

## Historical Themes in Primary Education within the Merdeka Curriculum: Indonesian and Global Perspectives

\*<sup>1</sup>Rahmi Seri Hanida, <sup>2</sup>Risdam Habibi Hasibuan

\*<sup>a</sup>STAIN Mandailing Natal, Indonesia;

<sup>b</sup> Universitas Samudera, Indonesia;

<sup>1</sup>[rahmiserihanida@stain-madina.ac.id](mailto:rahmiserihanida@stain-madina.ac.id); <sup>2</sup>[risdamhabibihisibuan@unsam.ac.id](mailto:risdamhabibihisibuan@unsam.ac.id)

\*Correspondent Author: [rahmiserihanida@stain-madina.ac.id](mailto:rahmiserihanida@stain-madina.ac.id)

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of historical themes in elementary school IPAS (Natural and Social Sciences) textbooks within the Merdeka Curriculum, with a particular focus on concepts and content structures related to social studies. Using a qualitative content analysis approach supported by a checklist technique, the research systematically evaluates how historical materials are organized and presented across Grades 3 to 6. The findings indicate that history learning is introduced progressively, beginning with local traditions, cultural diversity, and local wisdom, and advancing toward national history and global interactions. This structure reflects an effort to develop students' understanding of identity from the personal to the global level. However, several challenges remain, including limited depth of historical content, the dominance of hero-centered narratives, insufficient attention to causality and multiple perspectives, and the persistence of colonial biases. Comparative insights from international studies highlight the importance of balancing chronological and thematic approaches, integrating humanitarian values, promoting gender inclusivity, adopting decolonial perspectives, and utilizing innovative pedagogies such as digital technology. Overall, the study suggests that while the Merdeka Curriculum provides a strong foundation for contextual and student-centered history learning, further enrichment is needed to foster critical, inclusive, and reflective historical understanding among elementary student.

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### Introduction

Studies on history education at the elementary school level are indeed less prominent than those at the secondary level. Nevertheless, history learning in elementary schools plays a strategic role in shaping national identity, character, and children's critical thinking skills from an early age. At the primary education stage, history functions not merely as a means of introducing the past, but also as a medium for internalizing humanitarian values, tolerance, and cultural diversity. Within the framework of the

*Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum), history is integrated into the Natural and Social Sciences subject (*Ilmu Pengetahuan Alam dan Sosial / IPAS*) through a contextual, project-based, and student-centered approach. This integration signifies a paradigm shift from rote memorization of chronological events toward a multiperspective understanding that fosters historical consciousness and reflective thinking skills.

The *Kurikulum Merdeka* introduces historical themes progressively, ranging from local traditional narratives (Grade 3), cultural diversity and local wisdom (Grade 4), Indonesia's strategic position in maritime trade routes (Grade 5), to the national struggle and global interactions of Indonesia (Grade 6). Each theme is systematically structured to cultivate a gradual understanding of identity at the levels of the self, community, nation, and the wider world. However, the implementation of history learning in Indonesian elementary schools is not without challenges. These include limitations in textbook availability, a tendency toward the glorification of historical figures, colonial narrative bias, and a lack of pedagogical innovation.

International studies indicate that similar challenges are encountered in many countries. Research conducted in Ghana, Slovakia, Italy, Spain, various African countries, Finland, and China reveals diverse approaches and innovations in history education that may serve as valuable references. These include the importance of balancing chronological and thematic approaches, sensitivity to humanitarian issues, inclusive gender representation, decolonial narratives, and the utilization of digital technologies such as Virtual Reality 1. Therefore, a comparative analysis between the history themes in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* and international studies is highly relevant for enriching history teaching strategies in Indonesian elementary schools.

## Method

This study examines the analysis of IPAS (*Ilmu Pengetahuan Alam dan Sosial*) textbooks for elementary schools within the *Merdeka Curriculum*. The focus is directed toward the concepts and content structures selected in social studies-related themes. The research employs a qualitative approach using content analysis, supported by a checklist technique to systematically identify and evaluate the presence, organization, and representation of key concepts within the textbooks (Tóthová & Rusek, 2021; Vojír & Rusek, 2019; Vydra & Kováčik, 2025).

