

Analysis of the Implementation of the Joyful Learning Approach in Elementary Schools

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.56480/jln.v6i1.1624>

Received: November 14, 2025

Revised: November 23, 2025

Accepted: December 28, 2025

Abstract

This study aimed to analyze the implementation of the Joyful Learning approach in elementary school learning and its impact on students' learning engagement and classroom atmosphere. The study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. The participants consisted of teachers and fifth-grade students at an elementary school implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Data were collected through participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis to obtain a comprehensive understanding of classroom learning practices. The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing conducted continuously throughout the research process. The findings indicated that the Joyful Learning approach was implemented consistently through various learning strategies, including creative greetings, educational games, group discussions, collaborative activities, and short reflections at the end of lessons. The application of these strategies created a positive, enjoyable, challenging, and motivating learning environment. This condition contributed to increased student activeness, enthusiasm, and confidence in expressing opinions and participating in learning activities. In addition, the Joyful Learning approach supported the development of more harmonious social interactions between students and teachers, as well as the establishment of a conducive classroom climate. The study concluded that Joyful Learning is a relevant and effective pedagogical approach for supporting meaningful and student-centered learning within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools.

Keywords– Joyful Learning, Merdeka Curriculum, Primary School



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1. Introduction

Elementary education is a crucial phase in establishing the foundation of students' learning, not only in cognitive aspects, but also in shaping attitudes, learning interests, and initial emotional experiences regarding the learning process. At the elementary school level, students' learning experiences will significantly determine their attitudes toward school, teachers, and learning activities at subsequent levels. Therefore, learning at this stage should ideally be designed to create a safe, comfortable, and meaningful environment that encourages ongoing active student engagement.

Several recent studies have shown that student engagement and a positive classroom atmosphere play a significant role in improving the quality of learning in elementary schools. Rigid, monotonous learning environments that focus on one-way delivery tend to reduce student motivation, limit active participation, and hinder healthy pedagogical interactions between teachers and students (Huttunen et al., 2024). On the other hand, learning designed with attention to aspects of psychological comfort, varied activities, and students' emotional involvement has been proven to increase students' enthusiasm, activeness, and courage in participating in class.

In the context of national education policy, the Independent Curriculum emphasizes the importance of student-centered learning through a deep learning approach, encompassing mindful, meaningful, and joyful dimensions. This approach places student learning experiences at the heart of the learning process, requiring teachers not only to deliver material but also to create a learning environment that fosters a sense of enjoyment, challenge, and motivation for active learning (Kaspar & Massey, 2023; Kemendikdasmen, 2025).

The Joyful Learning approach is understood as a pedagogical strategy designed to create a positive, enjoyable learning atmosphere and actively engage students in the learning process. Joyful Learning emphasizes the importance of positive emotions, interest, and student engagement so that the learning process is not perceived as a burden, but rather as a meaningful and enjoyable experience (Dwijantie, 2025).

Recent studies show that Joyful Learning contributes to increased learning motivation, student engagement, and the quality of classroom interactions. (Nofeanasari et al., 2025) found that implementing game-based learning strategies, group discussions, and collaborative activities significantly increased elementary school students' learning interest and participation. Furthermore, this approach also fostered a more conducive classroom atmosphere, where students felt safe to express their opinions, ask questions, and engage in the learning process.

Conceptually, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (Kemendikdasmen, 2025) emphasizes that enjoyable learning is learning that creates a positive, enjoyable, challenging, and motivating atmosphere for students. Based on this concept, the enjoyable learning approach (deep learning) in this study was operationalized through several indicators, as presented in Tabel 1.

Tabel 1. Fun Learning Indicator

Concept from Kemdikdasmen (2025)		Operational Indicators
Positive learning atmosphere		Establishing a supportive relationship between teachers and students so that students feel safe and comfortable
Fun learning atmosphere		Students appear enthusiastic, enjoy learning, and do not show any stress
Challenging learning atmosphere		There are creative activities such as projects, games, simulations, and role play
The learning atmosphere is motivating		Students actively ask questions, answer questions, and are directly involved in learning activities

The Joyful Learning approach is understood as a learning strategy that prioritizes enjoyable learning experiences as a means to increase student engagement and motivation. Various studies have shown that active and playful learning positively contributes to student interest, engagement, and the quality of learning experiences in elementary school settings (Blinkoff et al., 2023). Implementing enjoyable learning is not always easy for teachers to do, because it requires a balance between creating a fun learning atmosphere and achieving

meaningful academic goals (Boysen et al., 2022). Other literature also emphasizes that playful learning requires conscious and structured pedagogical planning so that play activities are not merely recreational, but continue to encourage students' deep cognitive involvement. (Størksen et al., 2023).

