

# ***Merdeka Belajar* in an Online Learning during The Covid-19 Outbreak: Concept and Implementation**

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**Abstract** – Nadiem Makarim, the Minister of Education and Culture, released "Merdeka Belajar" (Freedom to Learn) as his revolutionary program by the end of 2019. It aims to make significant changes in the world of education. The current study aims to demonstrate the understanding of primary school teachers' understanding of the concept and implementation of Merdeka Belajar during Covid-19. Data were obtained through surveys via Google-Forms and in-depth interviews via WhatsApp with twenty primary school teachers at private and public schools around DKI Jakarta, Bogor, and Banten. In contrast, secondary data is obtained from previous research and online news directly related to this study. They were analyzed through restatement, description, and interpretation stages. The investigation resulted that the teachers having conceptually understood the program of Merdeka Belajar well. They agreed and accepted the program to reform and improve the education quality and the changes of times. The problem lies in the practical implementation due to the limited number of teacher movers in every school unit as creators, innovators, and role models for the other teachers. Besides, the lack of supporting infrastructure for online learning and the teachers' mastery of technology also hinder the program's success. Finally, this study recommended the need to socialize with the community, hold more teacher training, increase the number and distribution of teacher movers, and improve teachers' skills in using information and communication technology in the learning process.

**Keywords:** Merdeka Belajar, Teacher Mover, Online Learning, Covid-19

## **1. Introduction**

Merdeka Belajar is a new idea launched by the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, which is counter-productive for teachers and learners in the Era of the Covid-19 pandemic. The policy of school closures occurs massively in various countries (Rahiem, 2021). It was reported that in April 2020, 195 countries had imposed school closures, or nearly 91.3 percent of the world's student population was affected (Samat et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020). In Indonesia, school closures have occurred since March 2020, in several provinces, such as DKI Jakarta, Banten, West Java, starting on March 16, 2020 (CNN, 2020; Kumparan, 2020). The abnormal situation forces the government to make total and fast changes to the learning system without preparation. The learning system, which was

previously based on the direct interaction or face-to-face between the teacher and the learners in the classroom, should be shifted to internet-based learning (Samat et al., 2020). The fundamental and holistic change brings about difficulty, anxiety, dependence, or limitations for teachers, students, and parents. Teachers and students depend on the internet connection and device technology: computer, PC, laptop, or mobile phone. In addition, the success of online learning lies in whether the teachers are skillful in using technology-based applications. The challenges of the online learning system become more complex, especially for students of primary school because they are not yet skilled in operating the technology in the learning process. Moreover, it demands parents to accompany their children. Therefore, the noble idea of Merdeka Belajar promoted by the government turned into a nightmare for teachers, students, and parents in online learning during the Covid-19.

The literature review on Merdeka Belajar in online learning is still limited. Some studies show the rejection against technology in the learning process because it does not significantly positively affect the students' growth. The ideology of other countries might influence the students and replace the role of the teachers (Aggen, 2012; Alhumaid, 2019; Wiener, 2004). Meanwhile, other studies see that digital-based learning could be a way out that the learning process can still be conducted even during the outbreak of Covid-19 (Al Lily, Ismail, Abunasser, & Alhajhoj Alqahtani, 2020; Divayana et al., 2017; Husnul et al., 2020; Kidi et al., 2017; Nie, 2020; Ningsih & Mulyono, 2019; Perri, 2016; Petrakou, 2010). Another study on Merdeka Belajar emphasizes creativity and innovation (Saleh, 2020; Siregar, Sahirah, & Harahap, 2020). However, those studies cannot point out the substantial problem of the learners and teachers as the independent subject in online learning during the pandemic. The perspective of the "independent" subject in the online learning system is missed within the scholar's concern.

This study aimed to demonstrate the experience of teachers and students in the digital-based learning process during Covid-19. It specifically focuses on the essence of Merdeka Belajar and the types of difficulties encountered in the online learning system in Indonesia at the primary level of education. On the one hand, the government aggressively promotes the concept of Merdeka Belajar in education. On the other hand, teachers, students, and parents do not gain freedom in the practice of online learning during the pandemic. Therefore, three questions are formulated in the current study: (a) What is Merdeka Belajar? (b) Why Merdeka Belajar? (c) How is Merdeka Belajar in online learning during the covid-19 period at the basic education level?

