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When history begins to be taught: an analysis of shifting historical representations in indonesian primary school textbooks

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Abstract

History education in Indonesian primary schools has been reconfigured following the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly through the shift from Social Studies (IPS) to Natural and Social Sciences (IPAS) as the main subject area in which historical content is introduced. This study examines changes in historical representation across official primary school textbooks under the two curricula. Using a qualitative descriptive design with content analysis, the study analyzes government-issued textbooks published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, covering Grade 4–6 IPS textbooks in the 2013 Curriculum and Grade 3–6 IPAS textbooks in the Merdeka Curriculum. The units of analysis include historical narratives, visual representations, and learning activities presented within themes and chapters that contain historical content. To enhance credibility, the analysis was conducted systematically through cross-checking between textbook content, curriculum documents, and relevant policy texts. The findings show that the 2013 Curriculum textbooks primarily emphasize national narratives, heroic figures, and political history, with learning activities tending to focus on reading comprehension and factual recall. In contrast, the Merdeka Curriculum textbooks introduce history earlier through family history, local traditions, community experiences, and context-based inquiry, while Grade 6 expands the discussion to colonialism, independence, and nationalism through a more reflective approach. These findings indicate that curriculum reform has reshaped not only the structure of school subjects but also the pedagogical orientation of history education in primary schools, shifting it from transmissive, national-narrative-based instruction toward a more contextual, inquiry-oriented, and reflective model. This shift has important implications for the development of inclusive history textbooks and for strengthening teachers' capacity to connect local, national, and civic historical learning from an early age.

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1. Introduction

History education at the primary school level plays an important role in introducing students to identity, citizenship, collective memory, and social values through their earliest structured encounters with the past. In the context of elementary education in Indonesia, history is not taught as a standalone subject; rather, it is integrated into broader subject areas, namely Social Studies (IPS) in the 2013 Curriculum and Natural and Social Sciences (IPAS) in the Merdeka Curriculum. This shift is not merely administrative, but reflects a broader reorganization of how historical knowledge is selected, structured, and pedagogically introduced to children. In this context, textbooks are particularly important because they mediate official curricular knowledge and shape how students first encounter narratives about the nation, society, and the past.

Textbooks are not neutral compilations of information. They function as both pedagogical and ideological instruments that privilege certain events, actors, and values while marginalizing others. Through their narratives, visual materials, and learning tasks, textbooks shape how students understand the past and position themselves in relation to national identity, local belonging, and social change (Apple, 1991; Crawford, 2000; Zajda, 2024). International scholarship has shown that textbooks play a significant role in shaping collective memory, social representation, and identity boundaries; accordingly, textbook analysis concerns not only the content of knowledge but also the ways meaning and subject positions are constructed through educational texts (Sakki, 2025). Other studies have shown that textbook discourse often privileges dominant cultural and political perspectives while limiting diversity, contextual interpretation, and alternative viewpoints (Matt et al., 2025; Shah, 2023). Research on visual representation in school textbooks further suggests that the selection of images helps determine which groups, actors, and experiences are made visible or positioned as central within the curriculum (Chu, 2018; Deroo, 2021).

In the Indonesian context, studies on history education and social studies suggest that textbooks under the 2013 Curriculum tend to emphasize national heroes, political events, and the moral values of struggle, while contextual engagement with family history, local history, and inquiry-based learning remains relatively limited (Widiadi et al., 2022; Saripudin et al., 2022). On the other hand, research on primary history textbooks in other contexts indicates that contextualization, local experience, and proximity to students' everyday worlds are increasingly regarded as important elements in the development of early history learning (Oppong & Essiaw, 2024). Recent scholarship has also emphasized that history textbook analysis needs to move beyond narrow readings of text alone and examine narratives, visuals, and task design as part of a more holistic analytical framework (Llewellyn et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the implications of the curricular shift from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum for the representation of history in Indonesian primary school textbooks have not yet been systematically examined across grade levels, subject structures, and representational dimensions.

This study seeks to address that gap by focusing on how the representation of history changes in official primary school textbooks across the two curricula. The study does not assume that one curriculum is inherently superior to the other; rather, it examines how each curriculum organizes historical content, which values are more strongly emphasized, and how students are positioned in relation to the past. The analysis is guided by the view that historical representation in textbooks can be traced through at least three observable dimensions: narrative form, visual representation, and learning activities. These dimensions are important because they reveal not only what is presented as historical content, but also how such content is framed pedagogically and ideologically.

