

# Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of Independent Learning Curriculum at Public Elementary School Gembong

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**Abstract:** This research was conducted at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, Gembong Village, Gembong District, Pati Regency. This research aims to describe teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the independent learning curriculum and identify the impacts from the implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum at Public Elementary School No. 01. The research methods used are qualitative; data collection techniques used in this research are observation, interviews, documentation, and field notes. The data sources used in this research are primary and secondary data. The results of the research show that teachers have a positive perception of implementing the independent learning curriculum, namely: 1) implementing the independent learning curriculum requires thorough preparation by teachers; 2) teachers feel helped by the existence of PMM (Merdeka Mengajar Platform; 3) implementation of Merdeka Belajar provides freedom for teachers and students. The independent learning curriculum has a positive impact, namely: 1) can develop teacher competency; 2) learning is more interesting and enjoyable; and 3) can develop students' character. Implementing the independent learning curriculum cannot be separated from the obstacles experienced by teachers in its implementation. There are obstacles experienced by teachers in implementing the independent learning curriculum, namely obstacles in preparing learning equipment, using technology in learning, and limited learning resources.

**Keywords:** Teacher's perception, freedom to learn curriculum, elementary school

## 1. Introduction

The independent learning curriculum is an innovation by the Minister of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud) as an effort to overcome the education crisis in Indonesia and efforts to improve education after the Covid-19 pandemic. Implementing learning in the independent curriculum gives students the freedom to study comfortably, relaxed, happy and free from pressure to develop their natural talents. According to Zulinto et al. (2023), independent learning encourages students to learn and develop themselves, develop a caring attitude towards the environment, increase students' self-confidence and skills, and easily adapt to the community environment.

Implementing independent learning is more complex and requires collaboration between teachers and students. At Merdeka Belajar, the teacher acts as a curriculum developer. Curriculum implementation and development are important in education. The curriculum development aims to achieve the effectiveness of the previous curriculum (Yildirim & Kasapoglu, 2015). Therefore, only some teachers are ready to accept and implement the curriculum created, so in this case, the teacher's perception of implementing the independent learning curriculum is needed. Teachers' perceptions of implementing the independent learning curriculum can be needed to ensure that ministry policies align with each educational unit's programs, especially at the elementary school level (Aliyyah et al., 2023). The perception of elementary school teachers regarding the implementation of the independent learning curriculum can also be used as an evaluation or improvement in the implementation of the independent learning curriculum at the elementary school level.

Anderson (2013) states that the concept of independent learning can be drawn from several points. First, independent learning is the answer to teachers' problems in practice. Second, reducing the burden on teachers with the freedom to assess student learning using various types and forms of assessment instruments. Third, it opens our eyes to discover the various obstacles teachers face in learning tasks at school. Fourth, teachers are pioneers in shaping the nation's future

through the learning process, so teachers need to create a more enjoyable learning atmosphere in the classroom through an educational policy that will later be useful for teachers and students.

Making decisions about the curriculum is not only the responsibility of the planner but also the responsibility of the teacher. Teachers are curriculum developers who serve as guidelines for implementing learning in schools. Therefore, teacher perceptions play an important role in implementing the independent learning curriculum at the educational unit level. The Merdeka Belajar curriculum is relatively new in its implementation and tends to be different from the previous curriculum; of course, teachers have many perceptions regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Perception is a person's understanding of interpreting something. This opinion is in line with the opinion of Kotler et al. (2012), who states that perception is a process of how someone selects, organizes and interprets information that creates meaningful conceptions. People's perception of something can influence their behaviour towards the object or event they experience. Teachers' positive perceptions in implementing the independent learning curriculum can provide a positive view of curriculum changes aimed at improving the quality of education for the better.

Based on the results of observations made by researchers at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, the independent learning curriculum has begun to be implemented in grades I and IV. For teachers, implementing the independent learning curriculum still requires preparation and adjustment. In class I, the learning process did not use digital technology because no LCD projector was available. The learning resources still come from teachers, and books must be available to students. Teachers still have to direct students during the learning process. Students appear less active because they only listen and carry out what the teacher tells them to do. Learning places more emphasis on reading, writing and arithmetic (Calistung). Teachers create a pleasant atmosphere in learning by using media that is interesting to students, namely the media of composing words and guessing pictures.

Meanwhile, in class IV the learning process carried out is technology-based. Teachers use PowerPoint media when teaching. Students are invited to actively learn to ask questions and express opinions. Students are free to work according to their imagination and creativity. Learning sources are not only from books but also from the environment around students. Learning looks less enjoyable because there are no ice-breaking activities for students.