This paper is based on the argument that the process of digital-based distanced learning in the primary level of education in Indonesia is not yet ready to accept the total change of the offline system. Constraints and difficulties teachers and students face are primarily due to the lack of human resources, in this case, the mover teachers. To provide examples, mentoring, as role models, creators, and innovators for other teachers. Besides that, training and preparation on applying independent learning in online education during a pandemic are still minimal. Thus, socialization, reparation, improvement, and enhancement of infrastructure needed in online learning are required. Besides, it also needs skill improvement of teachers and learners in operating the technology. However, the attitudes and essential skills required in internet-based teaching and learning can be adequately achieved smoothly and in fun. Therefore, Merdeka Belajar becomes a reality.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Merdeka Belajar**

Nadiem Makarim, the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, established the "Merdeka Belajar" program as a strategy for educational changes in Indonesia. It is in response to the education system, which has been considered restrictive and limiting the movement of the school, teachers, and learners to develop creativity and innovation because they are too preoccupied with bureaucratic and administrative affairs (Wijaya et al., 2021). The program focuses on four aspects. The first is to replace the national-based school examination (USBN) with a school-based test so that teachers and schools can provide a real, thorough, and independent assessment, or it is not dependent on the national standard that ranks students all over Indonesia. The second, to remove the national examination (UN) as a requirement of graduation, students' success becomes a minimum-competence assessment and a character survey. UN has become a scourge for students every year and poses a problem for students, teachers, and schools because it is used as an assessment indicator for the

excellence of educational institutions. Assessment methods are not oriented on the cognitive aspect but the development of students more comprehensively. The third is to provide teachers a space to be creative and innovative in developing the Lesson Plan format, so they can better focus on thinking about the substance of the material with a better and enough preparation for teaching and to evaluate the learning process. The fourth is to create more flexible regulations on the admission of new students to accommodate various conditions in every area (Kemendikbud, 2019).

Merdeka Belajar is intended to be a revolutionary program in all aspects of formal education. The freedom of learning in teachers' sense gives students opportunities to grow and develop according to their uniqueness. Because every individual has different talents and potential from one another. The teacher serves to encourage and assist learners that they can learn with fun and stress-free by focusing on developing the natural skills of each student. To avoid an act of force to memorize, pressure students to learn a field of science beyond their passion and ability. Therefore, every student has a portfolio. The assumption is, if the freedom of learning is met, the students will feel comfortable that learning becomes something fun, implemented independently, driven by consciousness within (Abidah, Hidayatullaah, Simamora, Fehabutar, & Mutakinati, 2020).

In essence, the concept of Merdeka Belajar is a response to the needs of the education system in the Era of the industrial revolution 4.0 (Yamin & Syahrir, 2020). This Era requires human resources who have critical thinking and problem-solving skills, are creative and innovative, and can communicate by information technology and collaborate. Merdeka Belajar is intended for freedom of thought determined by the teacher (Halida Bunga, 2019). Teachers must push and provide students with experience in being creative and innovating according to their talent and uniqueness. It cannot be assessed only by the numbers of the exam results as it has long been applied.

Conceptually, independent learning is critical, quality, transformative, compelling, varied, applicable, actual, and factual. In essence, Merdeka Belajar will create independent and autonomous sources who can develop their potential, talent, and uniqueness (Abidah et al., 2020; Nofri Hendri, 2020). Therefore, it can be comprehensively formulated that the freedom to learn is a fundamental aspect for fulfilling the learning outcomes; the freedom to learn becomes a constitutive element to realize students who are fond of learning; freedom to learn becomes the foundation for all educational purposes. In short, Merdeka Belajar is the freedom for schools, teachers, and students to create, innovate to generate independent, superior, competent, and skilled generations (Wijaya et al., 2021). Thus, the main goal of Merdeka Belajar is to create an Indonesian generation with a high level of intelligence equipped with the skills of logical, critical, analytical, innovative, and creative thinking (Aan Widiyono, Saidatul Irfana, 2021). To realize all of the goals, government establish a task force for teacher movers.