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The study employs two interrelated conceptual lenses. First, it draws on the perspective of textbook representation and ideology, which regards textbooks as sites where official knowledge, values, and identity constructions are produced and normalized (Apple, 1991; Crawford, 2000). Second, it draws on the distinction between history as collective memory and history as a medium for developing historical thinking and historical consciousness, particularly the difference between transmissive national narratives and more reflective, contextual, and inquiry-based approaches to history learning (Supriatna, 2007; Seixas, 2004; Wineburg, 2001). In primary education, the growing emphasis on contextualization, critical thinking, and students' active engagement with the past has become increasingly visible in the international literature on history education (Green et al., 2010; López-Fernández et al., 2023; Oppong & Essiaw, 2024). Together, these perspectives provide the analytical basis for examining whether the representation of history in primary school textbooks remains centered on heroic-national narratives or is beginning to shift toward more contextual and interpretive forms of historical understanding.

Based on this background, the study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do historical narratives differ between primary school textbooks under the 2013 Curriculum and those under the Merdeka Curriculum? (2) How do visual representations of history differ between the two curricula? (3) How do learning activities related to history differ between the two curricula? (4) Which value orientations are most dominant in each curriculum's representation of history? To answer these questions, the study compares official government-issued textbooks, namely IPS textbooks for Grades IV–VI in the 2013 Curriculum and IPAS textbooks for Grades III–VI in the Merdeka Curriculum. The contribution of this study lies in providing a comparative analysis of how curriculum reform reshapes the representation of history in Indonesian primary school textbooks, while clarifying the implications of these shifts for primary-level history education and teacher pedagogy.

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach using content analysis to examine shifts in the representation of history in Indonesian primary school textbooks under the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum. Content analysis was selected because it enables a systematic examination of textual materials, visual elements, and learning activities in order to identify patterns of meaning, value orientations, and pedagogical tendencies embedded in textbooks (Neuendorf, 2002; Krippendorff, 2004). In this study, content analysis was used to compare how history is represented through narratives, visual materials, and learning activities across the two curricula.

2.1 Textbook corpus and selection criteria

The corpus consisted of official government-issued textbooks published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia. The textbooks analyzed included Social Studies (IPS) textbooks for Grades IV, V, and VI under the 2013 Curriculum, as well as Natural and Social Sciences (IPAS) textbooks for Grades III, IV, V, and VI under the Merdeka Curriculum. These textbooks were selected purposively because they represent official instructional materials widely used in Indonesian primary schools and therefore constitute the most direct representation of state-sanctioned historical knowledge for elementary students. The textbooks analyzed in this study are listed in the reference list as the primary documentary sources of the research.

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The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) the textbook had to be officially published or endorsed by the government; (2) it had to belong to a grade level in which historical content is introduced within the respective curriculum; and (3) it had to contain explicit historical content in the form of narratives, visuals, or learning activities. Sections that lacked identifiable historical content were excluded from detailed coding, although they remained part of the broader corpus for contextual comparison. Rather than sampling only selected chapters, this study examined all chapters, themes, subthemes, and learning units containing historical content in the selected textbooks.

2.2 Supporting curricular and policy documents

To support interpretation, the textbook analysis was triangulated with relevant curricular and policy documents, including the 2013 Curriculum's basic competencies for elementary education, the guidelines for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, and the ministry's learning and assessment guidelines. These documents were not treated as primary units of analysis; rather, they were used as contextual references to assess whether the patterns identified in the textbooks were aligned with broader curricular goals, learning principles, and official pedagogical orientations.

2.3 Units of analysis

The unit of analysis in this study consisted of textbook segments that explicitly represented history in textual, visual, or pedagogical form. These units included: (1) sentences, paragraphs, or short subsections presenting historical figures, events, traditions, social change, or chronological development; (2) images, illustrations, photographs, maps, timelines, and other visual elements accompanying historical content; and (3) student tasks, questions, discussion prompts, learning activities, and project-based assignments related to history learning. Depending on the structure of each textbook, these units were analyzed within chapters, themes, subthemes, topics, and activity sections.

2.4 Coding categories and analytical framework

The analysis was organized around three main dimensions: historical narrative, visual representation, and learning activity. These dimensions were operationalized into a coding scheme developed from the conceptual framework of textbook representation, ideology, and historical thinking.

In the narrative dimension, coding focused on dominant types of historical stories, such as national narrative, heroic narrative, political history, family history, local/community history, and past–present connections. In the visual dimension, analysis focused on the types and communicative functions of visual materials, including heroes and national symbols, historical sites and artefacts, local traditions and community life, family settings, and illustrations of social change. Visual materials were also analyzed alongside the accompanying text to determine whether they reinforced national-symbolic messages, contextualized local experience, or supported inquiry-based interpretation. Studies on images in elementary school textbooks support this perspective by showing that pictures function not merely as illustrations, but also as representational devices that shape visibility, identity, and meaning within school knowledge (Chu, 2018). In the learning activity dimension, coding identified the form of task demand, such as reading and answering factual questions, retelling, description, discussion, reflection, observation, simple interviewing, and inquiry- or project-based exploration.

