TEACHER’S PERCEPTION ON MERDEKA BELAJAR POLICY

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Abstract. The urgency of Merdeka Belajar policy is certainly a challenge for teachers to carry out the learning process in schools. This policy makes teachers have to independently find methods and ways of learning that suit the situation in school. This study aims to explore teachers’ perceptions regarding Merdeka Belajar policy that will be applied today. A mixed research design was used in this study by involving thematic content analysis to get an overview of teachers' perceptions about the implementation of Merdeka Belajar policy at schools. Then the researcher tested the extent of the teacher's readiness to use a portfolio instrument which was an implementation of Merdeka Belajar. This study involved 30 teachers who received a set of open-ended questionnaires, conducted the FGD process, and filled out a portfolio assessment questionnaire. The results showed that the majority of teachers considered Merdeka Belajar policy to be an effective alternative in providing instruction to students in accordance with the resources owned by the school. However, technically, teachers feel the need to be given structured socialization, clear guidance, and freedom based on the abilities and personalities of teachers in schools. In addition, the percentage of portfolio instruments usage seems to have been widely practiced in learning activities.

Keywords: character education, learning performance, learning assessment, merdeka belajar policy, teacher’s perception.

INTRODUCTION

The government together with other parties in a structured manner conducts continuous evaluations to obtain educational policies that can be accepted and implemented at various levels of education. The National Education System describes how education can be created to empower human resources and to get individuals with character and morals (Prakoso et al., 2020). The various policies that should be carried out always focus on developing the potential of the individual itself which in essence will be a valuable asset for a nation to progress and develop.

Educational policy is of course carried out to achieve several goals. Expanding and equitable access to education seems to be one of the important goals of implementing a planned education system (Hakim, 2016). A good education system will certainly be able to become a transmission and transformation in developing values, morals and public knowledge so as to create awareness of appropriate behavior (Sudrajat, 2011). In addition, the existence of a centralized education system is able to accommodate the multicultural differences that are present in each individual so that these differences are no longer a big challenge, but rather complement the existing system (Disas, 2017). Thus, the urgency of current educational policies is intended to achieve equality, justice and optimization of science.

Currently, the government has sounded a new policy which is expected to become an
alternative policy to solve existing education problems. This was achieved through the policy of Merdeka Belajar. There are four important points that concern the government in implementing this policy which includes the implementation of the national standard school exam (USBN), the implementation of the national exam (UN), the lesson plan (RPP), and the zoning regulations for new student admissions (PPPDB) (Tohir, 2019). The four main principles of implementing Merdeka Belajar focus on the freedom and accessibility given to schools to carry out the educational process based on their resources while still referring to the goals and ideals of education (Arifin & Muslim, 2020; Mu’amalah, 2020; Nasution, 2020).

Conceptually, Merdeka Belajar refers to a planned implementation of education for schools, especially for teachers by giving them freedom and actualization for them in running the national curriculum in accordance with existing resources in schools (Izza et al., 2020). In school planning, Merdeka Belajar is expected to be able to explore the talents and potentials possessed by students at an early age according to their wishes, in which case teachers and schools become effective facilitators to accommodate these goals. Whereas in a higher education setting, Merdeka Belajar is focused on developing individual student skills to have multi-tasking skills and also the development of the campus system as a forum for the actualization of the academic community in society (Siregar et al., 2020). Thus, it is hoped that the policy of Merdeka Belajar will become a forum for actualization of all resources in a national education system.

Practically, Merdeka Belajar Policy still finds several obstacles. Merdeka Belajar policy must be able to guarantee the individual differences displayed by the accommodated students as a whole. One of them is accessibility for students with special needs who use the system as usual, although there are still many issues areas (Asfiati, 2020). Merdeka Belajar must also consider situational cases that might be a challenge in its implementation, such as the current plague, namely the Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic is certainly one of the unexpected situations in the learning process so that this will be another challenge faced by the organizers of the policy (Abidah et al., 2020). In addition, because the implementation is left to teachers in schools, learning media, learning techniques, and a conducive and directed learning climate will be another task for teachers to create this (Ramadania & Aswadi, 2020).