Based on the results of interviews with class I and IV teachers at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, regarding the implementation of the independent learning curriculum. Both think that implementing Merdeka Belajar provides convenience for both students and teachers. Learning is carried out per subject, making students more focused and easier to understand learning. The existence of project-based activities makes it easy for students to explore current issues. Meanwhile, for teachers, the independent learning curriculum makes it easier for teachers to develop students' potential and get to know students' characteristics. Apart from several conveniences, there are also various obstacles in implementing Merdeka Belajar in classes I and IV at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, such as obstacles in preparing learning tools, literacy problems related to students' lack of interest in reading because the only source of reading is textbooks or worksheets, digital access problems. Because the independent curriculum student books are still in electronic form for digital access, sometimes the internet network is unstable, and teacher handbooks and learning tools still need to be available.

Based on previous research, Aliyyah et al. (2023) showed that teachers had positive perceptions regarding implementing the independent learning curriculum. Implementing the independent learning curriculum was also positively appreciated by elementary school teachers. Teacher perceptions can influence how teachers carry out students' learning processes. Based on the results of this research, teachers' perceptions in implementing the independent learning curriculum have an important role. Positive perceptions can be achieved to provide a positive view of curriculum changes aimed at improving the quality of education for the better in the future.

Based on the background description above, the researcher aims to examine teachers' perceptions of implementing the independent learning curriculum in elementary schools. So, the researchers were interested in conducting research entitled "Teachers' Perceptions of the implementation of the independent learning curriculum at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong."

## 2. Literature Review

The community desperately needs the curriculum revisions that the Indonesian government has been implementing since February 2022 in an attempt to address the issue of learning loss following COVID-19. Students require a curriculum that can adapt to the advancements in science and technology, which is why this needs to be done. During the COVID-19 epidemic, there was a drop in student learning outcomes in China (Xie et al., 2021) as well as in Canada (Aurini & Davies, 2021).

The Indonesian government mandated an independent curriculum with a student-centred learning design for schools to implement (Hidayah et al., 2022). This was done to strengthen Pancasila values and introduce the national identity while enhancing students' talents and interests (Aurini & Davies, 2021; Morel, 2021). Because learning uses information technology to enable students to know global information, the Finnish government also updated the primary school curriculum during the COVID-19 epidemic (Hakala & Kujala, 2021) in an effort to fortify the nation's character (Meeter, 2021).

Teachers in rural locations face difficulties implementing the autonomous curriculum because there is no internet signal (Lalduhawma et al., 2022; Meeter, 2021) (Fan et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2021). Therefore, there are learning gaps in

rural and urban settings (Juwita & Usodo, 2020; Hidayah et al., 2022). Teachers become even less aware of the education that needs to be provided to students as a result of the government's lack of socialization (Hidayah et al., 2022). Teachers and parents are happy with the new curriculum, which makes use of an online learning system, in contrast to Jordanian education (Hamaidi et al., 2021).

The objective of implementing the independent curriculum is to enhance the visibility of Pancasila students. Students who follow the ideas of Pancasila as an Indonesian ideology that is receptive to new developments serve as examples of Indonesian students who are lifelong learners with global competence. Noble character, global diversity, independence, cooperation, critical thinking, and creativity are the six main traits of Pancasila students. With a varied and ideal intra-curricular learning design, the independent curriculum has been in place since February 2022—during the COVID-19 pandemic—to provide pupils ample opportunity to hone their conceptual understanding and build their competencies (Republic of Indonesia, Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022). Teachers can customize instruction to students' interests and learning needs by selecting different teaching resources from the independent curriculum (Ministry of Education Culture, 2022). The Pancasila student profile, developed by the Indonesian government based on particular themes, is strengthened by the independent curriculum, which improves students' character (Education Standards Curriculum and Assessment Agency of the Ministry of Education Culture Research and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022). The independent curriculum is built on learning that is focused on the student.