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In addition, a cross-cutting analytical layer was used to identify value orientations, such as nationalism, patriotism, heroism, local identity, historical empathy, social reflection, and critical thinking. For example, passages about the anti-colonial struggle centered on national heroes were coded as national-heroic narratives with a value orientation of nationalism/heroism. Tasks asking students to interview parents or community members about family or local history were coded as contextual inquiry tasks. Illustrations of local ceremonies linked to discussions of tradition and communal memory were coded as local visual representations.

To clarify the operationalization of the coding framework, the analytical categories, indicators, and examples of coded data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories, indicators, and examples of data used in the analysis of historical representation in primary school textbooks

Analytical Dimension	Indicator	Operational Description	Example of Textbook Data
Historical narrative	National narrative	Textual passages presenting national events, the struggle for independence, colonialism, national figures, or nation-building processes	stories of anti-colonial struggle, the proclamation of independence, and national heroes
Historical narrative	Heroic narrative	Passages emphasizing exemplary figures, sacrifice, bravery, and the spirit of struggle	biographies of heroes, stories of courage, values of sacrifice
Historical narrative	Local/community narrative	Passages dealing with regional history, village history, community traditions, or social change in the students' immediate environment	stories about the local area, local traditions, and changes in the place where students live
Historical narrative	Family narrative	Passages based on family experiences, family origins, family traditions, or intergenerational memory	family history, household traditions, stories from parents or grandparents
Historical narrative	Past–present connection	Passages linking past events to present-day conditions or future relevance	explanations or questions about how the past affects present life
Visual representation	National figures and events	Images, illustrations, or photographs depicting heroes, battles, independence, or national symbols	pictures of national heroes, the national flag, and scenes of struggle
Visual representation	Historical sites and artefacts	Visuals showing temples, heritage buildings, inscriptions, objects, or other markers of historical memory	images of Borobudur Temple, inscriptions, and historical buildings
Visual representation	Local traditions and culture	Visuals showing cultural practices, ceremonies, traditions, or local community life	illustrations of local ceremonies, traditional practices, village cultural life
Visual representation	Family and social life	Visuals depicting family life, home environment, and everyday social relations	images of family activities, neighbourhood interaction, and daily community life

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Analytical Dimension	Indicator	Operational Description	Example of Textbook Data
Learning activity	Reading and answering factual questions	Tasks requiring students to read a text and answer questions based on explicit information	questions asking who, when, where, and what happened
Learning activity	Retelling or describing	Tasks asking students to retell a story or describe a figure or event	Retell the story, and describe the figure in the picture
Learning activity	Discussion and reflection	Tasks encouraging students to discuss meanings, values, or lessons from historical material	Discuss the meaning of struggle, and explain what can be learned from the event.
Learning activity	Observation and environmental exploration	Tasks asking students to observe their surroundings in order to identify historical traces or social change	observe traditions in the local area, identify changes in the neighbourhood
Learning activity	Interview or simple inquiry	Tasks directing students to gather information from parents, elders, or community members	Interview parents about family history, ask community leaders about local history.
Learning activity	Inquiry-based project	Tasks involving simple data collection, interpretation, and presentation of findings	Prepare a report on local history, create a poster on regional traditions, and conduct a small project on village history.
Value orientation	Nationalism and patriotism	Emphasis on love of country, pride in the nation, and appreciation of national struggle	invitations to emulate heroes, messages about loving the nation
Value orientation	Heroism and moral struggle	Emphasis on courage, sacrifice, responsibility, and exemplary conduct	values of perseverance, self-sacrifice, and determination
Value orientation	Local and social identity	Emphasis on understanding local origins, local traditions, and attachment to community life	recognition of local culture, understanding community traditions
Value orientation	Historical empathy and social reflection	Emphasis on understanding the experiences of people in the past and drawing social lessons from historical events	Understanding suffering under colonialism, reflecting on social change
Value orientation	Critical and contextual thinking	Emphasis on connecting history to present conditions, explaining cause and effect, and understanding change	comparing past and present, explaining the consequences of an event

These indicators served as the basis for identifying, coding, grouping, and comparing historical representations across grade levels and across the two curricula.