## Results and Discussion

History education in elementary schools plays a fundamental role in shaping national identity, character, and children's critical thinking skills from an early age. Teaching history at the primary education level is particularly important because it equips students with the ability to understand the concept of time, recognize cause-and-effect relationships between events, comprehend significant historical events, and place them within an appropriate chronological framework (Latina & Kegel, 2024).

History learning in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* is integrated into a single subject, namely Natural and Social Sciences (*Ilmu Pengetahuan Alam dan Sosial*). The *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Indonesia emphasizes student-centered, contextual, and project-based education; therefore, history is no longer taught merely through chronological memorization, but rather as a means of value reflection and multiperspective understanding.

**Table 1. Overview of History Themes in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* Elementary School Teacher's Guide**

Grade	Curriculum Theme	Content Scope	Learning Objectives
3	Chapter 7 Stories from the Hometown	In this chapter, one of the content areas covered is the history of the emergence of traditions in Indonesia.	Describing historical events or stories related to traditions or cultural practices in the local area where one lives.
4	Chapter 7 Cultural Diversity and Local Wisdom	Exploring cultural diversity and local wisdom within the immediate environment—ranging from family, friends, and teachers to the broader provincial context. This material is linked to roles and responsibilities, enabling students to respond appropriately to conditions of difference and cultural diversity in their social environment.	The learning objective of this chapter is for students to be able to describe and explain cultural diversity and local wisdom within their regional context.
5	Chapter 1 Where is Indonesia?	It covers historical geography related to Indonesia's role as a global trade route, as well as the history and culture of Indonesia's maritime heritage.	Students are able to analyze the influence of Indonesia's geographical location on the lives of its people.
	Chapter 5 My historic region	In this chapter, students will study the history of various historical remains and cultural heritage found in their respective regions. This historical knowledge is then connected to present-day life. Social and historical concepts are further integrated with scientific concepts through a range of investigative activities aimed at obtaining data and scientific evidence. These findings serve as a foundation for students to identify connections between the past and contemporary life.	The learning objective of this chapter is for students to understand the history of their region through its historical remains and cultural heritage. By gaining knowledge of local history, students are expected to identify connections between their region's past and present-day life.
6	Chapter 2 The story of Indonesia	In this chapter, students will be introduced to the history of Indonesia, beginning with the arrival of European nations in the archipelago and continuing through the struggles of the Indonesian people against colonial rule to achieve independence. Through literacy activities and discussions, students are expected to develop an understanding of their national history. In addition, students are encouraged to organize information and retell the history of Indonesia using a timeline format. At the end of the learning process, students are expected to reflect on Indonesia's historical narratives in terms of key figures, periods, and chronological events. They are also expected to emulate the figures and the	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Understanding Indonesian history, including its key figures and periods, and connecting them to contemporary life contexts.</li> <li>2. Retelling the struggle of the Indonesian people against imperialism and their achievement of independence.</li> <li>3. Reflecting on the spirit of the national heroes and emulating their struggles through concrete</li> </ol>

	spirit of the national struggle for independence in their everyday lives.	actions in everyday life.
Chapter 4- Indonesia and global citizens	Indonesia and the Global Community; International Relations; Globalization; International Cooperation; International Organizations; the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage; and Strategies for Cultural Preservation.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explaining forms of interaction among countries as a result of globalization.</li> <li>2. Analyzing Indonesia's role in international cooperation in addressing global challenges.</li> <li>3. Understanding one's role in preserving Indonesian cultural heritage.</li> <li>4. Conducting a campaign on one of the studied topics, including responding to globalization, participating in global issues, or preserving Indonesia's cultural heritage.</li> </ol>

Source: *Teacher's guide book*

#### Grade III Teacher's Book

The history component in Grade 3 introduces students to the history of the emergence of traditions in Indonesia, with the aim of enabling them to recount historical stories or cultural traditions from their own regions. The *Natural and Social Sciences* teacher's guide, published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology through the Agency for Curriculum Standards, Assessment, and Educational Publishing, presents this historical material in Chapter 7, which is allocated six instructional hours.

The wide diversity of Indonesian cultures poses a challenge in presenting various examples of traditions across the archipelago along with their historical backgrounds. In the textbook, one cultural example is highlighted, namely the Meugang tradition of Acehese society, which is rich in meanings of togetherness and social solidarity (Fitri et al., 2022). To achieve the learning objectives, teachers and students should explore examples of traditions from at least each province in Indonesia.

