fundamental regulations. 2. Enhancing assessments. 3. Securing public support.

In implementing efforts to enhance teachers' pedagogical competence in applying the Merdeka Curriculum, several factors contribute to its success, as well as factors that hinder it. Based on the research findings, the supporting and inhibiting factors of teachers' pedagogical competence in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum are as follows:

Supporting Factors for Teachers' Pedagogical Competence in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The following are some supporting factors identified by the researcher at Taman Kanak-Kanak Negeri Percontohan Kabupaten OKU Selatan regarding teachers' pedagogical competence in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum: 1) Support from the principal: The support from the principal is one of the success factors for

teachers in mastering learning theories and principles of educative teaching aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum. It motivates teachers to improve aspects that focus on teaching and learning; 2) Productive teacher age: Teachers aged between 20-40 years are considered productive, enabling them to adapt well to curriculum changes and easily adjust to the new curriculum; 3) Teacher motivation: High dedication and enthusiasm among teachers, combined with demands for IT proficiency and collaboration among peers, provide mutual support in the learning process; 4) Enthusiasm and excitement of students: Students' enthusiasm supports the smooth implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, encouraging teachers to improve their pedagogical competence and willingly engage in teaching activities that align with the curriculum.

Inhibiting Factors for Teachers' Pedagogical Competence in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The following are inhibiting factors identified by the researcher at Taman Kanak-Kanak Negeri Percontohan Kabupaten OKU Selatan regarding teachers' pedagogical competence in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum: 1) Mastery of teaching materials: Teachers face challenges in mastering teaching materials that differ in approach and content, requiring comprehensive understanding and gradual curriculum material dissemination; 2) Diverse characteristics and learning styles of children: Students' learning styles are categorized into three types: (1) visual learners who prefer processing information through sight, (2) auditory learners who prefer information through hearing, and (3) kinesthetic learners who prefer information through movement, practice, or touch. This diversity poses challenges for teachers in delivering lessons, necessitating training from educational institutions on how to address the varying characteristics and learning styles of children within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum.

B. Discussion

Teachers' Pedagogical Competence

The researcher identified the following findings for K1 teacher, Bunda Ristawati: The competence in mastering the characteristics of learners was good. The teacher demonstrated the ability to manage and provide equal learning opportunities for all students. The competence in mastering learning theories and educational principles was still lacking; the teacher did not sufficiently vary learning approaches. The competence in curriculum development was good as the teacher was able to design a syllabus aligned with the curriculum and plan lessons accordingly. The competence in educational learning activities was good, with the teacher successfully preparing students for learning, managing the classroom effectively, and evaluating students' understanding of previous materials. The competence in developing students' potential was good, as the teacher correctly identified students' talents, interests, potentials, and learning difficulties. However, the competence in communication with students was less effective; while the teacher managed to create interaction, it lacked depth. The competence in assessment and evaluation was good, with the teacher analyzing assessment results to identify challenging basic competencies and detect individual student weaknesses.

For K1 assistant teacher, Bunda Nozaph, the findings were as follows: The competence in mastering the characteristics of learners was good, as the teacher effectively understood and managed her students. The competence in mastering learning theories and principles was good, with the teacher aligning teaching methods with students' characteristics. The competence in curriculum development was good, demonstrated by the teacher's ability to design a syllabus aligned with the curriculum and plan corresponding lessons. The competence in educational learning activities was good, as the teacher

successfully prepared students for learning and focused on delivering lessons without distractions. The competence in developing students' potential was good, with the teacher showing a strong focus on interactions with students. The competence in communication with students was good, as the teacher was able to create effective interactions. Lastly, the competence in assessment and evaluation was adequate; the teacher could analyze assessment results to identify basic competencies but occasionally struggled to detect individual student weaknesses.

For Bunda Mega, the findings for K2a class teacher revealed that the competence in mastering the characteristics of learners was good. However, the competence in mastering learning theories and educational principles was less satisfactory, as the teacher struggled with using diverse approaches, strategies, methods, and techniques supported by technology. The competence in developing students' potential was good, with the teacher focusing attention on interactions with students. The competence in communication with students was also good, as the teacher successfully created effective communication and interaction during lessons. The competence in assessment and evaluation was adequate, with the teacher analyzing assessments to identify basic competencies, though occasionally struggling to recognize individual student weaknesses.

For Bunda Novita, the findings for K1a class assistant teacher showed that the pedagogical competence was good. The teacher provided equal learning opportunities to all students and regularly checked their understanding by asking questions about previously taught material. The competence in developing students' potential was good, with the teacher facilitating the development of both academic and non-academic potentials effectively. The teacher's ability to implement learning theories and principles was evident in designing lesson plans aligned with the learning modules. Evaluation planning and implementation were observed to be adequate, as the teacher conducted evaluations at the end of each learning activity and consistently reflected on students' performance.