2.5 Analytical procedure

The content analysis was conducted in a series of sequential stages. The first stage was category construction, in which preliminary categories were developed based on the research questions and conceptual framework. The second stage involved pilot coding, in which selected textbook sections containing clear examples of historical narratives, visuals, and learning

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activities were tested against the initial coding scheme. This stage was intended to assess whether the categories were sufficiently clear and applicable across both curricula. The third stage involved category revision, particularly when overlaps were found between national and local narratives or between factual and inquiry-based tasks. The fourth stage was full coding, in which all relevant units across the corpus were coded using the revised coding framework. The fifth stage was thematic grouping, in which the coded data were organized into broader patterns in order to generate themes of change, particularly shifts in narrative form, visual representation, learning activities, and value orientation. The final stage was interpretation, in which these patterns were related to curriculum reform, textbook ideology, and the distinction between history as collective memory and history as historical thinking.

2.6 Analysis of visual materials

Because visuals constitute an important dimension of historical representation, visual materials were analyzed not merely as illustrations, but as communicative elements. The analysis considered: (1) the type of image used; (2) its communicative function; (3) the actors or groups represented; and (4) its relationship to the accompanying text and learning task. Through this approach, the study examined whether images primarily reinforced fixed national narratives or instead supported more contextual and reflective forms of historical engagement.

2.7 Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the study's trustworthiness. First, the researcher maintained an audit trail consisting of analytical notes, coding results, category revisions, and examples of coded excerpts or data. Second, peer debriefing was conducted to discuss coding categories and preliminary interpretations, thereby reducing individual bias and improving analytical consistency. Third, triangulation was applied by comparing textbook findings with curricular and policy documents to ensure that interpretations of textbook changes were grounded in a broader educational framework. Because this study primarily relied on qualitative coding conducted by the researcher, trustworthiness was strengthened through transparency in coding procedures and category revision rather than through statistical calculation of intercoder agreement.

3. Result

Based on the coding of historical narratives, visual representations, and learning activities across the textbook corpus, several major patterns of change emerged. The distribution of explicit historical content across grade levels is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of historical content across grade levels in the 2013 curriculum and the merdeka curriculum

Grade level	2013 Curriculum (IPS)	Merdeka Curriculum (IPAS)	Main pattern identified
Grade 3	No explicit historical content in IPS.	Chapter 7: *Stories from the Hometown* introduces family traditions, local culture, and community life.	The Merdeka Curriculum introduces history earlier through family- and locality-based content.
Grade 4	Theme 5: *My Heroes* focuses on national	No explicit chapter devoted specifically to historical content.	The 2013 Curriculum presents explicit national-heroic history, while the

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Grade level	2013 Curriculum (IPS)	Merdeka Curriculum (IPAS)	Main pattern identified
	heroes and patriotic values.		Merdeka Curriculum does not present a distinct history chapter at this grade level.
Grade 5	Themes related to colonialism, national events, and independence.	Chapter 5: *The Story of My District* focuses on local environment, regional history, and socio-cultural change.	The 2013 Curriculum emphasizes national history, whereas the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes local and regional historical experience.
Grade 6	Theme 3: *Figures and Discoveries* focuses on important figures and selected historical narratives of change and contribution.	Chapter 2: *The Story of Our Indonesia* focuses on colonialism, resistance, independence, and nationalism.	Both curricula present broader national content, but the Merdeka Curriculum frames it after an earlier local introduction.

Note. The table summarizes the distribution of explicit historical content identified through coding of themes, chapters, and textbook units containing historical narratives, visuals, and learning activities.

3.1. Distribution of historical content across grade levels

The analysis shows that the distribution of historical content differs between the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum. In the 2013 Curriculum, explicit historical material appears mainly in IPS textbooks for Grades 4, 5, and 6. In Grade 4, history is introduced through the theme "My Heroes," which focuses on national heroes and exemplary struggle. In Grade 5, historical content appears in themes related to the colonial period, national events, and independence. In Grade 6, historical representation shifts toward national figures, inventions, and selected narratives of change and contribution.

In the Merdeka Curriculum, historical content is introduced earlier through IPAS Grade 3, especially in the chapter "Stories from the Hometown," which presents family traditions, local culture, and community experience as entry points to historical understanding. In Grade 4, no explicit chapter is devoted specifically to history, and the material is more strongly oriented toward science, environment, and contemporary social issues. In Grade 5, historical representation reappears through local and regional context, especially in material that invites students to explore their area, social change, and local resources. In Grade 6, national history is presented more explicitly through the themes of colonialism, resistance, and independence. These findings indicate that the Merdeka Curriculum introduces history earlier than the 2013 Curriculum, but not in a linear sequence of explicit historical chapters at every grade level.

3.2. Representations of Actors and Events

The representation of historical actors and events differs substantially across the two curricula. In the 2013 Curriculum, actors are predominantly represented as national heroes, major historical figures, and national leaders, while events are mainly framed as colonial struggle, independence, and major milestones in national history. For example, the Grade 4 theme "My Heroes" introduces students to heroic figures and the values of sacrifice, courage, and

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patriotism. In Grade 5, events related to colonialism, national struggle, and the proclamation of independence are emphasized. These patterns show that history is largely constructed around exemplary individuals and nationally significant events.