## **2.2 Teacher Movers**

Teacher movers are those who have the awareness, willingness, professional teacher competence, and those who prioritize the students' development that they always do the best in the learning process (Kemendikbud, 2019). Teacher movers are ideally found in each education unit because they share concrete experiences on how to be creative and innovative to improve the quality of education (Wijaya et al., 2021). It is necessary because 21st-century learning requires educators to master the competence of academic teaching according to their respective fields (Ardi & Erlamsyah, 2017). In this sense, competence is defined by knowledge and teaching skills to achieve the education goals well (Creemers et al., 2013). The Constitution No. 14, 2005 regarding teachers and lecturers formulates four competency standards of a professional teacher: pedagogic, personality, professional, and social. Combining the four competencies is expected to let teachers improve their skills and do the task well (Dudung, 2014; Hamid Darmadi, 2015).

Teaching skills are related to capability and capacity to choose effective teaching methods and design an exciting and efficient learning media (Bakar, Basri, & Fooi, 2015). Therefore, teacher movers become innovators, driving forces, and motivators to fellow teachers to improve competencies and skills (Prawitasari & Suharto, 2020). The teacher mover becomes a leader, an inspiration, a skilled model, and can move the community with a wide range of competencies and experience possessed (Ates & Kadioglu, 2018). Skilled teachers can design a better learning process: active, creative, innovative, engaging, and fun. Thus, teacher mover is a leadership education program for teachers that can lead and create learning freedom for learners. It aims to produce learners who have the academic

ability and skills needed in the current century. The skills are commonly called the four C's: creative thinking and problem-solving, creative innovation, collaboration, and communication (Fitriyah, 2019; Widodo & Wardani, 2020).

### **2.3 Online learning**

Conceptually, online learning is the process of education structurally grounded on information technology (Buselic 2012; Bozkurt et al. 2015; Griffiths 2016). They use the internet network with the connectivity and flexibility (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011), the ability to use technological means (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiago, 2017; Luschei & Zubaidah, 2012). Face-to-face meeting in the classroom turns to be a virtual meeting in the form of image, video, presentation of text and chart materials (Griffiths, 2016; Sahlström, Tanner, & Valasmo, 2019). Thus, online learning requires two key elements: the ability of the human as the users of the technology and the infrastructure of technology (Gikas & Grant, 2013). For example, Google Classroom, Edmodo, Schoology, Whatsapp, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Facebook, and Instagram (Alvin S. Sicat, 2015; Enriquez, 2014; Iftakhar Shampa, 2016; Kumar & Nanda, 2019; So, 2016). The ability of the teacher to select and use the internet technology suits the characteristics of the learning material (Hsieh & Tsai, 2017). Online learning becomes the final preference for all education units from kindergarten to higher education during Covid-19 (Al Lily et al., 2020).

To ensure that online education practice in Indonesia runs well, the Ministry of Education and Culture develops the application of Android-based distanced learning, Portal Rumah Belajar (Kemendikbud, 2020). This Portal can be accessed at [learning.kemdikbud.go.id](http://learning.kemdikbud.go.id). Some excellent features for students and teachers are learning resources, digital classroom, virtual laboratory, and question bank. The learning center can be used by students and teachers (Abidah et al., 2020). The ministry has been working with some online learning platforms, such as Smart Classes, Google Indonesia, Your School, Microsoft, Quipper, and Zenius. Each platform provides facilities accessible to the public for free (Abidah et al., 2020). Thus, online learning helps students develop general skills in finding and evaluating information relevant to their learning. Students can also be accustomed to using technological means. It is indispensable in 21st-century learning, closely tied with the infiltration of information and communication technology in the education system.

## **3. Method**

### **3.1 Case selection**

The application of Merdeka Belajar as the government strategy to make an education revolution in online learning during the Covid-19 finds a great opportunity and challenge. Therefore, the relationship between the change in the distanced learning system and the implementation of Merdeka Belajar is selected as the research object for three reasons. First, online learning has been getting a comprehensive response to the difficulties experienced by both students and teachers—the relationship between students and teachers changes and the implementation of online learning. The second, limited attention is given to the analysis of the process of distanced learning with the implementation of the government program of Merdeka Belajar. The existing studies concern and show various types of difficulties, but they are not examined explicitly on the program's significance in today's online learning system. The third, the analysis of the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar program in educational practice during the global pandemic of Covid-19 is necessary considering the great potential of online learning in creating heavier dependence and limitation of teachers and students. The three reasons show that a thorough understanding of online learning and the realization of Merdeka Belajar is a crucial and urgent issue to understand as the foundation of education management policy for the unit of primary education level. Therefore, selecting this issue as the research subject is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding and insight for problem-solving.