To achieve the optimization of Merdeka Belajar policy which is expected to be beneficial for all parties, this will be a shared task for all related aspects of education (Ramdani, 2018a; Ramdani et al., 2019; Ramdani & Fahmi, 2014). Starting from the government itself, which provides guarantees and technical instructions as to what kind of independent learning is. This is followed by schools which in practice, through teachers, how they plan the learning process according to the concept and management of independent learning, up to parents and the community who are directly involved in supervision and optimization outside of school. Thus, the collaboration of these parties is considered to be one of the important points in the implementation of Merdeka Belajar.

Although, conceptually, Merdeka Belajar policy has an extraordinary essence towards optimal learning achievement, the fact is no study has tried to see directly the portrait of teacher readiness and knowledge which will be an important resource in implementing the policy. Moreover, the teacher will become the material center, supervisor center, activity facilitator, and development function. How teachers perceive independent learning will greatly affect their readiness to carry out these practices Furthermore, it becomes important to explore the readiness of teachers in implementing Merdeka Belajar policies. This study itself aims to obtain an overview of the perceptions of teachers in schools regarding Merdeka Belajar policy.

**METHOD**

This study uses a mixed approach by combining a case study design with a descriptive
quantitative design (Ramdani et al., 2018). Researchers first carry out case study research by exploring the topics explored then taking a picture of the topic based on a predetermined context (Prakoso et al., 2020). The case study conducted in this study focuses on the perceptions of teachers in selected schools regarding their opinions and their readiness to implement Merdeka Belajar policy in schools. Three schools were selected based on the characteristics of superior schools which have implemented a learning process based on independence and flexibility as mandated in Merdeka Belajar policy.

Data were collected by using a set of open questionnaires, focus group discussion activities and portfolio readiness questionnaires. Open questionnaires and FGD activities were conducted to obtain qualitative data in case studies, while portfolio readiness questionnaires were used to obtain quantitative data. The number of respondents involved was 30 teachers with a proportion of 10 teachers from each school where respondents were selected using purposive sampling, namely sampling according to the needs of the researcher (Ramdani, 2017). All respondents have different background subjects so they can see more broadly the implementation of Merdeka Belajar from a more diverse perspective.

For the open questionnaire instrument, the researcher made questions based on a theoretical study of Merdeka Belajar policy that had been presented by previous studies (Mustaghiroh, 2020; Yamin & Syahrir, 2020). As for the portfolio readiness questionnaire, the researcher refers to the portfolio aspects developed by Akcil and Arap (2009) and Koraneekij and Khlaissang (2015) in implementing evaluation-based teaching and teacher flexibility. In addition, researchers conducted focus group discussions by also referring to the guidelines that were made during the open questionnaire stage. The open-ended questions include (1) What kind of description of Merdeka Belajar is understood by the subject; (2) what factors determine the success of Merdeka Belajar; (3) Challenges to be faced in implementing Merdeka Belajar, and (4) Benefits of Merdeka Belajar policy.

The data obtained from both the case study process and descriptive quantitative were then processed using thematic content analysis techniques to obtain crucial things from what the subject said (Amrullah et al., 2018; Tae et al., 2019). Furthermore, the data is combined and objectified to use the author's perspective in a variety of ways (Tae et al., 2019). The series of data analysis, validation, and interpretation were carried out by referring to the scientific procedures presented by the implementation of the mixed research model.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study uses a mixed approach which is carried out in two stages. The first stage is to conduct a qualitative exploration of the results of the FGD and open questionnaires, while the second stage is to analyze the descriptive portfolio questionnaire. The first results obtained from filling out an open questionnaire and FGD, the researcher presented an overview of teachers' perceptions regarding Merdeka Belajar which were categorized into 4 aspects of the study. These categorizations include (1) concept knowledge, (2) school readiness, (3) challenges, and (4) outcomes. The concept knowledge aspect is the teacher's knowledge of the concept of Merdeka Belajar. School readiness is the readiness of schools and teachers in implementing Merdeka Belajar policy. Furthermore, the challenge aspect is the challenges faced by schools and teachers in implementing Merdeka Belajar policy. While the outcome aspect is the benefits that schools, teachers and students get from the implementation of Merdeka Belajar policy.