For Bunda Darmiwi, the findings for K2b class teacher indicated that the competence in mastering the characteristics of learners was good, as the teacher provided equal learning opportunities to all students. The competence in mastering learning theories and educational principles was adequate, with the teacher utilizing various approaches, strategies, and techniques during lessons. The competence in curriculum development was good, with the teacher designing a syllabus and lesson plans in alignment with the curriculum. The competence in educational learning activities was adequate, as the teacher prepared students for learning, managed the classroom effectively, and evaluated their understanding of previous materials. The competence in developing students' potential was also adequate, with the teacher correctly identifying students' talents, interests, potentials, and learning difficulties. The competence in communication with students was good, as the teacher interacted effectively, responded to students' questions, and encouraged engagement. Lastly, the competence in assessment and evaluation was good, with the teacher conducting thorough evaluations.

For Bunda Anggun, as an assistant teacher, the findings revealed that her pedagogical competence was good. The teacher provided equal learning opportunities to all students and routinely checked their understanding by asking questions about previously explained material. The competence in developing students' potential was very good, as the teacher effectively facilitated the development of students' academic potential. The teacher demonstrated this competence through well-designed lesson plans aligned with learning theories and modules. The ability to plan and implement evaluations was observed to be adequate, with consistent evaluations conducted at the end of each learning activity.

The findings further highlight that the overall pedagogical competence of teachers at Taman Kanak-Kanak Negeri Percontohan Kabupaten OKU Selatan is good. The competence in mastering the characteristics of learners was good, as teachers were able to understand each student's character through communication and observation during learning activities. This allowed teachers to recognize students' traits and learning styles, which served as a basis for choosing appropriate learning strategies. The competence in mastering learning theories and principles of educational teaching was less satisfactory due to limited knowledge of learning theories among some teachers. This lack of variation in teaching approaches and limited subject mastery resulted in less student engagement. Consequently, students' potential was not fully developed as they received material passively without actively thinking or discovering concepts independently.

Based on the researcher's analysis, it was found that the pedagogical competence of teachers at Taman Kanak-Kanak Negeri Percontohan Kabupaten OKU Selatan is generally good. Among the seven pedagogical competencies evaluated, the following were categorized as good: mastering the characteristics of learners, educational teaching, curriculum development, educational learning activities, developing learners' potential, communication with learners, and assessment and evaluation. However, the competence in mastering learning theories and principles of teaching was categorized as less satisfactory and requires improvement.

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

The implementation of learning in the Merdeka Curriculum is a realization of teaching modules encompassing the entire process of forming students' competencies and character. According to Vygotsky (1978) as cited in (Rahman 2024), learning should be designed within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where teachers provide scaffolding to motivate students to learn according to their interests and talents. The implementation of learning in the Merdeka Curriculum is carried out in an interactive, inspirational, enjoyable, challenging, and motivating environment that encourages active student participation and provides ample space for creativity, aligning with Piaget's (1970) perspective, as cited in (Amineh and Asl 2015) on the importance of constructive activities to support cognitive development. The curriculum implementation is crucial to ensuring the effective learning process in schools. The model school applies differentiated learning, which adapts teaching strategies to students' learning styles and needs based on their talents and interests. This approach acknowledges that every student has a unique learning style and tailors educational activities accordingly..

Understanding the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, providing evidence-based solutions, and offering practical guidance are essential to ensuring effective curriculum implementation. It is crucial to create a supportive learning environment that fosters student engagement while exploring and developing teaching strategies that enhance teachers' pedagogical competence in applying the Merdeka Curriculum. The focus is to provide practical and theoretical insights that assist teachers in creating relevant, holistic, and child-centered learning experiences.

Based on observations and interviews conducted at Taman Kanak-Kanak Negeri Percontohan Kabupaten OKU Selatan, the Merdeka Curriculum was implemented for the first time in the 2023/2024 academic year. To support this implementation, educators participated in socialization programs organized by the local government. However, the findings reveal that many educators still lack a clear understanding of the mechanisms for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, its concepts and objectives, and the structure of

learning within this curriculum. These challenges highlight the need for training programs based on the constructivist learning model (Kolb, 1984), where teachers gain practical experience to better understand and apply the curriculum.

The findings suggest that some educators face difficulties and confusion in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in understanding its mechanisms and adapting components or replacing elements from the 2013 Curriculum. This underscores the importance of targeted training to equip educators with the knowledge and skills required for effective implementation.