History learning highlights the importance of combining chronological and thematic approaches in introducing cultural heritage. This is in line with the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes local narratives as entry points for learning history. Teachers need to develop local stories with national relevance in the form of dummy books by integrating chronological and thematic approaches, which can strengthen Indonesia's multicultural identity. Teaching methods and learning resources that combine these approaches are crucial in developing historical facts and meanings, as well as in enhancing students' historical understanding and critical thinking skills (Oppong et al., 2024).

#### Grade IV Teacher's Book

In Grade 4, the material on cultural diversity and local wisdom is no longer required to be taught from a strictly historical perspective, but rather from an anthropological one, by engaging students in exploring traditions within their own local context (Fitri et al.,

2023). This serves as a continuation of the Grade 3 material. Culture needs to be taught not merely as factual knowledge, but also as a set of values for living together; therefore, it is important for students to understand the local culture in which they live. This approach is not unique to Indonesia. Similar strategies have been widely applied in history education to incorporate content that is directly connected to students' lives. For example, in Slovakia, history curricula include Holocaust education to emphasize sensitivity to humanitarian issues and the values of tolerance (Hoftova, 2020).

#### Grade V Teacher's Book

In Grade 5, history content is presented only to a limited extent, mainly within the subtheme of historical geography. The material focuses on the history of Indonesia as a maritime nation, although it is relatively brief, as the primary emphasis of the Grade 5 theme is on Indonesia's geographical location (Ghaniaem et al., 2023). The historical global trade routes involving Indonesia are presented because they are closely related to Indonesia's highly strategic geographical location. This indicates that the teaching of historical causality has already been introduced at this level. It is also important to teach that Indonesia's role as an actor in world trade history was not solely a result of decolonization, but was fundamentally shaped by its geographical position. Textual narratives in history textbooks are highly important and powerful in giving meaning to historical stories (Iyer, 2025).

#### Grade VI Teacher's Book

While history content in Grades 3 to 5 is presented only as subtopics, in Grade 6 history is taught in a full chapter dedicated entirely to historical material. At this level, students are introduced to the history of Indonesia, beginning with the arrival of European nations in the archipelago and continuing through the struggles of the Indonesian people against colonial powers to achieve independence. Through literacy activities and discussions, students are expected to develop an understanding of their national history. In addition, students are encouraged to organize information and retell Indonesian history in the form of a timeline. At the end of the learning process, students are expected to reflect on Indonesia's historical narratives in terms of key figures, historical periods, and chronological events. Students are also encouraged to emulate the figures and the spirit of the national struggle for independence in their everyday lives (Amalia et al., 2021).

In the topic on the arrival of Western nations, the material is presented chronologically and explains the reasons behind Western entry into Indonesia. This is attributed not only to external factors related to oceanic exploration, but also to the natural resources of the archipelago.

The second topic at this level addresses Indonesian resistance to colonialism, beginning with the narrative that Indonesia was colonized for 350 years. However, within the recommended reading for teachers, there is no comprehensive explanation of why the period is defined as 350 years. Recent scholarly findings in Indonesian colonial history should therefore be taken into consideration. Historical facts do not need to be concealed; instead, multiple perspectives should be presented for comparison in order to foster students' critical thinking skills. An emphasis on developing critical thinking through history education has already been implemented in several countries, such as Spain (Zhong et al., 2025).

In history learning, the question of "*why*" is essential. However, in the second topic, the stated learning objectives appear to focus mainly on foreign nations that entered Indonesia and the historical figures associated with them. Students are expected to identify and retell the arrival of Western powers in Indonesia, rather than critically examining the underlying causes and consequences of these events.

The subsequent topic discusses regional resistance across Indonesia against foreign colonial powers, both Western and Japanese. In this section, the emphasis is placed primarily on heroic figures, presented through a gallery or album of national heroes. While highlighting heroes in history education is not inherently problematic, it is increasingly important to also emphasize collective and communal struggles based on a shared desire for unity. Such an approach can help foster historical consciousness that goes beyond admiration for individual figures alone. The dilemma of hero-centered narratives is not unique to Indonesia; it represents a global issue in history education.