In the Merdeka Curriculum, the range of actors becomes broader and more socially grounded. In Grade 3, historical representation begins with family members, local communities, and people in the students' immediate environment, rather than national figures. Events are represented less as fixed national milestones and more as traditions, local practices, community memory, and social change in everyday life. In Grade 6, national actors and events re-emerge more clearly through topics on colonialism, forms of resistance, and independence, but they are introduced after students have encountered family- and locality-based historical content in earlier grades.

3.3. Shifts toward contextual historical representation

The findings also show a shift in the perspective through which history is introduced. In the 2013 Curriculum, history is mainly presented through a single dominant national perspective, emphasizing unity, struggle, and exemplary heroism. The organization of content suggests that the past is presented as a relatively stable national narrative for students to learn and admire.

In the Merdeka Curriculum, the representation of history becomes more contextual and socially varied, especially in Grades 3 and 5. Chapters such as "Stories from the Hometown" and "The Story of My District" invite students to relate history to their own locality, community traditions, and everyday social life. Although the textbooks do not fully present a complex, multiperspectival historiographical approach, they do expand the range of experiences and viewpoints included in the material.

3.4. Learning activities and inquiry-oriented task design

Differences between the two curricula are also visible in the design of learning activities. In the 2013 Curriculum, activities related to history tend to focus on reading a passage, answering factual questions, identifying figures, and retelling events. These activity types position students primarily as recipients of information and emphasize the comprehension of explicit textbook content.

In the Merdeka Curriculum, learning activities more frequently encourage observation, discussion, local exploration, simple interviews, and reflective connections between past and present. For example, students are invited to discuss family traditions, observe changes in their local area, and connect past social practices with those in the present. These tasks do not always amount to full historical inquiry, but they do indicate a stronger movement toward inquiry-oriented, contextually informed learning design.

3.5. The function of visuals in representing history

Visual materials also show different representational functions in the two curricula. In the 2013 Curriculum, visuals largely function to reinforce national-symbolic meaning, for example, through images of heroes, national figures, and scenes associated with struggle and contribution. In the Merdeka Curriculum, visuals are more likely to support contextual meaning-making, particularly when they depict local traditions, community life, family settings, and regional environments. Their function is not only to identify a historical figure or event, but also to situate students within a recognizable social world.

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In addition to differences in grade-level distribution, the coding process also revealed broader differences in narrative form, visual representation, learning activities, and value orientation, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparison of dominant patterns of historical representation in the 2013 curriculum and the merdeka curriculum

Grade level	2013 Curriculum (IPS)	Merdeka Curriculum (IPAS)	Main pattern identified
Analytical aspect	2013 Curriculum	Merdeka Curriculum	Meaning of the shift
Dominant narrative form	National, heroic, and chronological narratives	Family, local, community-based, and contextual narratives	Shift from heroic-national narratives to more local-reflective historical representation
Main actors represented	National heroes, major figures, leaders	Family members, local communities, ordinary social actors, and then national actors in Grade 6	Expansion from elite heroic actors to broader social actors
Main events represented	Colonial struggle, proclamation, national milestones	Family traditions, local memory, social change, then colonialism and independence in Grade 6	Shift from fixed national milestones to layered historical experience
Visual representation	Heroes, national symbols, and struggle scenes	Local traditions, family life, community settings, and regional environments	Shift from symbolic-national visuals to contextual-local visuals.
Learning activities	Reading, factual questions, identifying figures, and retelling	Observation, discussion, exploration, simple interviews, reflective tasks	Shift from reading-and-answering to contextual inquiry
Student positioning	Receivers of established knowledge	Active participants interpreting family, local, and social history	Shift from passive reception to participatory meaning-making
Dominant value orientation	Nationalism, patriotism, heroism, moral struggle	Local identity, social reflection, empathy, critical thinking	Shift from national loyalty to reflective historical understanding
Pedagogical orientation	Transmissive and content-centred	Contextual, reflective, and student-centred	Indicates broader pedagogical transformation

Note. The table presents a synthesis of patterns derived from the coding of historical narratives, visual representations, learning activities, and value orientations across the selected textbooks.

3.6. Summary of dominant patterns across grade levels

Across grade levels, the comparison suggests three main patterns. First, the 2013 Curriculum concentrates explicit history more consistently in Grades 4–6 and frames it mainly through heroes, national events, and moral struggle. Second, the Merdeka Curriculum introduces history earlier in Grade 3, but distributes it unevenly across grade levels, with stronger historical emphasis in Grades 3, 5, and 6 and less explicit historical content in Grade 4. Third, the Merdeka Curriculum shifts the representational emphasis from national-heroic narrative toward family, local, and contextual history, accompanied by more exploratory task types and more socially

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grounded visuals. These patterns provide the empirical basis for the comparative interpretation developed in the discussion section.

