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Fostering Student Agency: The Application of Emancipatory Education Principles within Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the implementation of emancipatory education principles within Indonesia's transformative Merdeka Curriculum, a paradigm that promotes flexible and student-centered learning to strengthen adaptability and critical thinking. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design at Al Khoiriyah Al Husna Islamic Elementary School in Sukabumi, data were collected through participatory observations in 12 learning sessions, in-depth interviews with 26 teachers, focus group discussions, and document analysis involving 60 students from grades 4 to 6. The findings reveal significant pedagogical transformations, including increased student participation, enhanced project-based learning practices, and improved digital assessment systems, although challenges remain in mindset change, capacity building, and technology integration. The study concludes that emancipatory education can be effectively operationalized within the Merdeka Curriculum and leads to substantial transformation in traditional classrooms. It implies that sustained professional development and supportive institutional frameworks are critical for ensuring the continuity and scalability of transformative educational practices in Indonesia.

Keywords: Emancipatory Education, Merdeka Curriculum, Transformative Learning, Student Agency, Educational Reform.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary educational landscape in Indonesia is undergoing a profound transformation, primarily driven by the national implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This innovative framework signifies a pivotal shift away from rigid, content-driven instruction toward more flexible, student-centered pedagogical approaches. The curriculum is explicitly designed to address rapidly evolving global challenges by cultivating adaptive capabilities and critical thinking skills essential for 21st-century learners.

Despite this widespread national roll-out, significant challenges in its practical implementation persist. Recent studies highlight the complex realities of this transition, pointing to a gap between

policy ideals and classroom practice. Furthermore, research on teacher adoption indicates that while the curriculum's philosophy is often endorsed, educators report significant difficulties. These include challenges in pedagogical adaptation, struggles with developing appropriate assessment practices , and persistent issues with self-efficacy, particularly in shifting from a traditional teacher-centric mindset to that of a facilitator.

This study is motivated by this critical gap between policy and practice. The purpose of this research is to rigorously investigate the operationalization of emancipatory education principles a core, yet challenging, tenet of the curriculum's philosophy within a specific institutional setting. While the Merdeka Curriculum framework aims to empower students and foster autonomous learning (i.e., student agency), the practical realization of these liberatory principles, particularly within the culturally and religiously specific context of Indonesian Islamic schools, remains an area requiring empirical investigation.

This research addresses a specific gap in the extant literature. While recent studies have documented general implementation challenges, teachers' perspectives, and self-efficacy, there is a lack of in-depth, qualitative exploration into how the core philosophical principles of emancipatory education are practically translated, negotiated, and manifested in daily learning practices at the elementary level.

This paper, therefore, exemplifies a detailed case study at Al Khoiriyah Al Husna Islamic Elementary School in Sukabumi. Its primary contribution is the development of a contextual model for applying emancipatory principles within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. By meticulously analyzing data from systematic observations, in-depth teacher interviews, and document analysis , this study seeks to clarify how these principles are manifested in classroom dynamics and to identify the critical factors contributing to their success or hindrance. This exploration will be further contextualized and deepened by a comprehensive review of relevant empirical, theoretical, and methodological literature in the subsequent sections of this article.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative case study methodology, aligning with Schön, (2023) framework for exhaustively assessing educational innovations within their contextual frameworks. The inquiry focused on the practical application of emancipatory education principles operationalized through the Merdeka Curriculum at Al Khoiriyah Al Husna Islamic Elementary School in Sukabumi. This methodological choice is consistent with Suryadi & Rahmawati, (2023) recommendations for exploring educational transformation within distinct cultural contexts, particularly in religious educational paradigms.

Fostering Student Agency: The Application of Emancipatory Education Principles within Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum

Sheptian, Awaluddin, Soeprijanto

Research Type

The study utilized a descriptive qualitative methodology with a case study design , specifically focusing on the implementation of emancipatory education principles through the Merdeka Curriculum. This approach allowed for an in-depth examination of how liberating education principles were realized within Indonesia's educational framework.