Teachers still face various challenges in translating student-centered and enjoyable learning concepts into concrete learning activities during elementary school practice. This is due to challenges such as limited learning time, limited media and learning resources, and the diverse characteristics and abilities of students, which require adaptive learning strategies. This is also stated by (Michael et al., 2023) who stated that elementary school teachers often experience difficulties in consistently implementing active learning due to curriculum burdens, limited planning, and a lack of ongoing pedagogical support. This situation results in innovative learning approaches, including those designed to create a fun atmosphere, not being fully implemented optimally in the classroom.

In line with these findings, a systematic review conducted by (Ventista & Brown, 2023) confirmed that the lack of teacher professional development is a major factor hindering the implementation of innovative learning approaches. Teachers generally understand the concept of student-centered learning theoretically, but still face difficulties in applying it contextually according to curriculum demands and classroom realities. Similar findings were also expressed by (Bremner et al., 2023) who stated that limited pedagogical training and institutional support impact the low quality of learning implementation that emphasizes active engagement and positive student learning experiences.

Due to these various constraints, learning designed as Joyful Learning does not always create a truly conducive classroom atmosphere that motivates all students. Implementation is often partial and highly dependent on individual teacher initiative, resulting in an uneven impact on learning engagement and classroom atmosphere. This situation indicates a gap between the ideal concept of Joyful Learning as presented in the literature and the learning practices that occur in elementary school classrooms.

The research gap lies in the limited number of empirical studies that specifically analyze the process of implementing the Joyful Learning approach in the context of real-life learning in elementary school classrooms. Most previous studies have focused more on measuring the impact or outcomes of learning, such as student motivation and learning outcomes, while aspects of how the Joyful Learning approach is realized through teacher strategies, learning activities, and classroom interaction dynamics have not been studied in depth. Because of this, this study takes a different position from previous studies by focusing on analyzing the application of the Joyful Learning approach in learning practices.

Based on the description above, it can be stated that the aim of this study is to analyze the application of the Joyful Learning approach in learning in elementary schools, by examining the learning strategies used by teachers, the forms of learning activities designed, and their implications for the atmosphere and student learning involvement in the classroom.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive approach. A descriptive qualitative approach was chosen because it is suitable for an in-depth analysis of the implementation of the Joyful Learning approach in elementary school learning, particularly regarding teacher learning strategies, the forms of learning activities, and the atmosphere and student engagement created during the learning process. This study does not aim to test hypotheses or measure effectiveness quantitatively, but rather to gain a contextual understanding of learning practices as they occur naturally in the classroom. (Nasution, 2023).

This research was conducted at Muhammadiyah 19 Elementary School in Surabaya, involving research subjects selected purposively in accordance with the research objectives. The research subjects consisted of fifth-grade teachers who served as key informants because they were directly involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning. In addition, 25 fifth-grade students were also involved as the primary data source to explore learning experiences,

levels of engagement, and student responses during the implementation of the Joyful Learning approach in learning. The selection of the location and research subjects was based on the consideration that the elementary school has implemented the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes student-centered learning. This curriculum encourages the creation of a meaningful, contextual, and enjoyable learning process, making it relevant to the research focus on the implementation of the Joyful Learning approach in elementary schools.

The data sources in this study consist of primary data and secondary data, as presented in Tabel 2.

Table 2. The data sources

Data Type	Data Source	Operasional Indicators
Basic Data	Fifth-grade Teacher	Information regarding the planning and implementation of the Joyful Learning approach,
Secondary Data	Fifth-grade Students	Learning experiences, engagement, and perceptions of the learning environment.
Secondary Data	Learning Documentation	Photos of learning activities, class notes, and other supporting documents.

Data collection was conducted through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation to obtain comprehensive data using data triangulation. Observations were used to directly observe the implementation of Joyful Learning in the classroom, with a focus on teacher strategies, learning activity design, student engagement, and classroom atmosphere. Theoretically, observations are considered effective in capturing the dynamics of learning behavior and interactions in a naturalistic manner, including the construction of student engagement, which encompasses behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions (Ahmadi et al., 2023).