### 3.2 The type of research and data (primary, secondary)

The application of Merdeka Belajar in online learning during the pandemic of Covid-19 in the primary education level is described through qualitative research that relies on primary and secondary data. The preliminary data are the conceptual understanding of the elementary school teachers about Merdeka Belajar and the experience of implementing it in the online learning during the Covid-19. The secondary data consist of the family background of the students, the level of students' independence, and the experience of students upon online learning. Both primary and secondary data are used to analyze the application of Merdeka Belajar in online learning during the Covid-19. Participants/information sources in this study only involve twenty elementary school teachers. They are selected randomly who teach in public and private schools around Jakarta, Bogor, and Banten. The author intends to find out the attitude, understanding, and implementation of teachers on the government program of Merdeka Belajar in distanced learning.

### 3.3. The research process: stage and data collection techniques

In March 2021, we began to concentrate on Merdeka Belajar by collecting literature from previous research. Then from the reading results, several questions will be asked to the respondents. Data or answers to these questions were collected from March to May 2021 which consisted of primary data. The primary data were obtained by distributing questionnaires with open questions to the teachers, students, and parents through Google Form (<https://docs.google.com/forms>). The questions posed to the primary school teachers were in line with the objectives of this research, which are to demonstrate their conceptual understanding of Merdeka Belajar and its implementation in the field as follow :

**Table 1.** Detail of Questionnaire

Question	Question Type
What do you think about the Merdeka Learning program?	Open Question
What do you know about the program? Ladies and gentlemen, please provide an explanation based on your understanding, experience and observations.	
How is the independent learning program realized in Distance Learning? Can distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic foster learning independence? What are the obstacles faced by parents as teachers at the Elementary School unit level? Please, explain.	Open Question
How is the independent learning program realized in Distance Learning? Can distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic foster learning independence? What are the obstacles faced by parents as teachers at the Elementary School unit level? Please, explain.	Open Question

The interview with the teachers was performed via Whatsapp. The data sourced on online news were collected through topical news mapping concerning students, parents, and teachers in the educational process during the pandemic. Different categories of data became the foundation for the analysis of the process of the implementation of Merdeka Belajar in online learning.

### 3.4. Data analysis technique: data processing and analysis

The data were analyzed in three stages and two data analysis techniques. The stages cover: (a) data reduction as a process of structuring data to be more systematic, thematic grouping; (b) data display to present the research results in the form of excerpts of the interview; and (c) data verification as a stage data conclusion, following the trend of the data obtained. The data processed in three stages were analyzed by using descriptive and content analysis. First, data description as the basis for the process

of interpretation was done contextually. Second, content analysis was conducted following the process by Spradley (2000). The analysis stages and technique employed to formulate conclusions on the implementation of Merdeka Belajar in online learning during the pandemic of Covid-19.

#### 4. Results

From the questionnaires and interviews that we conducted, the following is about the conceptual understanding of Merdeka Belajar Learning and its implementation in the field. The teacher's answers to the questionnaire and open interview are as follows:

*"The Program of Merdeka Belajar is a breakthrough of the Minister of Education to provide total freedom for all education units to formulate the learning activities according to the condition of the learners in their respective institution. It is characterized by the shortened draft of the Lesson Plan to be one sheet, which was previously provided in many sheets. The existing curriculum no longer constrains the educational unit. Therefore, the teacher focuses more on the learning process, no longer restricted to administrative activities. Still, the Minister highly encourages every teacher to be creative and innovative, so the learning process becomes more meaningful and according to the learners' characteristics" (R1, R19, R20. Saturday, April 19, 2021).*

*"I strongly agree with the program of Merdeka Belajar. I understand simply. Merdeka Belajar means that the teacher is no longer constrained by the number of CHAPTERS and pages in the textbook. The standard of teachers has been fixated on the content of the books. Particularly in evaluating learning, the teacher no longer bases on questions (multiple-choice, fill-in, or description). The evaluation can be in the form of a portfolio or a structured project. Independent learning means more exploration for teachers, simplifying the documents of pre-teaching, such as the Yearly Plan, Semester Plan, and Lesson Plan. As a teacher, I am free to choose the learning and teaching materials approach, although it is still on the evaluation-based process. Independent learning leads the teacher to be individually more organized in preparing the teaching program from pre-teaching, the process of teaching, and evaluation" (R2, R16, R17, Tuesday, April 15, 2021).*

