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PERCEPTION OF TEACHERS REGARDING THE CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN GMG VILLAGE CENTRAL JAVA

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ABSTRACT

Thinking ability is one of the core competencies in elementary school education, however, it has been defined differently by experts and educational practitioners. The scope of thinking ability is also quite broad. Currently, there is not much research regarding teachers' perceptions of thinking abilities, especially at the elementary school level in rural areas. This research aims to obtain an overview of the perceptions of elementary school teachers in rural areas regarding students' thinking abilities. The research was conducted using qualitative methods, with in-depth interviews and observation as data collection techniques. The participants were two elementary school teachers in GMG Village, Central Java. The first is the homeroom teacher for the third graders (female, aged 56 years) and the second is the homeroom teacher for the fourth graders (female, aged 26 years). The results of the research show that teachers perceive a student's thinking ability as the student's ability to grasp lesson material and participate in all in-class activities. Teachers stated that they could differentiate between students who had poor and good thinking abilities. The 4th graders' homeroom teacher considers reading, writing, and calculating skills as part of thinking abilities, which must be achieved in the previous grade. As an additional finding, the two teachers stated that the KTSP Curriculum was much better than the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum in achieving the expected competencies from students, including in thinking. The research results can serve as a reference for policy making.

Keywords: *elementary school, teacher, thinking, village, curriculum*

1. PREFACE

Critical thinking skills are an aspect that every individual needs to possess to face the challenges and ongoing developments of the times. Critical thinking is an important factor required for individuals to lead their daily lives. Individuals with high levels of critical thinking skills will find it easier to understand and respond to complex situations. High-level critical thinking skills also assist individuals in evaluating information, making effective plans, and considering the consequences of their choices.

Thinking abilities encompass various types of knowledge (Jyotika, 2023). Bruner (1964) states that there are three stages of developmental thinking abilities: enactive, iconic, and symbolic. Enactive refers to motor responses stored in memory, iconic refers to events related to visual images, and symbolic refers to word forms, mathematical symbols, or other symbols. Beyer

(1984) asserts that thinking ability is a process consisting of at least three components: firstly, it consists of the sequence of procedures that individuals perform to make skills operational; secondly, it consists of knowledge about the rules that govern and guide individuals; and thirdly, it consists of knowledge about the instructions that must be learned in using these rules. Thinking ability is a mental activity commonly carried out in problem-solving, decision-making, asking questions, planning, evaluating ideas, organizing information, and creating objects (Moseley et al., 2005). However, thinking abilities in Indonesia are still relatively low, which is a major concern for experts, as this has the potential to affect various aspects of society (Tiatri & Tji Beng, 2015).

One method that can support the development of individual thinking abilities is through education. Law Number 20 of 2003 Article 3 explains that National education functions to develop abilities and shape the character and civilization of the nation in order to enlighten the nation's life, aiming for the development of the potential of learners to become human beings who have faith and piety to the One Almighty God, of noble character, are healthy, knowledgeable, competent, creative, independent, and become democratic and responsible citizens. In general, education is an activity that takes place in various places to develop knowledge, understanding, appreciation, concern, and behavior (Chazan, 2022). The formal education system in Indonesia starts from the primary level, followed by junior high school, senior high school, with the most basic level being primary school.

Primary school (SD) is the most basic level of education in the formal education system in Indonesia and lasts for 6 years. The aim of education in primary school is to transition students from the family environment and childhood towards compulsory, structured, and systematically organized education (Hubalovsky et al., 2019). Primary school plays a crucial role in building character and laying the foundation for children to face higher levels of education. At the primary school level, children will begin to learn about the most important basic skills, namely literacy (reading, writing, and arithmetic).

Literacy skills are the initial stage where children will gradually be introduced to letters and numbers. These skills play a crucial role in forming a strong foundation for children in the subsequent learning process. Literacy skills become the main focus in primary education because they are the foundation that can help children in future learning processes (Syafriza et al., 2023). Azzahra et al. (2021) state that reading, writing, and arithmetic are activities that are very important in life and throughout the learning process because this process relies on these abilities.

Reading ability is one of the essential basic skills for individuals in the present and future (Retaminingrum et al., 2019). Reading ability can help children understand texts and information efficiently. Reading also serves as a means for children to develop interactive and integrated skills (Adawiyah et al., 2020). Reading comprehension is the result of a complex and interactive process that connects the reader's critical thinking, prior knowledge, and deduction (Aloqaili, 2012). Developing students' reading and writing abilities requires a gradual introduction to challenging reading materials and writing tasks (Wardani et al., 2020).