The final topic in this chapter addresses Indonesian independence, where the material again centers on a gallery of proclamation figures. In general, the main learning demand in this topic is for students to emulate the proclamation figures and apply their spirit of struggle in everyday life. However, from a periodization perspective, an important element is missing: the global context of World War II, which influenced Japan's instability in Indonesia and created greater opportunities for Indonesian independence, is not adequately presented.

Regarding Chapter 4 at this grade level, the material is not examined historically when viewed from the stated learning objectives in the table. The subtopic on Indonesian cultural heritage discusses tangible and intangible cultural heritage, yet it requires further elaboration on how these cultural legacies were created and developed. In the teacher's guidebook, only the names of selected tangible and intangible cultural heritage items are presented, representing just a fraction of Indonesia's vast cultural heritage. Therefore, the development of ethnographic modules on cultural heritage and its historical background from each region is also necessary. Such an approach would strengthen local culture at the elementary school level and support students' understanding of local identity.

### Global Perspectives

History education in elementary schools plays a fundamental role in shaping national identity, character, and children's critical thinking skills from an early age. Unlike mathematics or chemistry, history has played a key role in building and maintaining national unity (Khawaja & Puustinen, 2022). Nevertheless, history education at the elementary school level is essentially intended to foster students' interest and motivation in learning history, while also providing a realistic understanding of the inherent limitations of historical knowledge (Latina & Kegel, 2024).

The *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Indonesia emphasizes student-centered, contextual, and project-based education; therefore, history is no longer taught merely through chronological memorization, but rather as a medium for value reflection and multiperspective understanding. International studies indicate that history teaching in various countries faces similar challenges, particularly in balancing national narratives, cultural diversity, sensitive issues, and pedagogical innovation. The eight articles analyzed provide a comprehensive picture of emerging directions in history education that can enrich the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Indonesia.

A study conducted in Slovakia on the representation of heroes shows that historical figures are often positioned as symbols of the ideal citizen in accordance with the ideology of the ruling regime (Otčenášová, 2020). This highlights that the use of heroic figures in Indonesia, such as Diponegoro or Kartini, should not be limited to glorification, but should instead serve as material for critical discussion on struggle, diversity, and humanitarian values. In this way, students can view heroes as complex human beings relevant for moral reflection, rather than as rigid myths.

From the United States, Fitzgerald highlights the importance of constructing causality in history textbooks to help students understand cause-and-effect relationships in

past events (C. Fitzgerald, 2019). This is relevant to the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which promotes inquiry-based learning by encouraging students to ask “why” and “how” events occurred. Through thematic projects, teachers can integrate textbooks with simple primary sources, such as photographs, local archives, or oral narratives, enabling students to understand that history is not merely a record of events but the result of analyzing complex cause-and-effect relationships. In this way, history becomes a medium for developing critical and analytical thinking skills from an early age.

An analysis of Ghana’s history curriculum shows that a combined chronological and thematic approach is effective in balancing factual sequences of events with relevant overarching themes (Oppong et al., 2024, 2024; Oppong & Essiaw, 2024). This approach aligns with the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes thematic-integrative learning at the elementary school level, allowing history to be connected with themes such as diversity, mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), and the environment. This makes history more accessible to children because it is directly linked to their everyday lives. In addition, research from Italy on the importance of pedagogical manuals and teacher training underscores that the quality of history education in elementary schools is highly dependent on teacher preparedness. In the Indonesian context, the *Kurikulum Merdeka* provides teachers with greater flexibility, but it also demands a high level of creativity and professional competence. Therefore, strengthening teachers’ capacity through teaching modules, professional development programs, and learning communities is a key factor in the successful implementation of this curriculum.

Studies from Spain on the representation of women in history curricula reveal the persistent strength of androcentric bias that marginalizes the contributions of female figures (Castrillo et al., 2024). This provides an important lesson for Indonesia to ensure that history education in elementary schools is more gender-inclusive by presenting female figures as an integral part of national history rather than merely as supplementary characters. Another study from Spain on identity and historical commemoration highlights the dangers of dominant identity bias in history education practices (Trujillo Yáñez, 2024). In the Indonesian context, the commemoration of national holidays such as Independence Day should be approached critically rather than treated merely as ceremonial events, by engaging students in local history research projects that foster deep reflection and multicultural understanding.