### **3. Methodology**

This research was conducted at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, located in Gembong Village, Gembong District, Pati Regency, Central Java. The research method used was descriptive qualitative methods. According to Hennink et al. (2020), qualitative research is a series of research actions that produce descriptive data in speech, writing and behaviour of the people being observed (Davidavičienė, 2018). The type of research used is phenomenology. The data used in this research are primary data and secondary data. Primary data was obtained from interviews with four teachers as research informants. Secondary data was obtained from research documentation, research notes, journals and books, relevant research and other supporting data. Data collection techniques use interview techniques, observation, documentation and field notes. The validity of the data uses triangulation techniques of sources and techniques. The data analysis used in this research uses the data analysis stage, according to Huberman & Miles (2002), which is divided into several steps: reduction, data display, and conclusion/verification.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

#### **4.1 Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum**

Research results obtained from four informants show that teachers have positive perceptions of implementing the independent learning curriculum at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong. Teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the independent learning curriculum were obtained from teachers' experiences during the implementation of the independent learning curriculum. According to Aini (2023), the teacher's personal experience impacts the teacher's understanding of the Merdeka curriculum. The more experienced a teacher will be, the more positive perceptions he will have regarding implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, which aims to improve the quality of education. The independent learning curriculum has begun to be implemented at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, from 2022 until now. The implementation is only carried out in classes I and IV. Classes II, III, V and VI still use the 2013 curriculum with thematic learning. This research was conducted with four informant teachers at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, who taught classes I and IV with the initials Mrs IP, Mrs TY, Mrs SZ, and Mr NA. The following are the results of research on teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the independent learning curriculum at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong:

##### **4.2.1 Implementing the Independent Learning Curriculum Requires Readiness for Teachers**

Implementing the independent learning curriculum begins with the teacher's readiness. Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, teachers are ready to implement the independent learning curriculum. Teacher readiness can be seen in teacher participation in IKM socialization, workshops, training in the use of technology, and learning independently with colleagues or through PMM. The teacher's next preparation is making a learning plan, a teaching module. Teachers create teaching modules tailored to the characteristics of students. According to Maulida (2022), the development of teaching modules has been carried out. Teachers can use various strategies, but the foundation for creating teaching modules is to analyze the conditions and needs of students, teachers and schools.

##### **4.2.2 Teachers feel helped by the Merdeka Belajar platform**

The research results show that teachers at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, who have implemented Merdeka Belajar have accessed PMM. Teachers feel helped by PMM, which offers a variety of menus in it. Teachers utilize the menus available in PMM, such as reference menus in creating teaching tools, independent training, and inspirational

videos to support learning changes and understand the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Based on the research results conducted by Wasliman et al. (2023), teachers can easily access PMM via cell phone or laptop. The PMM application makes it easier for teachers to learn, with teachers more easily downloading materials, student books, learning videos and other learning resources created by the teacher organization team or the teachers themselves.

#### 4.2.3 Implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum Provides Freedom for Teachers and Students

Based on the research that researchers have carried out, the results show that implementing the independent learning curriculum provides freedom for teachers and students. For teachers in implementing independent learning, they have more freedom to develop learning tailored to the needs of students. Teachers can make innovations in learning by utilizing various interesting learning methods and media to make learning more enjoyable. Students have more freedom to explore their interests and talents through learning according to students' needs. The implementation of Merdeka Belajar learning at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, seeks differentiated learning tailored to students' interests, such as the results of observations. Students are allowed to choose to express their understanding, such as students who like drawing can make products. Students who like singing can make products in the form of songs, and students who like writing can make poetry or other written works. Herwina (2021) differentiated learning affects students' learning outcomes that are more optimal because the learning is carried out according to their interests. Learning tailored to students' needs can give students the freedom to express what they have learned.

### 4.3 The Impact of Implementing the Independent Learning Curriculum

Implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, has had various impacts. The results of research with four research informants show that the impact of implementing the independent learning curriculum as follows:

#### 3.2.1 Can Improve Teacher Competence

The research results show that implementing the independent learning curriculum at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, can increase teacher competency. The socialization of IKM (Implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum) can increase teachers' understanding of implementing independent learning. Implementing Merdeka Belajar allows teachers to develop competencies through the Merdeka Mengajar Platform provided by the Ministry of Education and Culture. To improve their competence, teachers use the menu available at PMM, such as the independent training menu. In the independent training menu, the teacher can carry out an activity using the steps provided, such as the teacher carrying out activities implementing the P5 project. The teacher carries out the real action according to the steps provided and uploads the results of the teacher's real action. The next menu that the teacher accesses is inspirational videos. Trusted experts present inspirational videos on PMM. From these videos, teachers can get inspiration in their efforts to bring about changes in learning that are adapted to the needs of the times by utilizing digital technology. PMM can increase teacher competency in learning by planning to create learning tools tailored to the class. In line needs of students with the results of research conducted by Ahid & Sufirmansyah (2022), The Merdeka Mengajar platform offers various items divided into development categories for teachers and learning activities. Utilizing PMM is the right method for improving teacher competency, innovation and teacher creativity, especially for elementary school teachers.