The following is a qualitative sample which states that the concept knowledge obtained from an open questionnaire is given the CK-OQ (Concept Knowledge-Open Question) symbol and the CK-FGD (Concept Knowledge-Focus Group Discussion) symbol for the sample obtained from the FGD.
“Merdeka Belajar is a way of learning that is tailored to the various abilities and habits of students” (CK-OQ.1)

“A flexible learning process (providing learning opportunities as freely and comfortably as possible) for students to study calmly, relaxed, and happily without stress or pressure by paying attention to the natural talents of each student” (CK-OQ.8)

“The main direction is to form the character of students who are brave, independent, clever in socializing, civilized, polite, competent, and not only rely on a ranking system, because every child has talents and intelligence in their respective fields” (CK-OQ.9)

“Merdeka Belajar is a policy that will make students feel that school is not a burden but something that is fun. Whatever it is, if it’s fun, it will produce something better and good character will make this nation be better” (CK-FGD.1)

“Merdeka Belajar is a policy that will make students feel that school is not a burden but something that is fun. Whatever it is, if it’s fun, it will produce something better and good character will make this nation be better” (CK-FGD.2)

“The concept of Merdeka Belajar can build the mentality of the Indonesian nation to make fundamental changes in education. So, there must be a synergy between education at school and at home” (CK-FGD.3)

Furthermore, the qualitative sample that mentions school readiness which is given the symbol SR-OQ (School Readiness-Open Question) and SR-FGD (School Readiness-Focus Group Discussion) is as follows.

“Basically, teachers have the competence to follow any policies designed by the government” (SR-OQ.3)

“The main provision is that the teacher can maximize four basic competencies, namely professional, pedagogic, social, and personality” (SR-OQ.6)

“The teacher has started and is planning a variety of lessons and can explore the potential of students.” (SR-OQ.9)

“Merdeka Belajar will be carried out well, if there is synergy between the central and local governments, as well as the elements in schools. The central government must provide clear provisions or regulations regarding Merdeka Belajar and its implementation is returned to schools in accordance with their respective conditions and abilities” (SR-FGD.1)

“The role of teachers is very crucial as implementers of this policy of Merdeka Belajar, so it is necessary to strengthen teachers from the government” (SR-FGD.4)

“There needs to be socialization, habits, and long enough readiness, especially for schools that are not used to it. In response to the Merdeka Belajar policy, schools are ready to implement it but it takes seriousness and hard work from the government” (SR-FGD.7)

Meanwhile, the qualitative sample that mentions the challenges that are given the symbols C-OQ (Challenge-Open Question) and C-FGD (Challenge-Focus Group Discussion) are as follows.

“Provision of facilities for the needs of students or facilities and infrastructure for learning that are not yet fully adequate” (C-OQ.1)

“Students’ diverse abilities, both from intellectual, social and economic aspects” (C-OQ.4)

“Lack of even socialization about ”Free Learning“ for all teachers as well as a lack of professional training programs for teachers” (C-OQ.7)

“Lack of welfare and Teacher Professional Training for non-PNS” (C-FGD.2)
“Lack of socialization regarding Merdeka Belajar assessment instruments, namely portfolios. So that the teacher does not have a standard reference standard to use in the assessment” (C-FGD.3)

“The zoning system presents its own challenges for schools, because it causes diversity in students, both from an intellectual, social and economic perspective” (C-FGD.4)

Meanwhile, the qualitative sample that mentions the outcome which is given the O-OQ (Outcome-Open Question) O-FGD (Outcome-Focus Group Discussion) symbol is as follows.

“Creating an active and fun learning atmosphere for students and tailored to the abilities of each student” (O-OQ.1)

“The lesson plan (RPP) is made more concise without changing its essence. Thus, teacher administration is more effective and efficient and teachers can focus more on improving the quality of educating children” (O-OQ.3)

“Shaping critical, courageous, independent, cooperative, responsible, disciplined, creative student character and so on” (O-OQ.14)

“Merdeka Belajar can increase independence in students” (O-FGD.1)

“Merdeka Belajar will bring out the competence of students so that they can be honed” (O-FGD.2)

“This Merdeka Belajar can be a provision for students to face global competition” (O-FGD.3)