3.7. Illustrative frequency counts of historical narratives, visual representations, and learning activities in selected grade vi textbooks

To complement the qualitative analysis presented above, a simple frequency count was conducted on two Grade VI textbooks—IPS Theme 3: *Figures and Discoveries* from the 2013 Curriculum and the Grade VI IPAS textbook from the Merdeka Curriculum. These two textbooks were selected because they represent comparable grade-level materials from each curriculum and both contain explicit historical content. The purpose of this count was not to provide an exhaustive quantitative measurement of the entire corpus, but rather to offer illustrative comparative evidence of how historical narratives, visual representations, and learning activities are distributed across the two curricula at the same grade level. In line with the methodological framework of this study, the count was organized around the three main analytical dimensions used throughout the coding process: historical narrative, visual representation, and learning activity.

Table 4. Comparative frequency of historical narratives, visual representations, and learning activities in ips theme 3: *figures and discoveries* and the grade vi ipas textbook

Analytical aspect	Category	IPS Grade VI Theme 3 2013 Curriculum	IPAS Grade VI 2013 Curriculum	Main tendency
Historical narrative	National narrative / major national events	1	3	More dominant in the Grade VI IPAS textbook
	Heroic narrative / exemplary figures	2	1	More visible in IPS Theme 3
	Major figures / major discoveries	3	0	Strongly dominant in IPS Theme 3
	Local / community narrative	0	1	Limited in both textbooks, but slightly more visible in IPAS Grade VI
	Family narrative	0	0	Absent in both textbooks
	Past–present connection	3	2	Strong in both textbooks, but more explicit in IPS Theme 3
Visual representation	Visuals of national figures / major historical events	2	3	More dominant in IPAS Grade VI
	Visuals of major figures/discoveries/technology	4	1	Strongly dominant in IPS Theme 3
	Visuals of national symbols/struggle	0	2	More visible in IPAS Grade VI
	Visuals of local culture/heritage / regional identity	1	2	More visible in IPAS Grade VI

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Analytical aspect	Category	IPS Grade VI Theme 3 2013 Curriculum	IPAS Grade VI 2013 Curriculum	Main tendency
	Visuals of family or everyday social life	3	0	More visible in IPS Theme 3
	Visuals of historical sites/artefacts	0	1	More visible in IPAS Grade VI
Learning activities	Reading and factual questions	3	2	More dominant in the IPS Theme 3
	Retelling/describing	1	1	Limited in both textbooks
	Observation and exploration	2	2	Present in both textbooks
	Interview / simple inquiry	1	1	Limited but present in both textbooks
	Inquiry-based project	0	1	More visible in IPAS Grade VI

Note. The frequencies are indicative rather than exhaustive, as they were generated from the dominant history-related units explicitly identified in the two selected Grade VI textbooks. A single unit may contain more than one code when relevant.

The table shows that the two textbooks display different emphases across the three analytical dimensions. In terms of historical narratives, IPS Theme 3 is more strongly oriented toward major figures and major discoveries, with additional emphasis on exemplary inventors and explicit connections between past discoveries and present-day life. By contrast, the Grade VI IPAS textbook places greater emphasis on national narratives and major national events, particularly the arrival of foreigners, resistance, independence, and Indonesia's position in the wider world. In terms of visual representation, IPS Theme 3 is dominated by images of inventors, technological objects, and scenes of everyday life transformed by invention, whereas IPAS Grade VI gives greater prominence to national struggle, historical events, and Indonesian cultural heritage. Finally, in terms of learning activities, both textbooks include discussion, observation, and reflection, but they differ in orientation: IPS Theme 3 relies more on reading and factual comprehension tasks. At the same time, IPAS Grade VI shows a slightly stronger tendency toward project-based and inquiry-oriented activities linked to broader national and cultural themes. Taken together, these patterns reinforce the broader findings of this study: the 2013 Curriculum textbook tends to represent history through a more major-figure, discovery-oriented, and factual model, while the Merdeka Curriculum textbook represents history through a more national-historical and contextually broadened model, with somewhat greater room for cultural heritage and inquiry-oriented learning.

4. Discussion

4.1. From heroic-national representation to contextual history learning

The findings of this study indicate that the shift from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum involves not only changes in textbook content but also a broader transformation in how history is introduced to primary school students. Under the 2013 Curriculum, historical content is more explicitly concentrated in Grades IV–VI and is dominated by national heroes,

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major national events, and the moral values of struggle. By contrast, the Merdeka Curriculum introduces history earlier, beginning in Grade III, through family traditions, local community life, and hometown narratives, while national history reappears more explicitly in Grade VI. This empirical pattern suggests a shift in the starting point of history learning, from nation-centred representation toward forms of historical understanding that are more immediate and contextual.

