

# Conceptual Analysis of the Merdeka Curriculum in Early Childhood Education

Aulia Khairunnisa Putri<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia Kampus Cibiru; [auliakhairunnisaputri@upi.edu](mailto:auliakhairunnisaputri@upi.edu)

## Keywords:

Curriculum, Early Childhood Education, Independent Curriculum

**Abstract:** This literature review aims to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Early Childhood Education (ECE), covering its conceptual foundations, philosophical underpinnings, principles, components, and the evolution of curriculum policies in Indonesia leading to its establishment. The study employs a descriptive qualitative approach through a systematic literature review method. Data sources consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, government policy documents, and other relevant publications published between 2013 and 2024. The data were collected through academic database searches, including Google Scholar and national journal portals, using keywords related to the Merdeka Curriculum and Early Childhood Education. The collected data were analyzed using content analysis techniques involving data reduction, categorization, synthesis, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes flexibility and a child-centered learning approach. It provides educators with autonomy to design contextual and meaningful learning experiences through models such as Project-Based Learning and Inquiry-Based Learning. Therefore, aligning instructional models with the characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum is essential to achieve learning objectives and to optimally support early childhood development.

## Kata Kunci:

Kurikulum, Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, Kurikulum Merdeka

**Abstrak:** Kajian literatur ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka pada Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini (PAUD), meliputi konsep, landasan filosofis, prinsip, komponen, serta perkembangan kebijakan kurikulum di Indonesia hingga lahirnya Kurikulum Merdeka. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kajian literatur dengan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif. Sumber data diperoleh dari artikel jurnal ilmiah, buku, dokumen kebijakan pemerintah, serta publikasi relevan yang terbit dalam rentang tahun 2013–2024. Proses pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui penelusuran basis data akademik seperti Google Scholar dan portal jurnal nasional, dengan kata kunci terkait Kurikulum Merdeka dan PAUD. Data dianalisis menggunakan teknik analisis isi (content analysis) melalui tahap reduksi data, kategorisasi, sintesis, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa Kurikulum Merdeka menekankan fleksibilitas pembelajaran dan pendekatan yang berpusat pada anak. Kurikulum ini memberikan keleluasaan bagi pendidik untuk merancang pembelajaran yang kontekstual dan bermakna melalui model seperti Project Based Learning dan Inquiry Based Learning. Oleh karena itu, penyesuaian model pembelajaran dengan karakteristik Kurikulum Merdeka menjadi aspek penting dalam mendukung pencapaian tujuan pembelajaran serta optimalisasi perkembangan anak usia dini.

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.52593/kid.03.2.05>

Submission: February 7, 2026, revised: February 25, 2026, accepted: February 26, 2026

## INTRODUCTION

The development of the times has driven changes in various aspects of life, including the field of education. The education system is required to be adaptive to social and cultural dynamics as well as advancements in science in order to remain relevant to learners' needs. One of the fundamental components of the education system is the curriculum, which functions as a guideline for planning, implementing, and evaluating learning. Without a well-directed curriculum, the



educational process risks losing its orientation and clear objectives, including in the context of Early Childhood Education (ECE) (Retnangsih et al., 2022).

In recent years, curriculum policy in Indonesia has undergone transformation with the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes flexibility, child-centered learning, and the strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile (Ashfarina et al., 2023; Rani et al., 2023). Although various studies have examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in educational institutions, most research still focuses on practices at the primary and secondary education levels. Studies that specifically examine the Merdeka Curriculum in the context of Early Childhood Education through a systematic literature approach remain relatively limited. Furthermore, there is still a lack of research integrating discussions on its conceptual foundations, principles, and implications for learning models in ECE within a single comprehensive study.

On the other hand, the learning models recommended in the Merdeka Curriculum, such as project-based learning and inquiry-based learning, require adaptation to the developmental stages of early childhood. However, the literature specifically addressing the relationship between the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum and the selection of appropriate learning models for ECE remains scattered and has not been systematically synthesized. This condition indicates the need for a comprehensive literature review to identify, analyze, and formulate the theoretical relevance between curriculum policy and instructional practices at the ECE level. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap through a structured and focused literature analysis.