The second process, the researcher conducted a quantitative test to see how prepared the teacher was in using a portfolio assessment questionnair

| Table 1. Teachers’ perceptions regarding the benefits of portfolios |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| No. | Benefits | Percentage |
|-----|----------|------------|
| 1   | Increase students’ responsibility for their own learning | 100% |
| 2   | Monitor and assess student progress over time | 100% |
| 3   | Integrate learning and assessment | 100% |
| 4   | Can appreciate the learning process of student learning outcomes | 100% |
| 5   | Assess and promote critical thinking | 96.67% |

Based on the table, we get an overview of teachers’ perceptions regarding the benefits of portfolios. All 30 respondents in this study agreed that portfolios can increase student responsibility, can monitor and assess student progress based on the process over time, can integrate learning and assessment, and respect the learning process of students. In addition, 29 respondents agreed that portfolios can foster critical thinking in students.

| Table 2. Teachers’ perceptions regarding portfolio assessment materials |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| No. | Assessment Materials | Percentage |
|-----|----------------------|------------|
| 1   | Work report          | 100% |
| 2   | Written award        | 96.67% |
| 3   | The results of ordinary work and the results of the implementation of assignments by students | 93.33% |
| 4   | Presentation of completed tasks | 93.33% |
| 5   | Notes / reports from other relevant parties | 86.67% |

Based on the table, it can be seen that the work report has the largest percentage (100%) as a portfolio assessment material that can be carried out by the teacher.
Table 3. Teachers' perceptions of scoring portfolios

| No. | Portfolio Materials                     | Percentage |
|-----|----------------------------------------|------------|
| 1   | Summary of portfolio content           | 83.33%     |
| 2   | Documentation / data in folders        | 100%       |
| 3   | Document progress / summary            | 90%        |
| 4   | Presentation                           | 96.67%     |
| 5   | Appearance                             | 93.33%     |

Based on the table, it can be seen that there are five portfolio materials that can be scored. Each item has a different percentage amount. Documentation in the folder is one of the materials that the teacher chooses to score with a total percentage of 100%.

Table 4. Teachers' perceptions regarding the constraints of portfolio implementation in schools

| No. | Obstacles                                                                 | Percentage |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 1   | Portfolio appraisal requires extra work compared to other assessments     | 73.33%     |
| 2   | The community, especially the parents of students, has only known the success of their children only in the final test results | 96.67%     |
| 3   | Portfolio assessment is sometimes difficult to apply in schools that are more familiar with comparison test scores, ratings, standardized tests such as the National Examination | 83.33%     |
| 4   | Providing a complete and detailed format can also be tricky. Students fall into a rigid atmosphere, which ultimately turns off initiative and creativity | 66.67%     |
| 5   | Portfolio assessment requires adequate storage, especially if there are a large number of students | 90%        |

Based on this table, it can be seen that the teacher's perception that the community or parents of students only measure the success of their children through the final test results in the form of numbers, an obstacle to the implementation of portfolios in schools with the largest percentage (96.67%). In addition, inadequate facilities or infrastructure such as a storage area for portfolios are also an obstacle to the implementation of the portfolio with a percentage (90%), if the number of students in the school is quite large.

Table 5. The form of portfolio results that have been carried out

| No. | Portfolio Result Form                        | Percentage |
|-----|----------------------------------------------|------------|
| 1   | Reflection writing                           | 66.67%     |
| 2   | Review                                       | 60%        |
| 3   | Report                                       | 83.33%     |
| 4   | Tapes video recording                        | 66.67%     |
| 5   | Photo / picture                              | 83.33%     |
| 6   | Snippet of writing                           | 60%        |
| 7   | Graphs and charts                            | 43.33%     |
| 8   | Computer print out                           | 86.67%     |
| 9   | Diagram                                      | 26.67%     |
| 10  | Poetry                                       | 33.33%     |
| 11  | Notes of discussions / activities at home    | 46.67%     |
| 12  | Record anything / audio tapes                | 26.67%     |
| 13  | Draft                                        | 33.33%     |
| 14  | Illustration                                 | 40%        |
| No. | Portfolio Result Form                                      | Percentage |
|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 15  | Works in the form of objects                            | 56.67%     |
| 16  | Model / mockup                                          | 43.33%     |
| 17  | Scrapbook                                               | 56.67%     |
| 18  | Diagram                                                 | 26.67%     |
| 19  | Song                                                     | 30%        |
| 20  | Others: plays, presentations, exhibition (exhibitions)   | 3.33%      |

Based on this table, it can be seen that there are different percentages in each form of portfolio results. This is because the form of the portfolio results used is adjusted to the subjects taught by each teacher. The forms of portfolio results that were mostly carried out by teachers included computer printouts (86.67%), reports and photos or pictures (83.33%), written reflections and tapes video recordings (66.67%), as well as written reviews and snippets (60%). Meanwhile, other forms of portfolio results have been done and some will be done by the teacher.