The observation and interview guidelines were developed based on the theory of learning emotions, which emphasizes the role of teacher and student emotions in creating effective classroom interactions and a conducive learning climate (Frenzel et al., 2024), as well as empirical findings demonstrating a significant relationship between the learning environment, including instructional

support, environmental stimulation, and learning structure, and student engagement (Moges et al., 2025). Based on these references, the observation and interview instruments were formulated and presented in table 3, 4, and 5 below.

Tabel 3. Observation Guidelines for the Implementation of Joyful Learning

Observed Aspects	Indicators	Recording Techniques
Teacher Activities	How teachers design and implement enjoyable learning	Display scale + descriptive notes
Student Activities	Student engagement and participation in learning activities	Scale + descriptive notes
Classroom Atmosphere	A positive, enjoyable, challenging, and motivating learning atmosphere	Scale + descriptive notes
Classroom Interactions	Teacher-student and student-student interaction patterns during learning	Narrative description

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore teachers' and students' understanding, experiences, and perspectives regarding the implementation of the Joyful Learning approach in teaching. The interviews were conducted flexibly, guided by the key questions that had been developed.

Tabel 4. Teacher Interview Guide

Aspects	Key Questions
Conceptual Understanding	How do you understand the Joyful Learning approach to learning?
Learning Practice	What strategies do you use to create joyful learning?
Challenges	What challenges do you face in implementing Joyful Learning in the classroom?
Learning Impact	How does this learning impact classroom engagement and atmosphere?

Tabel 5. Student Interview Guidelines

Aspects	Key Questions
Learning Atmosphere	Does learning in class feel enjoyable? Why?
Learning Activities	What activities do you enjoy most during class?
Engagement	Are you more active in asking questions or expressing opinions during class?
Learning Motivation	Does class make you more enthusiastic about learning?

Documentation was used to support and strengthen data from observations and interviews. Documentation included photographs of learning activities, learning notes, and other documents relevant to the implementation of the Joyful

Learning approach in the classroom. The research data in this study were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis model, which proceeded cyclically and continuously. This model encompasses three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. The analysis process was not carried out linearly, but rather interconnected and continued from the beginning of data collection until the end of the study, as shown in Figure 1.

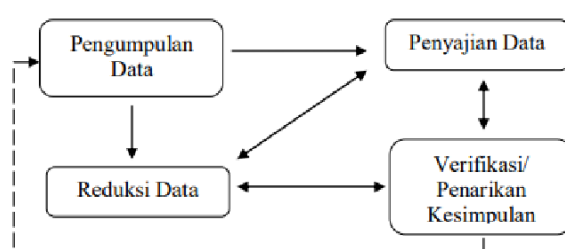


Figure 1. Miles & Huberman Data Analysis Techniques

The first stage is data reduction, which is carried out by sorting, selecting, and focusing data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation. At this stage, researchers select data relevant to the research focus, namely the application of the Joyful Learning approach in learning, so that the analyzed data truly represents the phenomenon being studied. The next stage is data presentation. The reduced data is then presented in the form of narrative descriptions, tables, and groupings of main themes. This data presentation aims to facilitate researchers in understanding patterns, trends, and relationships between data categories, while also facilitating the systematic interpretation process. The final stage is conclusion drawing and verification. At this stage, researchers identify patterns, relationships, and meanings that emerge from the presented data. The conclusions drawn are not final from the outset, but are continuously verified with existing data to ensure the research findings have a high level of validity.

To increase the credibility of the research results, source triangulation and technical triangulation techniques were used. Triangulation was conducted by comparing and confirming data obtained through observation, interviews, and

documentation. This way, the accuracy and reliability of the research findings were optimally maintained.

3. Result and Discussion

First, in terms of Teacher Activities, observations show that teachers consistently displayed enthusiasm and positive emotional expressions throughout the lesson. Teachers began the class with a short icebreaker to build students' affective readiness, then integrated contextual humor as a strategy for class emotional regulation and strengthening learning attention, in accordance with the developmental characteristics of elementary school students. Transitions between activities were carried out dynamically and planned, as seen from the alternating activities of writing, discussions, mini-presentations, and displays of work without pauses that would reduce class energy. Teachers were also observed providing scaffolding (teacher strategies) verbally and non-verbally when students experienced writing difficulties, for example through modeling sentence structure on the board, affirmative reinforcement "try first, I'll help later," and tiered guidance within groups so that the writing process did not stop for certain students. In addition, teachers designed simple project-based assignments such as story posters and collaborative stories, which not only created a fun writing experience but also became a vehicle for idea production and social collaboration.

