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Development of Early Childhood Student Agency in Efforts to Realize Free Play
(Case Study of the Aksi Pasukan HEPI Program at TK Negeri Pembina Subang)

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A B S T R A C T

The essence of independent Playing in the context of early childhood education is to provide meaningful play experiences so that they get the opportunity to explore their environment, solve problems, and become leaders in the learning process. One of the efforts to realize the freedom of play is to develop student agency in the child. Student agency is a child's competence to determine his learning process through expressing ideas and opinions, making choices, and making decisions to create a sense of ownership for what he does. This study aims to analyze the development of student agency which is packaged in a school program, namely the Aksi Pasukan HEPI at the TK Negeri Pembina, Subang Regency. The research method used is qualitative with a case study approach, with data collection being observation, interviews, and documentation. The result of the research is that the Aksi Pasukan HEPI program can develop early childhood student agency, by empowering all assets owned by the school and its environment.

A R T I C L E   I N F O

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of life also has an impact on changes that occur in the world of education. The Merdeka Learning Program launched by the Ministry of Education and Culture is a response to global competition, intending to make Indonesia's human resources superior so that they can adapt but still adhere to the noble values of Pancasila (Yusuf & Arfiansyah, 2021).

Freedom to learn in early childhood is the freedom to play (Adnyani, 2021). Freedom to play changes the paradigm that occurs, such as the teacher as the holder of control over the on going learning process Maulidi (2022), as well as homogeneous learning between schools (Siswanto, 2014). So it is necessary to develop student agency, namely the rights and competencies of children in determining their learning process, reflecting on their abilities, and taking proactive and responsible action. The same thing was stated by Sahlberg dan Doyle that children need opportunities to learn to organize themselves in the learning process to be more competent. The diversity and uniqueness of children's characteristics are important points for this freedom of play. The importance of knowing the characteristics of the environment and children's learning needs is the basic capital when designing child-centered learning designs. The role of the teacher (Anwar, 2018; Nadar et al., 2021), parents (Trenggonowati dan Kulsum, 2018; Gussevi dan Muhfi, 2021), and the community Kusumastita (2020) are here to enrich the ecosystem that can support the stimulation and interaction of children to optimize their development (Mustaqim, 2017). This is in line with Ki Hajar Dewantara's thoughts on how to educate children according to the nature of nature and its era (Noventari, 2020). The concept of free play promotes child-centered learning Suryana (2014), and makes it a leader in the learning process (Mertala, 2019).

In line with the concept of free play, student agency refers to how children can position themselves to play an active role in the playing process so that a sense of belonging and being able to interpret the play activities they do. In the development of student agency, teachers have the opportunity to build ideas, experiences, and children's agency, by providing lighter instructions to support children's interests and creativity in their learning experiences (Vaughn, 2020).

So far, research related to the development of student agency in early childhood is still very limited. Even some studies confirm that teachers are still the center of children's play activities. The dominance of teachers in children's play activities is related to the teacher's understanding of the needs of children in playing Cortázar (2015) the quality of resources, curriculum, and provision of education for early childhood and the role of the teacher in limiting children when playing so that children are not free to determine their play (Iskandar, 2021). In addition, there is a paradigm that children who like to play tend to show disobedience to angry adults, and be careless (Wood, 2014).

TK Negeri Pembina is one of the formal PAUD in the Subang district with the characteristics of a heterogeneous urban community, both in terms of the background of the students and the surrounding community. This is interesting because the diversity that exists is a challenge in itself in equating perceptions regarding the development of student agency, starting from the school, parents of students, even the community involved in it. Through the Aksi Pasukan HEPI program, TK Negeri Pembina innovates in the development of early childhood student agency. This program is a collaborative activity between children,

parents, school members, and the surrounding community, so it is called a troop action or pasukan in Indonesian. While HEPI itself stands for Great, Caring, and Sharing or hebat, peduli, berbagi in Indonesian. This program aims to develop caring, sharing and collaborating attitudes from an early age. This program was carried out for three weeks, and the children were actively involved in planning and reflecting at the end of the activity.