This shift can be interpreted through the distinction between history as collective memory and historical thinking. Textbooks in the 2013 Curriculum generally represent history as a shared national narrative centered on heroes, struggle, and major national milestones. Such a pattern is consistent with history's function as collective memory, namely the cultivation of national identity and exemplary values (Seixas, 2004). Recent scholarship on the relationship between collective memory and history textbooks further emphasizes that textbooks operate as psychosocial tools through which shared narratives, group boundaries, and identity commitments are formed (Sakki, 2025). By contrast, the Merdeka Curriculum broadens the representational basis of history by incorporating family, locality, and everyday social change as legitimate entry points for understanding the past. In this sense, the findings suggest a shift toward a more contextual foundation for the development of historical understanding (Wineburg, 2001).

4.2. Historical representation, place-based learning, and the expansion of social actors

One important empirical pattern identified in the findings concerns the changing types of actors and experiences represented in the textbooks. In the 2013 Curriculum, historical actors are primarily national heroes, leaders, and prominent figures associated with anti-colonial struggle, independence, and nation-building. In the Merdeka Curriculum, especially in Grades III and V, the representation of actors expands to include family members, local communities, and ordinary social actors in everyday life. This broadening of representational scope is significant because it allows history learning to begin from social worlds that are more immediate and familiar to children.

This pattern aligns with the logic of place-based learning, which emphasizes the educational value of connecting learning with students' local environment, lived experience, and community context (Gruenewald, 2003; Smith, 2022). Research on contextualization in primary history textbooks has likewise shown that historical understanding becomes more accessible when it is rooted in social and local contexts that students can recognize and relate to (Oppong & Essiaw, 2024). However, this shift should not be accepted uncritically as inherently superior. Although family- and locality-based history may increase relevance and proximity for students, it also risks weakening students' broader chronological understanding of national history if links to larger historical processes are not made explicit. The value of this curricular shift, therefore, depends largely on how effectively family, local, and national histories are connected pedagogically.

4.3. Activity design and the changing positioning of students

Another important finding concerns the design of learning activities. The 2013 Curriculum tends to rely on tasks such as reading, answering factual questions, and retelling, whereas the Merdeka Curriculum more frequently includes observation, discussion, simple interviews, local exploration, and connections between past and present. This difference indicates a shift in how students are positioned: from recipients of already-formed historical knowledge to more active participants in constructing meaning from their own surroundings.

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This pattern supports the argument that the Merdeka Curriculum opens greater space for early forms of historical inquiry and reasoning. Research in primary history education shows that instructional designs that emphasize critical thinking, contextualization, and active engagement with the past can strengthen students' historical understanding beyond mere factual knowledge acquisition (Green et al., 2010; López-Fernández et al., 2023). However, this shift also entails important consequences. Inquiry-oriented activities require greater teacher preparedness in facilitating discussion, using local sources, designing realistic tasks, and helping students connect personal or local stories to broader historical interpretation. Without adequate pedagogical support, inquiry-based tasks in textbooks may remain superficial or be reduced once again to routine question-and-answer exercises. For that reason, the shift evident in the textbooks should also be understood as a shift in the instructional demands placed on teachers.

4.4. Visual representation and its pedagogical meaning

The findings also show that visual materials function differently across the two curricula. In the 2013 Curriculum, visuals tend to reinforce national-symbolic meaning through heroes, formal figures, and scenes of struggle. In the Merdeka Curriculum, visuals are more often associated with local traditions, community life, family settings, and regional backgrounds, thereby supporting the construction of more contextual meaning. This pattern suggests that visuals are not merely illustrative supplements, but part of the way textbooks signal which pasts deserve attention and how students are expected to relate to them.

This pattern is consistent with studies showing that images in primary school textbooks play a powerful representational role in determining which actors and experiences are made central in school knowledge (Chu, 2018). Recent scholarship on history textbook research has also emphasized that visual materials should be interpreted in close relation to text, task design, and ideological framing, rather than treated as secondary or decorative elements (Llewellyn et al., 2024). Accordingly, the visual shifts identified in this study should be understood as interpretive patterns grounded in the coded corpus, rather than as fixed or deterministic effects on students' understanding.