*"Merdeka Belajar means freedom to think. Merdeka Belajar is a form of students' freedom to express themselves during the learning process at school that teachers, students, and parents could get a happy atmosphere. The essence of freedom to think, according to Nadiem, must be on the teachers' concern before they teach the students. Students are expected to think logically and realize the material's intention and purpose in terms of literacy. The students can find the basic concepts in numerical terms and apply them in solving problems" (R3, R18, Tuesday, April 15, 2021).*

*"As far as I know, Merdeka Belajar for teachers is providing freedom to teachers to teach, to choose the way of delivering the curriculum, or the teaching method according to the capabilities, competence, interest, and talents of every student, to explore the potentials of teachers-at school, to innovate or create something new and improve the quality of learning independently. Meanwhile, Merdeka Belajar for students or learners is to create a fun learning atmosphere without being burdened by the grade achievement or a certain score, to learn by outing class, to not only listen to the teacher but also to shape a character, and not focused on the score or ranking because every student has their talent and intelligence in their respective fields." (R4, R11, R12, R14, Monday, April 21, 2021).*

*"Merdeka Belajar is a learning concept that focuses on the uniqueness of each individual (who has diverse talents and skills) and builds a conducive and fun atmosphere for learning, so students do not feel burdened with the heavy subject matters. The conducive atmosphere is expected to stimulate the students to think creatively, logically, analytically, and*

*computatively, according to their respective talent and thought." (R5, R6, R7, R8, R10, Tuesday, April 22, 2021).*

Two teachers wrote critical notes that Merdeka Belajar for primary school children is less appropriate among the respondents. The reason is the tendency of the teachers to abuse their freedom. They quote the following:

*"The program of Merdeka Belajar is still newly released. It requires a structured and systematic system. It needs to prepare teacher resources as an executor, well-planned socialization, and preparation for all layers of stakeholders. Only independent teachers can be driving forces for the independent learning class. Meanwhile, it causes a lot of negative impact to the students, for example, the tendency for students to be accustomed to holding a gadget, to abuse the subsidized internet quotas for playing a game after learning which affects the parents always to buy quota." (R9, R13, Tuesday, April 22, 2021).*

The teachers voiced different views regarding implementing the Merdeka Belajar program in the distanced learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some consider the program can still be implemented even though it should be in the distanced learning for Covid-19. Online learning provides students free spaces and great opportunities for learning to be creative, innovative, looking for a source of information to learn, and learning many resources on the internet. Besides, students also become skilled in using technological means. The answers and opinions of teachers can be seen in the following excerpt:

*"I think distanced learning is a challenge and momentum for all teachers to apply Merdeka Belajar. Teachers are given the freedom to choose what materials deemed essential and important to be taught among a lot of basic competencies which are not all taught during this pandemic." (R1, R7, Monday, April 21, 2021).*

*"The application of the concept of Merdeka Belajar in distanced learning makes teachers more motivated to technological literacy. Within the freedom to learn, teachers are demanded to be more creative in teaching so that learners can still enjoy the atmosphere of learning although they should learn from home (which they might have been bored, wanted to learn together with friends" (R2, R3, R10, Tuesday, April 22, 2021).*

*"Merdeka Belajar In the distanced learning provides flexibility for schools to determine graduation. Teachers are given the discretion to assess the students, create only a one-sheet Lesson Plan, and develop learning quality. Students are given the freedom to argue and think critically, not memorize the material. The barriers should lie in the less smart students and the lack of understanding for children who slowly learn. Teachers find difficulty in assisting such students". (R6, Monday, April 21, 2021).*

*"The learning method during the pandemic is very effective, and the most important one is creating a bond between the teacher and students. Thus, the whole teaching and learning activities can still be conducted even during difficult and different situations. Even though learning in the network (online), students can still absorb knowledge. The implementation of distanced learning also proved to make the teachers innovate that students can absorb the subjects, even if they do not learn face-to-face" (R8, R9, Tuesday, April 22, 2021). This is also an implementation of the concept of Merdeka Belajar.*