Based on the display scale used in the observation recording, the teacher's activities obtained data in the "very visible" category. This category indicates that the teacher not only succeeded in presenting enjoyable learning, but also maintained the quality of emotional, pedagogical, and managerial interactions simultaneously, so that the class ran warmly, directed, and instructionally meaningful. This finding confirms that the implementation of Joyful Learning by the teacher took place intentionally, not spontaneously without design, and reflects the teacher's ability to manage affective experiences as part of the learning strategy in elementary school.

The interpretation of the findings of this study confirms that the implementation of Joyful Learning in elementary school learning not only creates

a pleasant classroom atmosphere, but also correlates with and directly influences students' emotional and behavioral engagement, especially in the context of writing activities that require social interaction and affective resilience. The consistency of the findings regarding teacher enthusiasm, the use of contextual humor, dynamic activity transitions, and tiered scaffolding reflects the characteristics of a positive, structured learning environment that supports student engagement behaviorally and affectively, as evidenced by the fact that positive teacher emotions such as joy are significantly related to instructional quality and classroom climate in elementary schools (Holzer et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024).

Second, in terms of Student Activities, observation findings indicate a high level of student engagement, particularly in activities that require collaboration and production. Students actively participated in group discussions, shared ideas when developing project storylines, and participated in collaborative writing activities. Furthermore, students appeared to raise their hands more frequently to ask questions or provide opinions when learning took place in a dialogic, group-based format. In terms of engagement, student activity can be categorized as "very engaged." Descriptive field data also noted that students showed no anxiety when writing, were willing to try to structure sentences, and appeared to enjoy the process of writing group papers.

The reciprocal relationship between teachers and students in real classrooms shows that teacher engagement is a strong predictor of student engagement and the emergence of positive emotions towards learning tasks. Other findings also confirm that intentionally designed playful learning encourages students to shift from passive roles to active participants cognitively and affectively, and increases intrinsic motivation through collaborative experiences and pride in written work output, including when work is presented or displayed in class. (Boysen et al., 2022; Bremner et al., 2023; Størksen et al., 2023). Thus, Joyful Learning in elementary school learning must be understood as a pedagogical strategy that is intentional, filled with positive emotions, collaborative, challenging, and inclusive, which simultaneously strengthens teacher-student pedagogical relations,

classroom climate, and students' authentic engagement in the writing process and products.

Third, in terms of Classroom Atmosphere, observation results indicate that the classroom climate is formed as a positive, enjoyable, and challenging learning space. This is characterized by cheerful student facial expressions, a relaxed writing atmosphere, spontaneous responses to teacher challenges, and the emergence of healthy competition when group work is presented or displayed in class. The teacher also creates a motivating classroom situation through verbal appreciation, providing space for exploring ideas, and displaying student work in the classroom area as a form of psychological reinforcement. Based on the classroom atmosphere category, the results obtained are categorized as "very conducive and enjoyable." Descriptive notes also confirm that there is no intimidating atmosphere or stressful interactions found, so students appear to have a safe space to express ideas and write independently or collaboratively, as seen in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Group Discussion Activity

The classroom atmosphere, narrated as a positive and challenging learning space in this study, can also be linked to the learning environment framework, which emphasizes that a positive emotional and social environment directly influences students' motivation, sense of safety, and learning engagement throughout the learning process. In educational psychology, the classroom environment is understood as a complex context where cognitive, social, emotional, and motivational factors interact and determine the dynamics of student learning. This atmosphere is not only a physical setting but also a place where interpersonal relationships occur that support or hinder student engagement. Recent research also shows that a positive classroom climate and

healthy interpersonal relationships between teachers and students significantly predict levels of student engagement, including emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement. (Xu et al., 2025).

Although most of the empirical literature on the impact of classroom environment on student engagement comes from research in higher education contexts or advanced language courses, the principle of the relationship between classroom climate, students' psychological well-being, and academic engagement remains relevant and applicable to elementary education; because a conducive emotional and social classroom structure provides a basis for students to feel safe to actively participate, explore ideas, and express themselves without fear of negative evaluation (Fernanda et al., 2024). Thus, a positive and challenging classroom atmosphere is not only an empirical description in the results of this study, but also reflects a fundamental component of learning that is important for student engagement in the learning process, where an engagement includes active behavioral responses, emotional enthusiasm, and cognitive involvement in learning tasks.