Writing ability is an individual's skill in composing and conveying ideas, thoughts, or information in writing clearly, coherently, and effectively. Writing ability can help children express and communicate their ideas or thoughts systematically. According to Wardani et al. (2020), writing ability is one of the language skills that individuals need to hone in order to develop.

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Numeracy skills refer to the ability to acquire, apply, and understand mathematical information (Lechner et al., 2021). According to the research by Kenedi et al. (2019), mathematics education in primary schools can prepare students with logical, analytical, systematic, critical thinking skills, as well as the ability to collaborate with others. These skills are crucial for solving problems in daily life and preparing students to face future challenges, both in academic and professional environments. Mathematics is a fundamental learning area essential for developing systematic thinking within formal education goals (Duque de Blas et al., 2021).

Based on the above description, it can be concluded that each aspect of ability is crucial to develop in children starting from primary school. Research conducted by Wu and Su (2021) states that literacy, writing, and numeracy skills are fundamental skills that every individual needs to possess. Tiatri and Jap (2015) suggest that although training in thinking skills can enhance verbal reasoning, understanding literacy skills remains essential as the foundation for higher-order thinking development. Therefore, the role of teachers is crucial as facilitators who develop these skills to enhance children's thinking abilities in school (Tiatri et al., 2023).

O'reilly et al. (2022) found that learning methods involving collaborative approaches and interactions between teachers and students in the classroom successfully enhance children's development. Development through this method can be implemented using familiar objects well-known to the child. Additionally, teachers also need to introduce different and varied learning styles (Bezanilla et al., 2019). Therefore, cooperation between teachers and children is crucial in creating engaging learning experiences and developing children's thinking abilities. The assessment of the success of developing thinking abilities in Indonesia can be seen through the evaluation of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA serves as one of the determinants of the success of thinking skills development because one of PISA's assessment focuses is on reading skills (Tiatri et al., 2021).

PISA is a study conducted every three years to measure students' knowledge and skills in three main areas: reading, science, and mathematics (Hopfenbeck et al., 2018). In the PISA 2022 assessment, Indonesia obtained scores of 366 in mathematics, 383 in science, and 359 in reading. Indonesia ranked 69th out of 81 countries. These results indicate that the level of children's thinking abilities is still relatively low. Therefore, primary schools play a crucial role in developing children's thinking skills, especially in the literacy aspect.
Based on the above description, researchers acknowledge the importance of developing thinking skills in children from the primary school level. According to Usra et al. (2023), thinking skills are one of the abilities that students must possess because they are part of the learning process. Therefore, this research was conducted to understand teachers' perceptions of the thinking abilities of primary school students in GMG Village, Central Java. The aim of this study is to determine how teachers perceive the thinking abilities of primary school students in GMG Village, Central Java.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research was conducted in January 2024 using a qualitative method, which involved the use of non-probability sampling as the sample selection approach. In this study, the selected sampling technique was purposive sampling, specifically used to observe and delve into phenomena and knowledge related to the researched topic. The research subjects consisted of 2 teachers from SDN A Gumeng. The first participant was Mrs. L, a 56-year-old 3rd-grade teacher. The second participant was Mrs. W, a 26-year-old 4th-grade teacher. Involving both participants was expected to provide in-depth insights into the researched topic and allow for a more

comprehensive understanding of the observed phenomena in the educational context of that environment.

Data collection in this study was conducted using semi-structured interviews. As suggested by DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), Semi-structured interviews require relational focus and practice in interview skills. Relational focus emphasizes the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. To obtain quality data, interviews are not recommended to be conducted using a transactional question-answer approach; instead, they should be interactive and repetitive. Interview skills can be honed through continuous practice, allowing the interviewer to feel comfortable and accustomed during the interview process. Documentation in the form of photos during the interview sessions at SDN A Gumeng, Central Java, is attached in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

There are two main questions in this interview session.
a. What do you think about the thinking skills of the third graders you currently teach?
b. How well do you identify, understand, apply and evaluate children's thinking skills? To what extent do you recognize this?