#### 3.2.2 Learning is More Fun and Interesting

The research results show that teachers try to create fun learning for students. Fun learning is realized by the innovations made in learning. Learning is carried out technology-based with learning video media and PPT, games, and learning resources from books and the environment around students. Learning linked to students' daily lives is expected to provide meaningful learning and foster creativity. Teachers can utilize appropriate learning models for their students to develop students' creativity and be by the abilities to be achieved (Sihaloho et al., 2022).

#### 3.2.3 Can Develop Positive Character Learners

The results of the research show that the implementation of the independent learning curriculum has had a positive impact on developing character. Developing the character of independent learning through P5 activities (Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile). P5 project-based activities at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, raised two themes, namely local wisdom and entrepreneurship. The theme of local wisdom is implemented in semester I with vegetable planting activities by students and entrepreneurship in semester II with work title activities by students. In the first semester, P5 project-based activities have begun to be carried out with the theme of local wisdom, including student vegetable planting activities. Students carry out the participants' vegetable planting independently; the teacher facilitates and directs student activities. This project activity can develop the character of cooperation and independence and increase students' creativity. Project The project for planting vegetables by students becomes a means of recognizing local potential region and preserving the environment, so it is hoped that it will be able to achieve two dimensions of the Pancasila student profile, namely Belief in God Almighty and having noble morals (Afriatmei et al., 2023). The

development of the positive character of students at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, is not only in project-based activities but previously in daily activities. Students have been instilled with good character by the six profiles of current Pancasila students, such as midday prayer activities by high-class students and activities respecting friends of different religions are included in the elements of faith in God Almighty and having noble morals. Class picket activities can grow the profile of Pancasila students with elements of cooperation. Literacy habituation activities can grow the profile of Pancasila students with critical reasoning elements.

Based on the results of research conducted by Hanifah et al. (2023), the Pancasila student profile can be implemented well through school culture in the elements of faith in Almighty God and noble morals, which are reflected in students' daily activities at school. The shortcomings of implementing the independent learning curriculum felt by teachers at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, are that some teachers still need to improve by using technological media in learning. Teachers must create teaching modules independently but access those available in PMM to modify them as needed. Implementing the independent learning curriculum requires teacher creativity in developing interesting and enjoyable learning for students, so adequate teacher competence is required. Implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum requires more time, starting from preparing learning tools, creating more complex teaching modules and preparing various learning resources, not just books. According to Almarisi (2023), the independent learning curriculum has three shortcomings. In terms of its implementation, the independent learning curriculum still needs to be more mature, and the education and teaching system needs to be realized properly. Maximum, lack of human resources and an unstructured system.

The obstacle for teachers in implementing the independent learning curriculum at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, is limited time management for teachers in preparing more complex learning tools, especially in creating teaching modules. Teachers are hampered in presenting technology-based learning due to incomplete learning support facilities and teachers' lack of understanding of using technology. In class I of Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, there is no LCD / Projector to support technology-based learning. The final obstacle is limited learning resources other than books. The teacher's efforts to overcome some of the obstacles above include taking the time to create teaching modules, even by modifying the available teaching modules to suit the characteristics of students. Teachers use other learning media but sometimes present quizzes or learning videos using laptops, but the implementation could be more optimal. Teachers realize that there is still a need to understand digital technology, so teachers try to practice using digital technology. Teachers continue to strive to utilize various learning resources, for example, from the environment and the internet.

## 5. Conclusion

The research results suggest that the teacher's experience influences teachers' perceptions of implementing the independent learning curriculum in implementing the independent learning curriculum. Teachers have a positive perception regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, namely that the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum requires thorough preparation by teachers, teachers feel helped by the existence of the PMM and the implementation of Merdeka Belajar provides freedom for teachers and students. The independent learning curriculum at Public Elementary School No. 01, Gembong, has a positive impact, namely that it can develop teacher competence, make learning more interesting and enjoyable and develop students' character.

Implementing the independent learning curriculum cannot be separated from the obstacles experienced by teachers in its implementation. There are obstacles experienced by teachers in implementing the independent learning curriculum, namely obstacles in preparing learning equipment, using technology in learning and limited learning resources. From the perspective of the teacher, when the COVID-19 pandemic makes it necessary to continue providing education for children in Indonesia, an autonomous curriculum is put into place. For teachers and schools to execute new curriculum policies, they urgently require support from the federal and local governments, education offices, universities, education quality assurance organizations, learning communities, school committees, and school superintendents. It is anticipated that the government would use the findings of this study as a foundation to enhance curriculum socialization and provide necessary infrastructure, enabling all schools to be prepared to implement the autonomous curriculum by 2024.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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