2. METHODS

This research is qualitative research with a case study approach to the Program Aksi Pasukan HEPI at Pembina Subang State Kindergarten which develops student agency in early childhood. Qualitative research itself departs from the philosophy of constructivism which assumes that truth is plural, interactive, and the exchange of social experiences interpreted by individuals with diverse backgrounds. While the case study approach aims to provide an overview of unique cases and detailed explanations.

Data collection techniques through observation, interviews, and documentation that focus on children's ability to express their ideas and ideas, make choices, express their curiosity, ask questions, draw in their environment, communicate their understanding to others, and take concrete actions as a learning process. Observations were made on the environment and school characteristics, from planning to evaluation and follow-up of this program. Interviews were conducted with school principals, teacher representatives, students, and parents. This is intended to obtain objective and complete information from the stakeholders involved. Besides that, data analysis is related to various documents, photos, or videos. So that data collection techniques are carried out by triangulation of techniques and sources.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Improving the quality of human resources in preparation for global competition is one of the major challenges for the world of education. In Indonesia itself, one of the efforts made is the release of the Merdeka Learning program Marisa (2021) by the Ministry of Education and Culture. This independent learning program is expected to build a happy atmosphere for students, teachers, and parents Bahar and Herli provide independence in innovation, character, and positive social skills, foster creativity, environmental-based skills. The concept of independent learning adapts to the learning environment, in terms of local wisdom, culture, socio-economics, and infrastructure (Anjelina et al., 2021).

At the level of early childhood education, independent learning is adapted to the characteristics of early childhood who are in the foundation phase Culture dan Independence, where playing is a child's learning process (Rohmah, 2016; Mariyana dan Setiasih, 2018; Sumitra dan Panjaitan, 2019). Therefore, freedom to learn in the context of early childhood education is the freedom to play. Through free play, early childhood is expected to master 21st-century competencies, namely communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking Retnaningsih dan Khairiyah (2022) and develop children's character and morals. Freedom to play essentially gives children freedom in determining their playing activities so that children become more independent in finding their learning process when playing (Nursarofah, 2022).

In line with free play, student agency is the capacity to set goals, reflect, and act responsibly to bring about change. This refers to how children can position themselves to play an active role in the playing process so that a sense of belonging and being able to interpret the play activities they do.

Children explore and choose various ways for themselves, which reflects the willingness and ability to independently arise from within themselves. However, there needs to be a collaboration with the people around them, such as utilizing, sharing, and collaborating with various resources and communities around them (Kim et al., 2020). So that teachers provide the widest opportunity for children to build their ideas, experiences, and agency. It is through this process that children will naturally learn learning skills that they will use throughout their lives.

One of the school programs that support early childhood student agency is the Program Aksi Pasukan HEPI (great, caring, sharing). The meaning of the HEPI Troops Action is a series of collaborative activities to become great and caring together so that they can share with the environment. The HEPI troop action program is designed to be an alternative program that is contextual in nature, elevates student agency, and has a positive impact on children and the surrounding environment. The program, which was implemented for three weeks, initially focused on developing caring and sharing characters from an early age by empowering all assets owned by the school (human assets, social assets, financial assets).

The initial stage of the Program Aksi Pasukan HEPI is the socialization of the program to all school residents and parents of the Subang TK Negeri Pembina. The important thing during this socialization is the perception of how the program to be implemented carries out student agency which will ultimately have an impact on the children themselves. Based on the data obtained, the full response and support from all school residents for the implementation of this program. The next stage of socialization is addressed to all TK Negeri Pembina Subang students. Socialization is in the form of activities packaged through video shows, followed by brainstorming about responses, responses, asking questions, expressing opinions, and plans related to this activity. This activity is the beginning of the development of student agency, where children have the opportunity to make their voices related to the lighter video that is shown.

