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The Experiences and Meanings of Physical Education Teachers in Implementing Evaluation Processes Based on the Merdeka Curriculum in Vocational High Schools within Urban District Areas

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates Physical Education (PE) teachers' experiences in implementing learning evaluation under Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum in urban vocational high schools. It examines how teachers conceptualize evaluation, the adaptive strategies they apply in practice, and the challenges encountered during implementation. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the study involved purposively selected Physical Education (PE) teachers from urban vocational schools. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and document analysis, and analyzed using systematic thematic procedures involving data reduction, display, and interpretation. The findings indicate that teachers perceive evaluation within the Merdeka Curriculum as a continuous and holistic process aimed at monitoring students' overall learning development rather than focusing solely on summative outcomes. In practice, teachers integrate formative assessment, performance-based assessment, classroom observation, and reflective activities tailored to students' needs and the vocational context. However, implementation remains challenged by time constraints, administrative demands, and differing levels of conceptual understanding of curriculum-based evaluation. The study concludes that effective implementation of evaluation in Physical Education (PE) depends on teachers' reflective professionalism, pedagogical adaptability, and institutional support. These findings contribute to broader discussions on curriculum reform and assessment transformation in vocational education settings.

KEYWORDS: learning evaluation; Merdeka Curriculum; Physical Education; experience and meaning; vocational high school

I. INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a fundamental pillar of national development and aims to foster learners' holistic growth across cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. In the Indonesian context, Law No. 20 of 2003 defines education as a conscious and planned effort to create learning environments that enable students to actively develop their spiritual strength, self-control, personality, intelligence, noble character, and skills required by society and the nation (Santika & Ramini, 2016). Within this broader framework, Physical Education (PE) plays an integral role in promoting students' comprehensive development through structured physical activity (Filiz & Konukman, 2020). Beyond physical engagement, physical education contributes to social development, lifelong healthy lifestyles, and mental well-being (Razouki et al., 2021).

To strengthen educational quality and relevance, Indonesia has introduced the Merdeka Curriculum as part of a national curriculum reform agenda (Rani et al., 2023). This curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning, flexibility, contextualization, and the development of 21st-century competencies. Similar global reform movements advocate competencybased education and authentic assessment practices that position learners as active agents in constructing knowledge (DarlingHammond et al., 2017). Within this paradigm shift, assessment is no longer viewed merely as a tool for measuring outcomes, but as an integral component of learning that supports reflection, feedback, and continuous improvement.

In physical education (PE) specifically, authentic and formative assessment practices are considered essential due to the subject's performance-based and experiential nature. Teachers must evaluate not only students' physical skills but also their attitudes, participation, collaboration, and reflective capacities (Nugroho et al., 2025). Consequently, professional competence in designing and implementing meaningful assessment becomes central to effective curriculum enactment (Anizar & Sardin, 2023). However, international evidence suggests that teachers often struggle to translate assessment policy into classroom practice,

particularly when reforms demand conceptual shifts and increased administrative accountability (Brown & Harris, 2014; López-Pastor et al., 2013).

Although the Merdeka Curriculum provides flexibility and encourages authentic, competency-based evaluation, its implementation largely depends on teachers' interpretative and reflective capacities. Curriculum reform literature consistently highlights that policy success is mediated by teachers' beliefs, experiences, and contextual constraints (Priestley et al., 2015). In vocational high schools especially those located in urban settings with diverse academic and industry-oriented programs the complexity of assessment implementation becomes even more pronounced. Teachers must balance institutional demands, industry relevance, student diversity, and administrative requirements.

Preliminary observations indicate that some PJOK teachers still perceive evaluation as primarily administrative rather than developmental. Challenges such as time limitations, workload pressures, and differing conceptual understandings of authentic assessment may reduce the transformative potential of the Merdeka Curriculum. If evaluation fails to function as meaningful feedback, it risks contributing to decreased learning motivation and potential learning loss (Pasani et al., 2020).

Despite the strategic importance of assessment in curriculum reform, limited research has explored how Physical Education teachers experience, interpret, and construct meaning around the evaluation process within the Merdeka Curriculum framework, particularly in vocational high schools in urban districts. Most existing studies focus on policy analysis or quantitative outcomes, leaving a gap in understanding teachers' lived experiences and professional reflections.

Drawing upon qualitative inquiry perspectives (Creswell, 2017), this study seeks to explore how PJOK teachers design, implement, and reflect upon evaluation practices under the Merdeka Curriculum. Specifically, it investigates (1) teachers' experiences in conducting curriculum-based assessment, (2) their meaning-making processes regarding evaluation, and (3) their professional reflections and pedagogical decision-making.

By centering teachers' voices, this study contributes to international discussions on curriculum reform, teacher agency, and assessment transformation in practice-oriented and vocational education contexts. Understanding how teachers navigate policy expectations and classroom realities is essential for strengthening sustainable and meaningful assessment practices in contemporary education systems.

II. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to gain an in-depth understanding of Physical Education (PJOK) teachers' experiences, interpretations, and professional reflections in implementing evaluation practices under Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum in urban vocational high schools. A qualitative design was selected because the study sought to explore meaning-making processes situated within natural school contexts rather than to measure variables statistically, thereby allowing rich, contextualized insights into how teachers interpret and enact curriculum policy in everyday practice (Creswell, 2017).

The research was conducted between August and October 2025 in two urban vocational high schools (pseudonymously referred to as SMK A and SMK B) that had formally adopted the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in the subject of Physical Education, Sports, and Health. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria: actively teaching PJOK under the Merdeka Curriculum and being directly involved in designing and implementing student assessment processes (Patton, 2015).

Primary data were collected through in-depth semi structured interviews, enabling flexibility to probe participants' narratives while maintaining alignment with predefined domains such as conceptual understanding of authentic and formative assessment, evaluation strategies, perceived challenges, institutional support, and professional reflection (Dahal, 2025). Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. To strengthen data triangulation and contextual validity, document analysis was conducted on lesson plans, teaching modules, assessment rubrics, student performance records, and relevant school policy documents (Lim, 2025). Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles et al (2014), involving concurrent processes of data condensation, systematic coding, thematic categorization, data display in narrative matrices, and iterative conclusion drawing and verification. An inductive analytical logic was applied to allow themes to emerge from participants' lived experiences rather than being predetermined by theoretical constructs. To ensure trustworthiness, the study adopted the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Birdi et al., 2026), operationalized through prolonged engagement, triangulation of interviews and documents, member checking to validate interpretations, thick contextual description, maintenance of an audit trail, and peer debriefing to minimize researcher bias. Through these rigorous procedures, the study aimed to produce a contextually grounded and analytically robust account of how PJOK teachers experience and construct meaning around evaluation practices within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum.

III. RESULTS

A. Research Context

This study was conducted in two urban vocational high schools (SMK A and SMK B) that emphasize vocational competence, practical skills, and workforce readiness through a balance of conceptual knowledge, practice, and professional attitudes.

Both schools operate in dynamic urban environments with diverse student backgrounds, influencing classroom dynamics and requiring adaptive teaching and assessment strategies.

A total of 20 teachers (out of 64) participated, representing various subjects and levels of experience. Differences were found in teachers' readiness and understanding in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in assessment practices.

Learning is predominantly practice-oriented, positioning teachers as facilitators of contextual learning. As a result, assessment is complex, covering cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains simultaneously.

B. Data Analysis Overview

The study produced 197 pages of interview transcripts, analyzed using ATLAS.ti with AI-assisted coding to support thematic organization. Through iterative coding and abstraction, key themes emerged; teachers' experiences in evaluation, meaning construction of evaluation, professional collaboration, reflective growth, and the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PJOK assessment.

Consistent with qualitative traditions, results and discussion were integrated into interpretive narratives grounded in participants' accounts. The findings were organized into three main dimensions; (1) teachers' experiences in evaluation, (2) the meaning of evaluation for teachers, and (3) the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on PJOK assessment practices.

C. Teachers' Experiences in Implementing Evaluation

1. Transition to Holistic Assessment

PJOK teachers experienced a shift from quantitative, result-oriented assessment to qualitative, process-based evaluation under the Merdeka Curriculum. Assessment now emphasizes continuous monitoring rather than final performance scores. In practice-based PJOK contexts with limited time, this is complex, as teachers must assess motor skills, participation, attitudes, collaboration, and conceptual understanding simultaneously. Initial implementation caused confusion in interpreting guidelines, but these challenges became part of teachers' professional learning process.

2. Adoption of Authentic Assessment

Over time, teachers began viewing evaluation as a holistic tool to understand students' learning progress. They applied authentic strategies such as performance assessment, observation, project-based activities, rubrics, portfolios, and formative feedback. Assessment became integrated into daily practice, with ongoing feedback and developmental notes during each session.

3. Implementation Challenges

Persistent challenges included limited facilities, large class sizes, administrative demands, and varying conceptual understanding among teachers. To cope, teachers strengthened peer collaboration, shared rubrics, and used simplified yet structured assessment tools to improve consistency and confidence.

D. The Meaning of Evaluation for PJOK Teachers

Beyond technical changes, evaluation gained deeper professional meaning. Teachers viewed it as a systematic process to measure learning outcomes, a reflective tool for improving instruction, a collaborative effort involving teachers, students, and parents, and a means to foster student independence.

Under the Merdeka Curriculum, assessment is understood as authentic, contextual, and cyclical emphasizing reflection and continuous improvement. In PJOK, where physical abilities differ widely, evaluation is seen as recognizing individual potential rather than imposing uniform standards.

This shift reflects a change in pedagogical awareness: teachers no longer conduct assessment merely for administrative purposes but embrace its humanistic, student-centered orientation.

E. Impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on PJOK Evaluation

1. Increased Professional Reflexivity

The Merdeka Curriculum strengthened teachers' professional awareness, prompting greater reflection on fairness, alignment with learning objectives, and individual student development. Teachers shifted focus from final scores to careful observation of learning processes, requiring higher pedagogical sensitivity and adaptability.

2. Student Impact

Authentic assessment encouraged greater participation, willingness to try challenging tasks, creativity, and collaboration. Students became less score-oriented and more engaged in meaningful learning experiences.

3. Administrative and Time Constraints

Although documentation demands increased, teachers viewed the added responsibilities as part of broader educational reform requiring ongoing professional growth.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that PJOK teachers' teaching experience does not merely represent an accumulation of professional service years; rather, it constitutes a dynamic process that shapes adaptive, reflective, and contextual capacities in implementing evaluation under the Merdeka Curriculum. This experience fosters the awareness that instructional practices cannot be applied uniformly but must remain responsive to classroom conditions and student characteristics, as reflected in a teacher's statement that "we cannot keep using the same method," illustrating teacher agency the capacity to act reflectively within educational policy contexts (Priestley et al., 2015). Within the Merdeka Curriculum framework, agency is crucial because the autonomy granted to teachers requires heightened professional responsibility, particularly in physical education, which involves distinctive pedagogical complexities due to the heterogeneity of physical practices and students' socio-emotional dynamics.

Such complexity demands rapid decision making, methodological adaptation, and sensitivity to emotional dimensions, leading post-instructional reflection to evolve into reflective professionalism that not only refines technical aspects of teaching but also revises evaluative approaches based on classroom experience (Kaloudis, 2025). The study further identifies a paradigm shift from outcome based to process oriented evaluation. Teachers no longer focus solely on physical performance achievement but also consider effort, participation, and individual progress findings aligned with Hay and Penney's (2009), critique of evaluative justice in physical education. This shift reinforces the concept of assessment for learning, positioning assessment as an integral component of the learning process (Black & Wiliam, 2020), while supporting principles of fairness through authentic and participatory assessment that acknowledge differentiated abilities (López-Pastor et al., 2013).

Moreover, PJOK teaching experience within the Merdeka Curriculum context carries significant emotional dimensions. Teachers must manage students' feelings of insecurity, fear, and anxiety in public performance settings, thereby engaging in substantial emotional labor (Petiot, 2023). Teachers' commitment to patience and empathy strengthens positive emotional relationships, which have been shown to support students' psychological well-being and learning motivation (Wentzel, 2012). Merdeka Belajar is interpreted as a space of reflective and responsible professional freedom, consistent with the notion of teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015), and encourages a shift toward student-centered learning (Brown & Harris, 2014), that enhances engagement and active participation, as emphasized by the OECD (2019). Nevertheless, such autonomy requires reflective readiness to prevent pedagogical inconsistency (Kaloudis, 2025).

Evaluation practices are not implemented individually; peer involvement functions as a professional support system through collaborative professionalism, strengthening instructional quality and collective responsibility, enhancing pedagogical problemsolving (Vangrieken et al., 2015), and providing emotional support that contributes to teacher well-being and professional resilience (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). From teachers' perspectives, successful evaluation is not defined by numerical outcomes alone but by coherence between learning processes and outcomes that authentically represent student learning (Hay & Penney, 2009), and uphold fairness through differentiated assessment (López-Pastor et al., 2013). Assessment also operates as a feedback loop for improving subsequent instructional quality (Bennett, 2011).

Teacher student relationships constitute the foundation of humanistic evaluation, as warm and professional interactions have been shown to enhance learning engagement (Roorda et al., 2011) and active participation through emotional support (Skinner & Belmont, 2019). Consequently, assessment is understood not as punishment but as an integral element of the learning process (López-Pastor et al., 2013). Overall, the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum-based evaluation in PJOK represents a comprehensive professional transformation encompassing strengthened teacher agency, a shift from outcome-to process-oriented assessment, integration of emotional dimensions, professional collaboration, humanistic teacher student relationships, and sustained reflection as the core of professionalism. Evaluation is thus reconceptualized not as a mechanism of selection, but as a fair, humanistic, and development-oriented pedagogical practice.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that PJOK teachers in urban vocational schools interpret the Merdeka Curriculum as a shift from administrative, outcome based assessment toward formative, authentic, and student-centered evaluation. Assessment is no longer viewed merely as grading, but as an integral part of learning used to map abilities, monitor progress, and improve teaching strategies.

Teachers position themselves as facilitators who guide students through formative assessment, performance observation, self-reflection, and feedback, making evaluation an educative and dialogic process. Assessment also functions as professional reflection, helping teachers refine methods, adjust task difficulty, and plan follow up actions.

Despite challenges related to heterogeneous student abilities, teachers adapt standards and strategies to maintain fairness and learning expectations. Overall, Merdeka Curriculum based evaluation encourages more meaningful, contextual, and development oriented practices while strengthening teachers' reflective professional identity.

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