Studies in South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe reveal that despite efforts toward decolonization, history textbooks remain heavily laden with Western colonial narratives (Hennessey, 2024, 2024; Iyer, 2025). This aligns with Indonesia’s experience of prolonged colonialism. The *Kurikulum Merdeka* promotes a decolonial perspective by emphasizing popular resistance, nationalism, and sovereignty. Elementary school teachers can utilize P5 projects with themes such as “Voices of Independence” or “Local Wisdom” to explore the stories of struggles in their respective regions. In this way, students do not merely remember the suffering caused by colonialism but also appreciate the values of struggle, self-reliance, and national identity. This approach is crucial for fostering a critical and emancipatory historical consciousness among young generations.

A study of Finnish schools shows that teachers tend to focus exclusively on official government-provided textbooks and perceive it as unrealistic to use learning resources beyond the prescribed textbooks (Khawaja & Puustinen, 2022). In the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, teachers are granted the flexibility to utilize various additional resources, including primary historical sources such as historical artifacts. However, further research is needed to examine the realities in the field, particularly in comparing the implementation of the teacher’s guidelines within the *Kurikulum Merdeka* with actual classroom practices.

Finally, a study in China on the use of Virtual Reality (VR) in history education demonstrates positive outcomes in enhancing students' motivation, engagement, and learning achievement (Zhong et al., 2025). Although VR infrastructure is not yet evenly distributed across Indonesia, this spirit of innovation aligns with the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes experiential and technology-based learning. Teachers can make use of virtual museum tours, interactive mapping applications, or documentary films to create immersive and meaningful historical experiences for students. In this way, history becomes dynamic, contextual, and responsive to the learning styles of 21st-century children.

International studies indicate that history teaching in various countries faces similar challenges, particularly in balancing national narratives, cultural diversity, sensitive issues, and pedagogical innovation. (Araújo & Rodrigues, 2018; C. Fitzgerald, 2019; Caocci, n.d.; Castrillo et al., 2024; Gemedzhi et al., 2022; Hennessey, 2024; Iyer, 2025; Khawaja & Puustinen, 2022; Latina & Kegel, 2024; López-Fernández et al., 2023; Mård, 2021; Oppong et al., 2024; Otčenášová, 2020; Toro-Pérez & Parra Monserrat, 2022; Trujillo Yáñez, 2024; Villena Taranilla et al., 2022; Zhong et al., 2025).

Overall, these eight international studies reveal four common threads that are relevant to the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Indonesian elementary schools: first, the importance of humanitarian values and tolerance in history education; second, the development of critical thinking skills through an understanding of causality; third, the inclusivity of historical narratives free from gender and colonial bias; and fourth, pedagogical innovation through technology and project-based approaches. If implemented consistently, history education in Indonesian elementary schools within the framework of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* can function not only to introduce the past, but also to shape a generation that is critical, tolerant, inclusive, and prepared to face global challenges with a strong national identity.

## Conclusion

An analysis of the historical themes in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* for elementary schools and the eight international studies reveals several important common threads. First, history education needs to instill humanitarian values, tolerance, and respect for diversity, as reflected in studies from Slovakia and Spain that emphasize sensitivity to controversial issues and gender inclusivity. Second, history teaching should develop critical thinking skills, particularly an understanding of causality, in line with Fitzgerald's findings in the United States and the chronological-thematic approach practiced in Ghana. Third, historical narratives must be free from colonial bias and the dominance of a single identity perspective, echoing calls for decolonization in African research and national historiography literature in Crimea. Fourth, technology-based pedagogical innovation, such as the use of Virtual Reality in China, offers new opportunities for immersive history learning, although simpler adaptations can be implemented in Indonesia according to school conditions.

Thus, history learning within the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Indonesian elementary schools is not only locally relevant but also resonates with international practices. The integration of values, skills development, inclusivity, and innovation is essential for ensuring that history education functions as a means of shaping a generation that is critical, tolerant, inclusive, and grounded in a strong national identity. The *Kurikulum Merdeka* provides broad opportunities for teachers to exercise creativity, utilize local resources, and design learning projects that connect the past, present, and global challenges. With this direction, history education at the elementary level can make a meaningful contribution to realizing the *Pancasila Student Profile*—students who are faithful, globally minded, critical thinkers, and collaborative in spirit.

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