Next is the process of discussion and making a mutual agreement. At this stage, the children are invited to discuss what will be done related to the action plan that will be carried out. Children's freedom in making activity plans and what things they want to know is packaged with the creation of a concept map of the activity plan. This process involves the teacher's creativity in making lighter questions. The development of student agency positions children to think critically, ask friends, imagine their new plans, to produce amazing works (Vaughn, 2014). The process of making a concept map becomes a medium for children to learn to make a voice (voice) and appreciate the opinions and ideas that are put forward together orally or in writing. Through this process of sharing ideas, ideas, and opinions, they finally make a choice and agree on it by consensus. From the concept map that was made together, we can find out what things will be done, what preparations will be prepared, to how this action will be carried out.

One of the ways to collect infaq money for the actions of the Hepi troops is a mutual agreement. In addition to learning responsibility, in this process, children learn about financial literacy and financial management simply. After the money is collected according

to the specified deadline, the children manage the infaq money. They choose from several ideas proposed by their friends, such as how the collected infaq money will be spent, where to shop, who will receive the aid, and when the plan will be distributed aid. At this stage of discussion, the children finally agreed to spend the collected infaq money, by shopping at the Inpres market which is located not far from the school by driving public transportation.

The next activity is shopping together. 20 children chose to go shopping, from all classes, while those who didn't go shopping continued to study at school. In this shopping process, the school coordinates with parent representatives to assist, so that when shopping divided into three groups with assistance per group of two parents. In this activity, the children interacted directly with the traders. They choose the items to buy, ask for the price, and count the money to pay. This activity fosters an attitude of ownership (ownership) in children, where they feel responsible for the tasks they will do.

The problem arose when one of the children (5 years old) wanted to buy a drink, even though at that time he was fasting and did not bring pocket money. Anindya (6 years old) approached and talked to the child. "You're not strong enough to fast? If you want to buy a drink, do you bring money?" The boy shook his head. Then Anindya suggested that if you can't fast, drink it later because you don't have money with you. The boy agreed. From this incident, Anindya tried to help her friend in finding a solution. Through this student agency, children can develop their ability to find, understand, and overcome the problems they encounter.

The culmination of the series of activities of the HEPI Troops was the distribution of aid in the form of goods that the children had spent the previous day. This activity is carried out by involving the social environment around the school. The children were directly involved in distributing the aid. In addition to the results of the children's shopping the previous day, several parents participated and also gave donations in the form of food, rice, money, and others. This, apart from being a role model for children about caring and sharing, also gives an important value regarding the importance of collaborating with others. Social practices in the school environment give them a direct experience of how they interact with adults other than their teachers (Markström and Halldén, 2009).

"Teacher, I'm tired but I'm very happy," said Reyvan (aged 6.5), "I'm happy because we can share," said Zahra (6 years old) while smiling brightly. They conveyed these expressions during the reflection session which was the final stage of the Program Aksi Pasukan HEPI. In addition, interviews with principals, teacher representatives, and parents showed that this program was very useful for developing caring and sharing characters, as well as making children great with their competencies.

Some of the things that were found in this study are that it is important to equalize perceptions about the role of adults (teachers, parents, the community involved) in the development of early childhood student agency. This is intended so that children really become the main actors in their learning activities, so that voices, opinions, ideas, choices in decision-making, and are fully responsible for all actions taken by children. So far the role of adults has been limited to being a facilitator for children in developing this student agency ability. In addition, a school ecosystem that is pro-children is very important and needed in optimizing programs so that goals can be achieved properly.

4. CONCLUSION

The Program Aksi Pasukan HEPI at the Pembina Subang State Kindergarten, in addition to carrying out the early childhood student agency, also familiarizes children with giving alms, sharing, caring, having opinions, respecting others, working together, and committing together. The concept of activities that they made from planning to the peak of the activity brought them to the real experience of the learning process, free to play. The success of this program can not be separated from the cooperation and coordination with various parties, ranging from school principals, teachers, parents, and other social circles.

Student agencies are still strangers to early childhood education activists. Especially regarding research related to the development of early childhood student agency, both in terms of learning at school, or other school programs. So there is a need for more in-depth research, especially with the educational climate in Indonesia.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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