Population and Sample/Informants

he selection of the research setting and participants was meticulously structured according to the strategic sampling principles delineated by Wahyuni and Treagust (2024), tailored for studies centered on educational implementation. The school's demographic composition, consisting of 343 students and 26 educators , provided an ideal environment for a nuanced examination of curriculum execution across various grade levels, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Wulandari and Kuswandi (2023) highlight that this population scale facilitates extensive analysis while keeping data collection and analytic processes manageable, which is crucial when exploring the complexities of educational transformations. The study specifically focused on the educational experiences of 60 students in grades 4 to 6.

Research Location

The research was conducted at Al Khoiriyah Al Husna Islamic Elementary School, located in Sukabumi, Indonesia. This school was chosen as an exemplary setting for an in-depth examination of educational transformation and its implications.

Instrumentation or Tools

Data collection incorporated a multitude of methods to ensure a comprehensive representation of the implementation process, adhering to the framework put forth by Setiawan & Munajat, (2024). The tools used included:

- Participatory Observation: Twelve structured classroom observations were systematically carried out between August and November 2023, evenly distributed across grades four through six. This approach aimed to capture authentic classroom interactions and dynamics, consistent with Wijaya and Ningsih's (2023) suggestions for curriculum implementation studies. The observation protocol integrated elements from both traditional and progressive educational assessment frameworks, in line with recommendations from Raharja and Wibowo (2024).
- In-depth Interviews: Interviews were conducted with the entire cohort of 26 teachers. These semi-structured interviews were designed to delve into various themes emerging in contemporary literature on curriculum implementation, such as pedagogical adaptation strategies, implementation challenges, professional development experiences, and the integration of religious and progressive educational values. The interview protocol was crafted

Fostering Student Agency: The Application of Emancipatory Education Principles within Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum

Sheptian, Awaluddin, Soeprijanto

to capture both individual and collective insights into the school's broader transformation process. The guidelines provided by Yuliana & Prasetyo, (2023) for exploring educators' nuanced experiences amidst curriculum reform initiatives were closely adhered to.

• Document Analysis: Analysis of documents followed a systematic approach delineated by Hase & Kenyon, (2023). This involved a thorough examination of lesson plans, teaching resources, student assessment records, and professional development materials.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection phase was characterized by a multi-method approach to ensure an all-encompassing representation of the implementation process.

• Classroom Observations: Twelve structured classroom observations were conducted between August and November 2023. These observations were evenly distributed across grades four, five, and six to gain comprehensive insight into instructional dynamics.

• Teacher Interviews: In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 26 teachers. These interviews explored themes such as pedagogical adaptation, challenges, professional development, and the integration of religious and progressive educational values.

• Document Review: A systematic analysis of documents, including lesson plans, teaching resources, student assessment records, and professional development materials, was performed. This comprehensive strategy facilitated the triangulation of findings, enhancing the study's robustness while maintaining sensitivity to the unique context of an Islamic elementary institution undergoing educational reforms.

Data Analysis

The analytical process encompassed both individual reviews of documents and comparative analyses across different categories of documentation, enriching the understanding of the implementation process and its associated dynamics. Analysis of the twelve classroom observations and associated data revealed significant transformations in teaching and learning practices. The study also involved statistical analysis, including paired samples t-tests to demonstrate improvements in student engagement, and analysis of variance across grade levels to reveal differences in implementation effectiveness. Multiple regression analysis was used to identify key predictors of successful implementation based on teacher data. Qualitative analysis of observation data and teacher interviews revealed themes aligning with current theoretical frameworks in educational transformation.