Based on this background, the study aims to conduct a literature review on the Merdeka Curriculum in Early Childhood Education, focusing on the analysis of its concepts, principles, and relevance to learning models that support the optimization of children's development. Through a literature review approach, this research is expected to provide a more structured theoretical synthesis and serve as an academic reference for educators, researchers, and policymakers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the ECE level.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a literature review method with a descriptive qualitative approach to examine and analyze various written sources related to the Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum, particularly within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. This method was chosen to obtain a comprehensive

understanding of the concepts, foundations, principles, learning approaches, and implementation challenges of the ECE curriculum based on previously published research findings and theoretical studies.

The data sources were obtained through a review of scientific articles, reference books, and official government policy documents published between 2013 and 2024. The literature search was conducted through academic databases such as Google Scholar, national journal portals (SINTA), and institutional repositories using the following keywords: "ECE curriculum," "Merdeka Curriculum for ECE," "implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum," and "ECE learning models."

The inclusion criteria in this study were: (1) articles or books discussing the ECE curriculum or the Merdeka Curriculum conceptually or in terms of implementation; (2) publications in accredited scientific journals or by academic publishers; (3) relevance to the research focus; and (4) publication within the specified time frame. The exclusion criteria included: (1) non-scientific opinion articles; (2) sources without clear authorship and publication year; and (3) literature not directly related to the context of ECE in Indonesia. Based on this selection process, a total of 25 literature sources were obtained and analyzed, consisting of 20 journal articles and 5 reference books.

Data analysis was conducted using a narrative synthesis technique with a thematic approach. The stages of analysis included: (1) identification and collection of relevant literature; (2) selection and classification based on inclusion and exclusion criteria; (3) critical reading and documentation of key points; (4) thematic grouping, such as curriculum foundations, principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, and ECE learning models; (5) comparison and analysis of similarities and differences in perspectives across sources; and (6) systematic drawing of conclusions.

Through these stages, this study is expected to produce a structured theoretical synthesis and provide a comprehensive overview of the development and implementation of the ECE curriculum in Indonesia.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Concepts and Foundations of the ECE Curriculum**

The results of the literature review indicate that the Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum is generally defined as a set of plans and arrangements concerning objectives, content, teaching materials, and

learning strategies designed in accordance with children's developmental stages. Morisson (as cited in Kurniah et al., 2025) emphasizes the curriculum as a guideline for organizing learning activities. This definition aligns with Law Number 20 of 2003, which defines the curriculum as a structured set of plans aimed at achieving specific educational objectives (Ni'mah, 2017).

Sue Bredekamp and Carol Copple (2021) further argue that the ECE curriculum must be developmentally appropriate, meaning that it should align with children's developmental characteristics and position children as active subjects through play and exploration (Kurniah et al., 2025). Meanwhile, Carol Gestwicki (2020) views the curriculum as having a coordinative function that integrates objectives, content, methods, media, and assessment within a unified system.

In general, the literature identifies five main foundations of the ECE curriculum:

- a) Philosophical Foundation – Rooted in constructivism, particularly the ideas of Lev Vygotsky, which emphasize social interaction in cognitive development, as well as humanism, especially Carl Rogers' perspective that views learning as a process of self-actualization.
- b) Psychological Foundation – Based on child development theories that require learning to be aligned with age stages and individual characteristics.
- c) Socio-Cultural Foundation – Emphasizes the social and cultural context as an environment for constructing learning meaning.
- d) Juridical Foundation – Supported by national regulations such as Law No. 20 of 2003, Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 137 of 2014, and the latest policies related to the Merdeka Curriculum.
- e) Empirical Foundation – Based on research findings and actual needs identified in the field.