Fourth, in terms of Classroom Interaction, narrative observation records illustrate that teacher-student interactions were dialogic, responsive, and supportive. The teacher responded positively to every student contribution, whether in the form of questions or ideas. Student-student interactions also appeared dynamic, marked by spontaneous peer feedback, mutual assistance when writing project papers, and peer scaffolding during the writing process. These findings demonstrate that the classroom is not only enjoyable but also a social space rich in the exchange of ideas, emotional support, and collaboration in writing.

Regarding classroom interactions and student responses, the findings that students dared to ask questions, collaborate, and actively participate are logical consequences of a learning approach that provides a space for psychological safety and social flexibility. This shows that Joyful Learning creates a learning environment that is not only enjoyable but also inclusive, where students feel comfortable making mistakes, asking questions without fear, and providing peer-

feedback support. This kind of classroom dynamic reinforces the relevance of the Joyful Learning approach to a more humanistic, collaborative, and experiential learning pattern, thus supporting holistic student engagement.

Fifth, the results of teacher interviews revealed that teachers understand Joyful Learning as a learning approach that emphasizes the enjoyment of the learning process as a catalyst for student engagement, while remaining oriented toward achieving meaningful competencies and instructional challenges. Teachers conveyed that joyful learning must be consciously designed, planned, and have explicit pedagogical objectives, so that enjoyable activities are not merely a distraction, but rather a strategy for creating relevant learning experiences for elementary school students. In writing lessons, teachers implement strategies in the form of writing projects based on real outcomes (for example, group story compilations and class work displays), language games to stimulate attention and exploration of ideas, and collaborative activities that provide space for discussion and the division of writing roles among students.



Figure 3. Ice Breaking Activities in Class

Teachers assessed that this approach was also supported by positive feedback and appreciation given by teachers both individually and in groups to students. Challenges reported by teachers were primarily related to limited learning time management to accommodate rapid activity transitions, as well as the diversity of student writing abilities that required flexible adaptation of instruction. Teachers revealed that there were differences in writing speed, neatness of writing, and courage to express ideas among students, so the mentoring process often had to be carried out simultaneously in several groups, which could potentially reduce the depth of mentoring if not managed efficiently.

Regarding its impact, teachers felt that this approach contributed to increasing students' courage to ask questions and express opinions, a more fluid and minimally stressful writing atmosphere, and more lively class engagement during the writing process, especially during project-based and group-based assignments. Teachers also highlighted that displaying students' work in class was a form of emotional reinforcement and academic pride for students, which resulted in increased student participation in subsequent writing activities. These findings indicate that the Joyful Learning practices implemented by teachers have manifested as a pedagogical approach that is affectively meaningful, socially interactive, and remains instructionally directed in learning in elementary schools.

Sixth, student interviews revealed data related to the learning environment, indicating that most students perceived writing in class as a fun, non-stressful activity that provided a space for collaborative learning. Students reported that writing in a group format helped them express their ideas more easily, received peer support when they struggled with sentence structure, and built their confidence in completing their writing, particularly on story writing assignments and project posters.

The students' most preferred activity was collaborative group story-telling, as it made them feel like they were making a real contribution to the learning process. Students also reported asking questions or expressing opinions more frequently when learning took place through discussions, language games, or project completion, compared to when learning was conducted individually without group interaction. In terms of engagement, students reported being more willing to raise their hands and comment on their peers' writing when the teacher created a relaxed and supportive classroom atmosphere. In terms of motivation, students reported being more enthusiastic about writing when their work was appreciated, either through direct praise from the teacher or through classroom displays visible to their peers and other teachers. Students expressed that displaying their work made them feel proud, motivated to improve their writing, and wanted to produce better writing on subsequent assignments.

Based on research findings, Joyful Learning, from a student perspective, is not simply "learning while having fun," but rather provides pressure-free and collaborative learning, creating meaningful affective and cognitive experiences. This approach provides a sense of safety in expressing oneself, social support, and pride in learning outcomes, as well as increasing engagement, intrinsic motivation, and long-term learning outcomes for elementary school students

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the application of the Joyful Learning approach in elementary school learning can be implemented consistently and effectively and contributes significantly to creating a positive, meaningful, and student-centered learning atmosphere. This approach not only increases students' behavioral, emotional, and social learning engagement but also strengthens the quality of pedagogical interactions between teachers and students in the context of implementing the Independent Curriculum. Teachers play a strategic role as facilitators who adaptively design enjoyable learning without neglecting the achievement of learning objectives. The findings of this study have an impact on strengthening innovative pedagogical practices in elementary schools and serve as a conceptual reference for teacher professional development and school institutional support in realizing humanistic, participatory, and relevant learning to meet the demands of 21st-century learning.

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