Ethical Approval (Optional)

While the provided document does not explicitly detail the ethical approval process for this specific study, it is standard practice in educational research to obtain necessary ethical clearances. This typically involves securing approval from relevant institutional review boards or ethics committees, ensuring the protection of participants' rights, privacy, and well-being. This includes obtaining informed consent from all participants (teachers and parents for students), ensuring data anonymity and confidentiality, and clearly communicating the study's purpose and procedures.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results section presents the key findings of the study. Analysis of the twelve classroom observations and associated data revealed significant transformations in teaching and learning practices at Al Khoiriyah Al Husna Islamic Elementary School. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum facilitated substantial changes across multiple dimensions of educational practice , aligning with patterns identified in recent studies of curriculum implementation. These transformations were particularly evident in areas highlighted by contemporary research on educational transformation, such as student engagement, teaching methodology, and community involvement.

Table 1. Comparison of learning indicator (2022-2024)

Indicator	2022 (%)	2024 (%)	Change (%)	t	p	Cohen's d
Active student participation	45.3	85.2	+39.9	8.45	.001	1.82
Project based learning	38.7	75.8	+37.1	8.12	.001	1.75
Parent engagement	35.3	75.2	+39.9	7.89	.001	1.76
Student initiative	40.8	80.4	+39.6	8.23	.001	1.84
Collaborative learning	50.2	90.1	+39.9	8.67	.001	1.88

Note. N = 180 students across three grade levels

Statistical analysis demonstrated significant improvements across multiple dimensions of educational practice. Paired samples t-tests showed statistically significant improvements in student engagement ($t(179)=8.45$, $p < .001$, $d=1.82$), with mean participation rates increasing from 45.3% (SD = 12.4) to 85.2% (SD = 8.7). These results support recent findings by Winata and Friantary (2024) regarding the impact of student-centered learning approaches in Indonesian schools. The large effect size (Cohen's $d=1.82$) indicates substantial practical significance in the observed changes.

Table 2. Teacher Competency Development (N=26)

Competency	Pre-Implementation	Post-Implementation	t	p	Effect Size
Student-centered methods	45.3%	85.5%	7.45	.001	1.62
Project facilitation	38.7%	75.8%	7.23	.001	1.58
Technology integration	42.1%	72.4%	6.89	.001	1.52

Table 3. Learning Outcomes by Grade Level

Aspect	Grade 4 (n=60)	Grade 5 (n=60)	Grade 6 (n=60)	F	p	eta2
Active Participation	82.5 (1.8)	85.2 (1.7)	87.8 (1.6)	12.34	.001	0.12
Learning Independence	78.3 (1.7)	80.3 (1.6)	82.3 (1.5)	11.67	.001	0.11
Critical Thinking	76.5 (1.8)	78.5 (1.7)	80.5 (1.6)	10.89	.001	0.10

Analysis of variance across grade levels revealed significant differences in implementation effectiveness ($F(2,177)=12.34$, $p < .001$, eta2=0.12). Grade 6 students demonstrated significantly higher engagement levels (M = 87.8%, SD = 7.2) compared to Grade 4 (M = 82.5%, SD = 8.4, $p < .01$) and Grade 5 (M = 85.2%, SD = 7.8, $p < .05$). These findings align with developmental patterns noted by Setiawan and Munajat (2024) regarding the relationship between student maturity and engagement with progressive educational approaches.

Table 4. Multiple Regression Result

Predictor	beta	SE	t	p	VIF
Teaching experience	.42	.06	7.00	.001	1.45
Professional development	.28	.05	7.60	.001	1.38
Initial implementation	.35	.04	8.75	.001	1.32

Note. R2=0.68. F(4,21)=11.17. p < .001

Teacher implementation data showed significant improvements across three key competency areas. Multiple regression analysis ($R2=0.68$, $F(4,21)=11.17$, $p < .001$) identified teacher experience (beta=.42, $p < .001$) and professional development participation (beta=.38, $p < .001$) as key predictors of successful implementation. These findings support recent research by Yulianto & Ahmadi, (2024) on the importance of teacher professional development in curriculum reform. The analysis also revealed strong positive correlations between professional development participation and implementation success (r=.72, $p < .001$). Qualitative analysis of observation data and teacher interviews revealed themes that align with current theoretical frameworks in educational transformation. Consistent with patterns identified by Saptono and Suparno (2023), teachers reported initial adaptation challenges, particularly in balancing traditional and progressive approaches. However, the development of collaborative professional learning communities, as recommended by Raharja & Wibowo, (2024), facilitated successful adaptation. Of the observed sessions, 83.3% demonstrated high levels of student engagement, while 75% showed effective implementation of project-based learning strategies.