*"Distanced learning during the pandemic can foster the freedom to learn because students are required to dig the potential of learning. They can learn without limits or barriers. Although teachers and parents face many obstacles, technology media is beneficial for distanced learning" (R13, Tuesday, April 22, 2021).*

There is also a different opinion, which sees that Merdeka Belajar in online learning during the pandemic is complex for primary school students. They state that students tend to abuse internet technology to play the game they are profligate in using quota. Meanwhile, the supervision or control of the teacher towards students is difficult to do because they are separated by space and distance. The other obstacles in Indonesia are the limited internet network, quota, hp/laptop, the mastery of technology, and socialization of the program of Merdeka Belajar that has not been well distributed.

*"The Program of Merdeka Belajar has not been socialized to the school in which I teach. So, I don't understand the implementation of this program although it has a better purpose". The obstacle we face as teachers is that the students do not have the gadget. They still borrow to their parents, and sometimes it clashes with their work hours, many tasks are not collected on time". (R12, R14, Monday, April 21, 2021).*

*"The Program of Merdeka Belajar could not be applied in the distanced learning because the teacher and the students only meet in the virtual classroom or google meet, which leads them to find difficulty understanding the materials." (R17, R18, R19, R20, Tuesday, April 22, 2021).*

*The obstacles of the implementation of Merdeka Belajar in the distanced learning are the limited quota of internet, the learning Media used by the teacher which tends to be monotonous and provokes the students to be bored or tired, the learning process which is not interactive, the difficulty of teachers to monitor the students' character or behavior, the tendency to turn the learning into an online assignment, too many tasks given to the students, the minimum absorption of the material, and the less integrated Daily Test, Mid-Semester Examination, Final Examination, and School Examination (R11, R4, R5, Tuesday, April 22, 2021).*

*"If the program of Merdeka Belajar is manifested in the distanced learning, students are required to be active during the hours of learning, using zoom meeting during the learning process. However, the reality is that many students cannot follow the zoom meeting session because they use their parents' cellphone, and the signal and quota are limited". (R15, R16, Monday, April 21, 2021).*

*The program of Merdeka Belajar in the distanced learning does not fully cultivate the students' freedom to learn because a lot of things do not support it. For example, the obstacles faced as a teacher during the pandemic of covid-19 is the limitations of teachers in mastering the technology, limited students who have a laptop cellphone (some students use a cellphone, in turn with their parents), lack of parental support, students' lack of discipline in the distanced learning. (R8, Monday, April 21, 2021).*

## **5. Discussion**

This study conceptually shows that educators at the primary level around Jakarta, Bogor, and Banten should understand the intention and purpose of the program of Merdeka Belajar. Merdeka Belajar is the right strategy for significant changes in the learning process. Merdeka Belajar provides a space to create and innovate for both teachers and students. Teachers have the opportunity to think about the substance of the lesson with good preparation in teaching. The administration is simplified. Despite all the shortcomings due to the limitations of the infrastructure support for online learning, the pandemic of Covid-19 has accelerated the implementation of the program enforced a year before the pandemic. The abnormal situation forces teachers to be creative and innovate so that the learning process still runs effectively. It is one of the manifestations of Merdeka Belajar. Nevertheless, this study found some issues arising during its implementation. It is joint work that government and all elements of society should struggle for that the ideals of independent learning can be successfully realized.

Merdeka Belajar in the primary level of education is intended to build the commitment of the teachers on the learning goals, encourage, train, and create independent learning. It is necessary for technology-based learning to require awareness and motivation so that students can learn independently. Thus, the learners become autonomous because they can think independently. It is one form of the manifestation of Merdeka Belajar. In this sense, teachers play a significant role so that students can reflect on the process and outcomes of learning (Sueb et al., 2020). Teachers can see and develop the cognitive skill and the uniqueness of every student, such as literacy and numeric skill. Teachers will focus on encouraging students to grow and develop optimally according to their cognitive skills. In literacy, teachers may emphasize training to think logically and critically to abstract the intention and purpose of the learning material. The students' numeric skills are trained to find the basic concept of the formula of science. Each student's potential development is intended to apply the knowledge and skill in life later. Thus, they can resolve wider issues of everyday life in the future (Mustaghfiroh, 2020; Sudaryanto, Widayati, & Amalia, 2020; Yusuf, Arfiansyah, & Sunan Ampel Surabaya, 2021).