These questions serve as the main questions that we can develop according to the participants' answers.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the interviews with both teachers, the findings revealed that some students in both third and fourth grades still have inadequate grasp of the material. The ability of third-grade students to comprehend the material is still lacking; out of 17 students, 2 students are still unable to grasp the material well. They are considered not capable yet because they still need several repetitions of explanations to understand the material. This was expressed by Mrs. L, as follows:

"...Usually, if explained once or twice, those with higher IQ can immediately grasp it. But for those with lower IQ, even after being explained several times, they still can't grasp it, Ma'am... There are two kids, Ma'am... They’re lagging behind."

In the fourth grade, which consists of 12 students, there is one student who has difficulty following the learning activities because they still do not possess letter recognition. According to Mrs. W, fourth-grade students no longer learn about letter recognition, reading, or writing. As expressed by Mrs. W when asked about literacy skills:

"...Indeed, it's not the time anymore to learn letter recognition, but they still can't. For example, today I target that you can learn 5 letters, but the next day they can't anymore. Then from A to Z slowly, but the next day I try from A to Z slowly again. They can recognize the letters when lined up, like this is A, this is C, but when I mix them up, they can't anymore... In fourth grade, it's not the time anymore to learn reading, writing, or letter recognition, but because this child is different from the others, they can't even recognize letters yet. It's difficult. I've tried different methods for letter recognition, but they can't focus. We, as upper-grade teachers, don't focus on reading, writing, or letter recognition anymore. So, they always go home last because they can't understand, their thinking ability is lacking, you could say."

According to Piaget's theory, children's cognitive development progresses through four stages: sensorimotor (0-2 years), preoperational (2-7 years), concrete operational (7-11 years), and formal operational (11 years and older). In the sensorimotor stage, infants organize activities with sensory and motor skills. The preoperational stage is characterized by the ability to use symbols but not yet capable of logical thinking. The concrete operational stage allows

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problem-solving with logic but without imaginative thinking. The formal operational stage enables abstract thinking and consideration of possibilities (Papalia & Martorell, 2021).

When children are able to solve problems, there are two types of thinking: reproductive thinking and productive thinking (Eysenck & Keane, 2020). Reproductive thinking involves systematically reusing previous experiences, for example, in mathematics, and is also required for well-defined problems. Productive thinking involves restructuring new problems, which is primarily necessary when dealing with poorly defined problems.

The issues faced by the students as described by Mrs. L and Mrs. W are related to the hindered cognitive development of the children. According to Piaget, the cognitive development of each individual varies and follows predetermined stages in general. This is evident from the differences in cognitive abilities among students in understanding and grasping learning materials.

One of the factors causing the hindered ability of students to grasp the material is the lack of tools during the implementation of Distance Learning (PJJ). The limitations in tools make it difficult for students to follow the online learning provided by teachers. Students may only be able to study at night because they have to wait for their parents to come home first. This statement was conveyed by Mrs. W, as follows:

"... But compared to my previous class, the current fifth grade is different. Maybe it's because last time, due to Corona for 2 years, right, Ma'am, they didn't attend school. Schooling was only online, and parents didn't have online facilities. Not all children have them, and even if they do, it belongs to their parents, right? Parents work from home, so even if we give assignments via YouTube, they can only open them at night. Out of 12 students, only 3 (don't have a smartphone), the other 9 have them, but they belong to the parents, and they still work, hehehe."

The statement is in line with the research conducted by Saetban (2021), which states that there are two factors contributing to the decline in children's learning achievement: internal and external factors. Internal factors include low interest in reading, never asking questions during distance learning, and studying for only a short period. Furthermore, external factors such as students feeling uncomfortable studying at home due to an unconducive environment also play a role.

Through the interviews, both teachers (Mrs. L and Mrs. W) stated that they prefer the use of KTSP (School-Based Curriculum) compared to Kurtilas (2013 Curriculum) and the Merdeka Curriculum. KTSP is considered to make children more focused in learning compared to Kurtilas, which transforms all subjects into thematic forms. When comparing KTSP with the Merdeka Curriculum, the Merdeka Curriculum has drawbacks due to administrative demands, resulting in reduced time with students. The advantage of the Merdeka Curriculum is the ease of creating Lesson Plans (RPP) because it can utilize the ATM system (Observe, Imitate, Modify), but it needs to be adjusted to the school's conditions. As expressed by Mrs. W when discussing the curriculum:

"Actually, in my opinion, KTSP was better, like that... It was chaotic, Ma'am, because all subjects became thematic. With KTSP, each subject was separate, so students could focus more on learning. Now, in the Merdeka Curriculum, it's actually also separate, each subject is separate too, but KTSP is still better, in my opinion... The downside of the Merdeka Curriculum is that teachers' time is consumed by administrative tasks, Ma'am... It's reduced for students, you know... But the good thing about the KEMDIKBUD program is the PMM, because everything,

like if we want to find teaching modules, everything is there... We use the ATM system, so we observe, imitate, but it needs to be modified according to each school's conditions. If we just take everything without modification, it might not fit our school's conditions... That's the good thing about the Merdeka Curriculum. So, in the past, we had to create our own Lesson Plans, but in the Merdeka Curriculum, we can take them, but we have to use the ATM method to take them, modify them, and then adjust them, like that."

Officially, KTSP was established in 2006. According to Misbah et al. (2020), KTSP emphasizes the principle of autonomy given to schools to develop curricula according to their needs and characteristics. KTSP provides a foundation for each school to design its own curriculum but must still adhere to national guidelines set by the Ministry of Education and Culture. This curriculum not only serves as a representation of Indonesia's educational vision but also as an instrument to guide the achievement of core competencies that are the focus of the learning process. The KTSP guidelines present a list of competencies that must be mastered by every student during their education.

Unlike KTSP, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture implements Kurtilas by providing several types of standards. These standards include content standards, process standards, and assessment standards. These standards are outlined in the Minister of National Education Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia No. 16 of 2007 or the Minister of National Education Regulation. The standards contain descriptions of what knowledge needs to be taught, how to teach it, and also how to assess students' abilities (Winarti, 2018).

In 2021, the Ministry of Education and Culture replaced Kurtilas with the Merdeka Curriculum. The Merdeka Curriculum facilitates teachers with the necessary tools to encourage the growth of reading, mathematics, and character development skills among students (Rohmah et al., 2024). This curriculum encourages teachers to customize education, freeing them to select specific textbook chapters or incorporate information from various classes to meet the needs of different learning students. Besides academics, the Merdeka Curriculum focuses on character development in line with the concept of Pancasila (Yoto et al., 2024).
Overall, it can be concluded that KTSP, Kurtilas, and the Merdeka Curriculum are efforts by the Ministry of Education and Culture to improve the quality of education in Indonesia. Although they have different approaches, all three emphasize the importance of designing curricula that are suitable for local needs and characteristics. Additionally, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes the importance of adhering to national standard guidelines to ensure that the developed curriculum remains in line with the standards set by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The ultimate goal of curriculum changes is to ensure that students are able to develop, be competent, and be ready to face increasingly complex future demands.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on interviews and observations with two elementary school teachers, the researcher successfully uncovered that the students' ability in grades 3 and 4 to grasp the material is still inadequate. The teachers' observations indicate that students with different IQ levels show varying abilities in grasping the material. This certainly can affect the learning process in the classroom.
Furthermore, it was found that some students in grade 4 have not fully mastered basic literacy and numeracy skills (calistung) despite these skills being fundamental necessities. This indicates the need for further efforts to strengthen these basic skills before students progress to higher grades.

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Furthermore, in this study, both elementary school teachers stated that they share the same understanding of how they assess their students' thinking skills. They do so by observing students' ability to comprehend and recall material from a lesson, which serves as a way for teachers to evaluate students' thinking abilities. Additionally, the teachers also have the ability to distinguish between students who demonstrate strong thinking skills and those who demonstrate weaker ones.

This study also revealed the existence of factors that hinder or serve as obstacles for students in grasping the material, namely the lack of facilities or tools during distance learning (PJJ), as expressed by the grade 4 teacher. This factor provides insight into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the learning process, especially for students who do not have access to adequate facilities or tools for online learning.

The teachers expressed a preference for the KTSP curriculum over the 2013 curriculum and the Merdeka curriculum. However, the Merdeka curriculum allows for freedom in lesson plan development, although it also raises some administrative challenges. This indicates the need for adjustment and refinement in the implementation of newer curricula.

A suggestion would be to conduct further research to identify teaching strategies that can enhance the understanding and mastery of materials for students in grades 3 and 4, particularly in terms of critical thinking and basic literacy skills.

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