The discussion section interprets the findings of this study within the context of existing research, explores their practical implications, evaluates the strengths and limitations, and provides recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Key Findings

The comprehensive investigation at Al Khoiriyah Al Husna Islamic Elementary School clearly demonstrates the multifaceted potentialities and inherent challenges associated with the implementation of emancipatory education within Indonesia's formal education system, a nation characterized by its rich cultural and religious diversity. The observed transformational changes

Fostering Student Agency: The Application of Emancipatory Education Principles within Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum

Sheptian, Awaluddin, Soeprijanto

over twelve concentrated classroom sessions provide invaluable insights into how progressive educational principles can be effectively integrated into existing institutional frameworks while upholding academic standards and preserving religious values. These findings resonate harmoniously with contemporary theoretical frameworks articulated by Tilaar and Nugraheni (2023), particularly concerning the integration of progressive pedagogical practices within religious education.

The notable enhancement in student-centered teaching methodologies, evidenced by significant increases in participation rates and elevated student engagement, signifies a profound departure from conventional pedagogical approaches. This transformation aligns with Freire et al., (2018) foundational concept of "problem-posing education," emphasizing dialogue and critical thinking, and illustrates how systematic professional development can catalyze meaningful changes in teaching practices. Furthermore, the successful implementation of project-based learning and the integration of modern technologies reinforce Darling-Hammond et al., (2020) assertions regarding the critical importance of aligning teaching practices with evolving educational needs.

Beyond the quantitative data, the qualitative findings offer a reflective narrative on these transformations. Teachers consistently reported that the primary challenge was not adopting new techniques (like project-based learning) but fundamentally shifting their mindset from 'controller' to 'facilitator'. This internal challenge was practically navigated through peer observation and structured collaborative sessions. For instance, teachers described "aha moments" when observing a colleague successfully manage a student-led project, realizing that "letting go" of control led to deeper student engagement rather than chaos. This reflective practice, embedded within their professional learning communities, was more critical than technological tools in overcoming the "mindset transformation" challenge identified in the results.

Analysis of implementation patterns across grade levels unveiled intriguing developmental trends. The heightened engagement in Grade 6 classrooms supports Mezirow and Taylor's (2023) findings on the intricate relationship between student maturity and transformative learning experiences. This pattern underscores the necessity for grade-specific adaptation strategies in implementing emancipatory education principles, as emphasized by Wijaya and Ningsih (2023) in their research on developmental considerations for effective educational reform.

Teacher professional development emerged as an essential component for successful pedagogical changes. The strong correlation between participation in professional development programs and implementation success ($r=.72$, $p < .001$) substantially supports Widodo & Allamnakhrah, (2023) findings on the critical importance of comprehensive teacher preparation in curriculum reform initiatives. The establishment and nurturing of collaborative professional learning communities, as described by Yulianto and Ahmadi (2024), were instrumental in equipping educators with the necessary tools and support to navigate the complexities and challenges of pedagogical transformations.

Fostering Student Agency: The Application of Emancipatory Education Principles within Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum

Sheptian, Awaluddin, Soeprijanto

Comparison with Previous Studies

The observed transformations in teaching and learning practices at Al Khoiriyah Al Husna Islamic Elementary School align with patterns identified in recent studies of curriculum implementation (Prasetyo et al., 2023; Suyanto et al., 2023). The significant improvements in student engagement are consistent with recent findings by Winata & Friantary, (2024) regarding the impact of student-centered learning approaches in Indonesian schools. The finding that teacher experience and professional development participation are key predictors of successful implementation supports recent research by Yulianto and Ahmadi (2024) on the importance of teacher professional development in curriculum reform. The initial adaptation challenges reported by teachers, particularly in balancing traditional and progressive approaches, are consistent with patterns identified by Saptono & Suparno, (2023). The facilitating role of collaborative professional learning communities in adaptation is also supported by recommendations from Raharja and Wibowo (2024). Furthermore, the findings on integrating progressive pedagogical practices within religious education resonate with contemporary theoretical frameworks articulated by Tilaar and Nugraheni (2023). The emphasis on dialogue and critical thinking aligns with Freire's (2018) concept of "problem-posing education", while the importance of aligning teaching practices with evolving educational needs is reinforced by Darling-Hammond et al. (2020). The relationship between student maturity and transformative learning experiences, observed in heightened engagement in Grade 6 classrooms, supports findings proposed by Mezirow & Taylor, (2023) , and the need for grade-specific adaptation strategies aligns with recent research by Wijaya & Ningsih, (2023).

Limitations and Cautions

It is imperative to recognize several limitations inherent in this study that warrant careful consideration. The relatively short observation duration of merely twelve sessions, coupled with the exclusive focus on a single educational institution, inherently restricts the generalizability of the findings. This concern has been similarly acknowledged in parallel studies conducted by Suryadi and Rahmawati (2023). Furthermore, the specific context of an urban Islamic elementary school in Sukabumi may not adequately encapsulate the diverse challenges that may be encountered by various types of educational institutions. This vital point was raised by Wulandari & Kuswandi, (2023) in their comprehensive research concerning educational innovation. The study's focus on a single school limits its external validity, meaning the findings may not be directly applicable to all Indonesian elementary schools, particularly those in different cultural, socioeconomic, or religious contexts.

Recommendations for Future Research

Looking ahead, considerable opportunities exist for future research endeavors that could significantly enhance our understanding of this subject matter. One such opportunity includes the necessity for extended observation periods, an assertion corroborated by the recommendations of Setiawan and Munajat (2024), which advocate for more extensive data collection to capture the nuances of educational practice over time. Additionally, comparative analyses that span across

diverse educational settings would yield richer insights into the impacts of different local contexts on the implementation of emancipatory educational principles. Moreover, conducting longitudinal studies that meticulously examine the enduring effects of these transformative educational practices would be instrumental in providing critical insights into the long-term efficacy and sustainability of implementing emancipatory education, as recently advocated by Wahyuni & Treagust, (2024). Future research could also explore the specific challenges and facilitators of mindset transformation, capacity building, and technology integration in more detail, as these were identified as challenges in the current study. Investigating the perceptions and experiences of parents and the wider community in relation to the Merdeka Curriculum could also offer valuable insights.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the implementation of emancipatory education principles through the Merdeka Curriculum at Al Khoiriyah Al Husna Islamic Elementary School in Sukabumi and aimed to examine the realization of liberating education principles within Indonesia's educational framework. The findings demonstrated significant transformations in learning practices, including increased student participation, enhanced project-based learning, and improved digital assessment systems, creating a more engaging environment. Notably, the study revealed the successful application of emancipatory education principles within an Islamic elementary institution while identifying challenges in mindset transformation, capacity building, and technology integration. These results underscore the operational viability and significant implications of fusing emancipatory educational doctrines within Indonesia's formal education system, characterized by its rich cultural and religious diversity. They suggest that noteworthy educational metamorphosis is feasible, even when constrained by a limited timeframe, and that systematic and sustainable change can be realized when initiatives are bolstered by well-structured professional development programs and supportive institutional frameworks.

While this study provides valuable insights into educational transformation within religious educational settings, certain limitations should be noted, such as the relatively short observation duration of merely twelve sessions and the exclusive focus on a single educational institution. Future research should focus on extended observation periods, comparative analyses across diverse educational settings, and longitudinal studies examining the enduring effects of these transformative educational practices, potentially enhancing our understanding of emancipatory education and informing educational reform and equitable learning environments in Indonesia.

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