The difficulties and obstacles of implementing the Merdeka Belajar program lie in: a) the lack of human resources or educators; b) the lack of preparation among educational institutions; c) the lack of preparation of government. The main actor for the success of Merdeka Belajar in the learning process is the teacher. The teachers have not conceptually understood the essence, intention, and purpose of the program. Therefore, they are not independent yet. The questionnaire admits that they did not have experience being an independent teacher who can create the learning process that provides freedom for learners. The recognition of the teachers affirms the old sayings of Latin, which reads: "*Nemo dat quod non habet*". Nobody can give what he does not have. It means that Merdeka Belajar requires independent teachers, those who have gained freedom, freedom to think, create, innovate, master pedagogical science, and possess skills in teaching. It requires courage and confidence to do something new as a breakthrough to create a change and attract students in the learning process.

During the pandemic of Covid-19 in March 2020, the government issued a policy to grant teachers a space to simplify the curriculum independently and not to impose all of the materials because the situation is not normal (Circular Letter of the Ministry of Education, No 4/2020 on the Implementation of Education Policy). In this situation, the teachers feel confused, worried about the way of putting it into practice. As a result, the teachers remain oriented on the material completeness by teaching the whole materials in the curriculum and giving many tasks. The teachers recognize it as the respondents of this research, which is in line with the previous study, which reported that online learning causes stress (Churiyah et al., 2020). In this context, to establish and realize Merdeka Belajar, the role of a teacher mover is needed. A teacher mover becomes the role model, the actual evidence that will provide a direct experience on becoming an independent teacher who can design and create a separate learning process. A teacher mover provides direct training, experience sharing, and mentoring to fellow teachers and gives a concrete example of the implementation of Merdeka Belajar. Thus, there found no gap between the world of ideals and the reality, between the theoretical and the practical world.

The second factor that did not support Merdeka Belajar is the lack of preparation of educational institutions. School as a task force for teachers does not entirely create the atmosphere of freedom to learn. Ideally, there are teacher movers in every school unit who play role models in reaching Merdeka Belajar. However, few teacher movers are provided that most schools do not yet have a teacher mover. It is revealed in the questionnaire and interview as explained in the previous section. The lack of preparation of the schools in achieving independent learning can also be seen in the difficulties encountered in online learning. Some of these are the school's low internet network, so troubles commonly occur during online teaching through Zoom. In addition, the limitations of the teacher lie in the technology and curriculum mastery, and freedom to learn is not yet available, and the learning textbook is not designed in the perspective of Merdeka Belajar in online learning.

Online learning, in addition to being an obligation due to the pandemic, is also something inevitable. Considering the rapid development of information and communication technology in all aspects of human life, including education, Merdeka Belajar aspires to grant freedom to think, create, and innovate in the learning process designed according to the students' profile. The current students in primary education are Z and Alpha generations, called "digital natives." It implies that a digital-based learning process must prepare the school. The teachers are skilled in technology, and e-books are

available as a source of learning. However, the teachers realize it through the answers to the questionnaire because they lack technology skills, so the learning process is monotonous and boring to the students.

The other constraint of Merdeka Belajar's implementation lies in the government's lack of preparation. There found no clear structure from the government to the school regarding the parties in charge of enforcing the program. The task forces specifically assigned to implement the program in detail, including the formation and distribution process of the teacher movers, have not been well organized. As a result, coordination and communication are not well built, whereas the success of a policy implementation depends on good coordination, a clear structure, and professional human resources (Chasanah et al., 2017; Goggin, 1990; Quade, 1984). This situation reflects three points. The first, Merdeka Belajar, is a government revolutionary action to create fundamental changes in the world of education in Indonesia. Education has lost the spirit, which is supposed to develop autonomous, mature, independent, and free to both teachers and learners. As the Father of Indonesian Education has taught it, Ki Hajar Dewantara, independence must be conditioned, trained, created within the students' way of thinking because they can think to find the knowledge, not reliant on other people (Abidah et al., 2020). Therefore, Ki Hajar Dewantara defines education as the power to improve ethical, intellectual, and physical harmony with the environment and social life (Huda, 2016). Therefore, students will be autonomous individuals in the sense of having self-reliance.