4.5. Implications for primary teacher education

The findings of this study have direct implications for primary teacher education, particularly in preparing teachers to work with a history curriculum that increasingly integrates local context, inquiry, and reflective learning. First, teacher education needs to strengthen prospective teachers' capacity to use family history, local traditions, community memory, and nearby sites or artefacts as starting points for history learning. Second, teachers need support in designing pedagogical bridges that connect family–local–national narratives, so that local inquiry does not remain an isolated experience detached from broader historical understanding. Third, prospective primary teachers need to be trained to develop age-appropriate inquiry tasks, such as guided observation, simple interviewing, timeline construction, comparisons between past and present, and reflective discussions based on locally available sources.

These implications also extend to textbook design. If textbooks are expected to support inquiry-based history learning, then the activities they present must be realistic within the constraints of everyday school practice. In other words, textbook authors need to provide tasks grounded in accessible sources, reasonable time demands, and clear scaffolding for teachers. This finding is consistent with studies showing that teaching materials based on local wisdom, project-based learning in IPS and IPAS, and contextual learning resources can enhance the

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relevance of learning in primary education (Arifin et al., 2020; Nuruddin et al., 2020; Nora et al., 2022; Syafriafdi et al., 2023; HS et al., 2024; Sari et al., 2025).

5. Conclusion and implications

This study reveals a consistent shift in the representation of history in Indonesian primary school textbooks between the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum. In the 2013 Curriculum, historical content is more explicitly concentrated in Grades IV–VI and is primarily represented through national heroes, major national events, and chronological narratives of struggle, independence, and contribution. In the Merdeka Curriculum, history is introduced earlier, beginning in Grade III, through family traditions, local community life, and hometown narratives; it becomes less explicit in Grade IV, reappears through local and regional historical content in Grade V, and is presented more explicitly again as national history in Grade VI. These findings indicate an observable shift in the starting point, structure, and representational emphasis of history learning in primary school textbooks.

This shift is also evident in the design of learning activities, visual representation, and dominant value orientations. In the 2013 Curriculum, history learning is mainly organized through reading texts, answering factual questions, identifying figures, and retelling events, supported by visuals of heroes, national symbols, and scenes of struggle, and associated with dominant values such as nationalism, patriotism, heroism, and the moral virtues of struggle. By contrast, in the Merdeka Curriculum, activities more frequently involve observation, discussion, local exploration, simple interviews, and reflective connections between past and present, while visuals more often depict family life, local traditions, community settings, and regional environments. These patterns are more closely associated with value orientations related to local identity, social reflection, historical empathy, and critical thinking. Taken together, the findings suggest that the representation of history has shifted from a predominantly national-heroic and transmissive model toward a more contextual, reflective, and inquiry-oriented one.

The findings of this study have practical implications for several stakeholders. For textbook authors, the results point to the need to design historical materials that connect family, local, and national history more explicitly and coherently, rather than presenting them as separate layers. For schools and primary teachers, the findings highlight the importance of learning strategies that help students move from familiar local contexts toward a broader understanding of national history through realistic inquiry tasks, such as guided observation, simple interviewing, and comparisons between past and present life. For teacher education institutions, the study underlines the need to prepare prospective teachers to use local sources, facilitate age-appropriate inquiry, critically interpret textbook activities, and build meaningful pedagogical bridges between family, locality, and nation.

This study is limited to the analysis of official government-issued textbooks and does not examine how these materials are implemented in classrooms, interpreted by teachers, or experienced by students. Future research should therefore focus on classroom implementation studies, students' responses to local and national historical content, and comparative analyses of textbooks across publishers, regions, or school contexts. Such studies would deepen our understanding of how curriculum reform shapes not only the representation of history in textbooks, but also the actual practice of history learning in primary education.

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6. Limitation

This study has several limitations. First, the corpus is limited to official government-issued textbooks, so the findings do not represent commercial textbooks or supplementary learning materials that may also be used in schools. Second, the analysis focuses on textbook representation and does not examine how the materials are implemented in classroom practice, interpreted by teachers, or received by students. Third, because the study relies on qualitative coding, a degree of interpretive subjectivity remains, particularly in identifying value orientation and the communicative function of visuals, although audit trail, peer debriefing, and document triangulation were used to strengthen trustworthiness.

Credit authorship contribution statement

Nanang Suryana: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing. **Didin Saripudin**: Conceptualization, methodology, supervision, validation, writing—review and editing. **Abdul Razaq Ahmad**: Conceptualization, methodology, supervision, validation, writing—review and editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study consist of publicly available textbooks and curriculum-related documents. Additional coding records and analytical notes are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethical Declaration

Ethical approval does not apply to this manuscript. This study is based exclusively on the analysis of publicly available textbooks and curriculum-related documents and does not involve human participants, personal data, or animal subjects.

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Declaration of AI statement

ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used to assist with language improvement and manuscript revision. The authors critically reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-assisted output and take full responsibility for the final manuscript.

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