In the process of enhancing teachers' pedagogical competence in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, several factors contribute to its success, while others hinder its effectiveness. Based on the research findings, the supporting and inhibiting factors of teachers' pedagogical competence in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum are as follows:

Supporting Factors for Teachers' Pedagogical Competence in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The following are some supporting factors identified by the researcher at Taman Kanak-Kanak Negeri Percontohan Kabupaten OKU Selatan regarding teachers' pedagogical competence in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum: a) Support from the principal: Support from the school principal plays a crucial role in helping teachers master learning theories and principles of educational teaching aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum. The principal also motivates teachers to improve their focus on teaching-related aspects; b) Productive teacher age: Teachers in the productive age range of 20-40 years can adapt well to curriculum changes and easily adjust to new curricula; c) Teacher motivation: Teachers demonstrate high dedication and enthusiasm, driven by the demands for IT proficiency and collaboration among peers, which creates a supportive environment for implementing effective teaching practices; d) Students' enthusiasm and excitement: The enthusiasm of students greatly supports the smooth implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This encourages teachers to enhance their pedagogical competence, making them more willing and prepared to engage in learning activities aligned with the curriculum.

Inhibiting Factors for Teachers' Pedagogical Competence in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The following are the inhibiting factors identified by the researcher at Taman Kanak-Kanak Negeri Percontohan Kabupaten OKU Selatan regarding teachers' pedagogical competence in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum: a) Mastery of teaching materials: Teachers face challenges due to differences in teaching materials and approaches, which require comprehensive mastery of the content. Additionally, the gradual introduction of curriculum materials adds to the complexity; b) Diverse characteristics and learning styles of children: Students exhibit varying learning styles, which can be categorized into three types: (1) visual learners, who prefer processing information through sight, (2) auditory learners, who prefer information through hearing, and (3) kinesthetic learners, who prefer learning through movement, practice, or touch. This diversity creates challenges for teachers in delivering lessons effectively. To address this, training programs organized by educational institutions are necessary to equip teachers with strategies to accommodate these diverse learning styles.

This study highlights the critical role of pedagogical competence in the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly at the early childhood education (PAUD) level. The findings suggest that teacher training programs need to prioritize equipping educators with knowledge of modern learning theories, student-centered approaches, and digital tools. Schools and policymakers are encouraged to create professional development programs that address the gaps in pedagogical skills and emphasize

differentiated and project-based learning strategies. Such measures align with the curriculum's objectives of fostering student creativity, critical thinking, and holistic development. **This research contributes** significantly to the understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation at the PAUD level. Unlike previous studies that often focused on primary or secondary education, this study explores the unique challenges and strategies of early childhood educators. The research emphasizes the importance of differentiated learning and project-based approaches to promote the Pancasila Student Profile. Additionally, it provides valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders to design interventions that strengthen teacher competence, ensuring effective curriculum delivery and enhanced learning outcomes.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain **limitations**. It was conducted in a single kindergarten in South OKU Regency, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or educational settings. With only six teachers as participants, the study may not fully capture the diversity of experiences in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Furthermore, the reliance on qualitative data, while offering detailed insights, lacks the statistical rigor of quantitative methods. The study's short observation period may also not reflect the long-term adaptations or outcomes of curriculum implementation. **Future studies** could address these limitations by expanding the sample size and scope to include multiple early childhood institutions across various regions. Longitudinal research could explore the long-term impacts of teacher training programs on pedagogical competence and student development. Additionally, mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative data could provide a more comprehensive understanding of curriculum implementation. Investigating the role of parents and community involvement in supporting early childhood education under the Merdeka Curriculum could also offer valuable perspectives for holistic educational improvement.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings on teachers' pedagogical competencies in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the Model State Kindergarten in OKU Selatan Regency, the results fall into the "good" category. This is evident from several indicators in the learning activities, including mastery of students' characteristics, educational learning, curriculum development, nurturing students' potential, communication with students, as well as assessment and evaluation. However, some teachers have not fully mastered certain indicators of pedagogical competence, particularly the indicator on mastering theories and principles of learning.

In the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, the learning process is divided into three stages: the opening activity, the core activity, and the closing activity. These three stages are integrated into a unified learning process and cannot be separated from one another. Nevertheless, there are still teachers who struggle to fully understand the preparation of learning tools such as Learning Objectives (CP), Learning Targets (TP), Learning Objectives Achievement Plan (ATP), and Teaching Modules used in the Merdeka Curriculum.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

RP conceptualized the research framework, conducted data collection through interviews and observations, and drafted the initial manuscript; TL analyzed the data, assisted in synthesizing key findings, and contributed to the literature review section; and Y provided critical revisions, verified the methodology, and contributed to the discussion and conclusion sections. Each author has reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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