Merdeka Belajar is the proper response to the changes and needs of technology-based learning in the 21st century. It means that the learning process is based on the progress of information and communication technologies. The excellent, high-quality, and competitive education that can generate global skills (critical thinking-problem solving, creative-innovative, collaborative, and communicative) will be achieved based on technology. The rapid changes in the disruption era, the revolution of industry 4.0 and society 5.0, require human resources with knowledge and skills. Therefore, education in Indonesia should be transformed along with the context of the current Era.

The third, the pandemic of Covid-19, accelerates the implementation of Merdeka Belajar. The sudden change of face-to-face learning in the classroom to online learning forces teachers to be creative and innovative in teaching. In addition, the application of technology in education as the characteristic of the 21st century learning is actualised despite all the existing shortcomings. In this sense, the ideals of Merdeka Belajar, which envisions creating self-reliance within students, are aligned with the characteristics of 21st-century technology-based learning. This learning requires self-reliance to achieve educational success. Merdeka Belajar and online learning are in the same position. The students' independence in learning, thinking, creating, and making innovation, collaboration, and communication will be achieved if the pattern of the learning process changes from teacher-centered to student-centered learning. In this context, the application of Merdeka Belajar is the right action. The current focus of the government is necessary for Merdeka Belajar to be successfully implemented at schools.

The implementation of Merdeka Belajar requires serious effort, government support, and all elements of society. The government's concrete action is holding socialization and training that the teachers are skilled in technology, pedagogy (Rahayu & Firmansyah, 2019) to bring the spirit of Merdeka Belajar. Therefore, the government needs to actualize the teacher movers of Merdeka Belajar. The teacher movers are supposed to be well-spread to every school, so they become role models and innovators in the implementation of Merdeka Belajar. They play a significant role in improving the capacity of teachers (Prawitasari & Suharto, 2020). The success of Merdeka Belajar lies in the collaboration of all parties. The government could not struggle alone. Finally, the improvement of the infrastructure of online education, the quality and skills of educators, and cooperation between the government and all elements of society are the preconditions for the successful implementation of Merdeka Belajar.

## **6. Conclusion**

Merdeka Belajar has to be accepted and understood by primary education teachers at the theoretical and conceptual levels. The main concern is the actualization of collaboration among the government and all elements of society to implement the program that the intention and purpose of the program are achieved. The pandemic of Covid-19 affects the educational system, in addition to the social structure. Sudden changes in the learning process from face-to-face in the classroom to online

education accelerate the implementation process of Merdeka Belajar. It becomes an opportunity and challenge for teachers to be innovative and creative, so the learning process can still run well. Therefore, they perceive that Merdeka Belajar is the solution to create a revolutionary change in Indonesia's world, which has been considered to have lost its soul. The program of Merdeka Belajar is the government effort and strategy to restore the spirit of education that frees learners, as Ki Hajar Dewantara once exemplified. Merdeka Belajar responds to the changes and needs of the 21st century, which requires intellectually intelligent and globally skilled human resources.

The concept of Merdeka Belajar in the online learning during Covid-19 in the current study allows the comprehension of the essence of the program. The right understanding of the shift of the conceptual learning process generates a more substantial implication about education problems, which lies in the lack of human resources (educators), the lack of preparation among educational institutions, and the infrastructure for online learning. Technology has encouraged self-reliance and freedom for students in the learning process. Students should no longer be passive, waiting for the transfer of knowledge from the teachers. It allows students to be free and independent to look for information about science from other sources. The teacher plays as a driving force, guide, motivator, and reflector to learn independently. In addition to obtaining a broader understanding of the current condition of education, this study also allows the formulation of an action plan that can drive the transformation process of Merdeka Belajar in education.

However, it is limited in a sample, which is relatively small, so comparative analysis could not possibly be held. Therefore, two concerns need further studies: the addition of a category of school and the number of the informants involved. A comprehensive analysis should only be possible with a comparison variable. Thus, this paper suggests the need for a survey that accommodates diverse types of school and involves not only the school personnels but also the community leaders and education figures, so a complete and in-depth portrait about the experience of the application of Merdeka Belajar in the online learning during the pandemic can be obtained. At the same time, the more appropriate policy, which is on target, can be formulated.

## 7. Author Contribution

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. The authors conceived and designed the research protocols, performed the data collections, analyzed the data, authored or reviewed drafts of the paper, and approved the final draft.

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