Based on the results carried out through the processing of previous case study data, it turns out that there are four important points that can be described in relation to teachers' perceptions of Merdeka Belajar. First, the concept of Merdeka Belajar which is understood by teachers in this study focuses on freedom in teaching, freedom in expressing the meaning of learning, and freedom that ensures students and teachers in schools can jointly experience the fun and substance of learning. School is considered a comfortable second home for students and teachers to be able to share problems, feel happiness, avoid unpleasant feelings, and ultimately form the moral character of children. The concept of Merdeka Belajar is in line with several previous studies which also agree that learning is effective if it is built with this situation (Lucardie, 2014; Rozenfeld et al., 2011; Sanfo, 2020).

The second point is about school readiness. In general, the majority of subjects assumed that in essence the teacher was the most important party in the implementation of Merdeka Belajar. Teachers who are ready to be realized from various components of knowledge, skills and personality can support the policy. Despite the fact, there are still many teachers who do not yet fully have these components evenly and comprehensively in various regions in Indonesia (Ramdani, 2018b; Ramdani et al., 2019). The role of teachers is very crucial because it is directly related to their totality to be able to find the most effective learning with the resources available in schools. This is then also reinforced by several other studies that discuss the role of teachers as teachers, educators as well as student motivators in schools (Ellerani & Gentile, 2013; Higgins et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the third point regarding the challenges that will be faced in the implementation of Merdeka Belajar is considered an important thing to be followed up immediately. Several things that are considered to be challenges include the need for clarity and continuous socialization to ensure that the perceptions of each teacher are the same and truly understand the intent of the policy. Then, more technical and substantive training is needed to obtain knowledge and skills that are more appropriately used in its implementation. In addition, the facilities and resources owned by each school must also support the policy. Whereas the fourth point focuses on the benefits that might result from the policy of Merdeka Belajar, all of which refer to the objectives of implementing a national education system (Ramdani & Fahmi, 2014; Ramdani & Prakoso, 2019). The policy of independent learning is expected to be able to produce a generation that excels in all fields by first creating a learning atmosphere and a pleasant school climate.

The results in the case studies appear to be in line with those found in the open
questionnaire results. A portfolio instrument that will be used as a crucial instrument in learning based on Merdeka Belajar. This refers to the use of specific media and instruments in evaluating learning outcomes. As described by Sugiri & Priatmoko (2020) related to authentic assessment which is designed to determine the character and assessment based on individual excellence. The results of this study indicate that the majority of teachers are familiar with the use of various types of existing portfolios. Basically, various activities carried out in schools of course already use practical media in measuring children's abilities so that the next challenge is to ensure that the attributes measured by the various portfolios are right on target (Furat et al., 2012).

Other information found in the results of the portfolio questionnaire (see table 1-5) also illustrates that, so far, the teacher considers the use of portfolios to be effective and useful to evaluate students' abilities. Moreover, it is in line with the policy of free learning. Thus, this study collaboratively provides an overview of the conditions that occur in the field related to the policy of Merdeka Belajar in schools. The point of view that occurs is that teachers are an important resource in implementing the policy, so it is the duty of the government together with schools to always provide clear guidance and instructions to achieve the objectives of the existing curriculum, because in essence teachers have been in schools use one of the attributes in Merdeka Belajar policy, namely the use of various types of portfolios.

CONCLUSION
The results of this study confirm that teachers responded positively the policy of Merdeka Belajar. Merdeka Belajar policy is considered to be one of the appropriate mechanisms for implementing the learning process based on local wisdom and optimizing the resources owned by schools. Merdeka Belajar is considered a learning climate that provides freedom for teachers to explore the best way to do learning. However, a joint guide is needed that can be used as a benchmark for teachers and schools to implement the policy, especially the various practices and experiences related to this policy have long been applied in the learning process in schools so that it remains only to be done a combination of various existing the aspects.

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