### **Components and Principles of Curriculum Development**

The literature identifies four main curriculum components according to S. Nasution, namely: objectives, teaching materials, learning processes,

and evaluation (Ni'mah, 2017). These four components are integrative in nature. The principles of curriculum development frequently cited in the literature include: relevance, flexibility, continuity, efficiency, and effectiveness (Shofiyah, 2018). Recent studies emphasize that flexibility has become an increasingly dominant principle in contemporary curriculum policies.

### **Development of ECE Curriculum Policy in Indonesia**

The results of the historical review indicate that the orientation of the ECE curriculum in Indonesia has evolved over time. The 1964–1976 curriculum tended to be academically and morally oriented. During the 1984–1994 period, there was a shift toward an integrated approach and greater attention to children's characteristics. The Competency-Based Curriculum (2004) and the School-Based Curriculum (KTSP) emphasized decentralization and basic competencies. The 2013 Curriculum strengthened character education and the scientific approach.

The Merdeka Curriculum emerged as the latest policy, emphasizing flexibility, project-based learning, the strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile, and more formative assessment practices.

### **Learning Models Supporting the Merdeka Curriculum**

The literature identifies several relevant models:

a) Project-Based Learning (PjBL)

This model is emphasized as a primary approach within the Merdeka Curriculum. The literature (Rosa et al., 2024; Sari et al., 2017) states that PjBL enhances children's engagement through contextual projects. However, its challenges lie in teachers' readiness and the suitability of project topics to early childhood characteristics.

b) Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL)

This model positions children as active investigators (Agustini et al., 2024). It is effective in fostering critical thinking skills but requires extended time allocation and effective classroom management.

c) Other Model

Problem-Based Learning, Discovery Learning, and Cooperative Learning are also identified as supportive models for meaningful, play-based learning.

**Table 1.** Summary of Literature Synthesis Findings

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Main Findings</b>	<b>Literature Trends</b>
Curriculum Definition	A structured set of plans covering objectives, content, and methods	Consistent across sources
Philosophical Foundation	Constructivism & humanism are dominant	Emphasizes the child as an active subject
Development Principles	Flexibility is increasingly dominant	Aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum
Policy Orientation	Shift from academic to holistic orientation	Increasingly child-centered
Learning Models	PjBL & IBL are most relevant	Effective but require teacher readiness

Source: Author's synthesis (2026)

### **Discussion**

The synthesis of the literature indicates that the ECE curriculum is not merely understood as a learning planning document, but as a pedagogical system that reflects a particular educational paradigm. Definitions of curriculum according to national regulations and classical scholars tend to emphasize its structural function—namely, as a set of plans and arrangements concerning objectives, content, teaching materials, and evaluation. This perspective positions the curriculum as a normative instrument that ensures the achievement of educational goals and the standardization of quality. However, contemporary literature adds a more dynamic pedagogical dimension, particularly through the developmentally appropriate practice approach, which emphasizes aligning learning with children's developmental stages and individual characteristics. Thus, there is a shift in the meaning of curriculum from being merely an administrative document to becoming a pedagogical framework oriented toward children's learning experiences.

From a philosophical perspective, the dominance of constructivist and humanist theories in the literature demonstrates a shared understanding that children are active subjects in the learning process. Constructivism views knowledge as constructed through social interaction and direct experience, while humanism emphasizes self-actualization and the holistic development of individual potential. Both foundations contribute to strengthening the paradigm of child-centered learning. Within the context of the Merdeka

Curriculum, this principle is reflected in granting autonomy to teachers and educational institutions to design contextual and flexible learning experiences. In other words, theoretically, the Merdeka Curriculum maintains continuity with the philosophical foundations of ECE. However, the literature also warns that implementing constructivist and humanistic approaches requires a learning environment that supports interaction, exploration, and positive teacher–child relationships.

From a psychological foundation perspective, the ECE curriculum must be grounded in child development theories, including cognitive, socio-emotional, language, and motor development. The literature emphasizes that learning experiences that are not aligned with developmental stages may hinder the optimization of children’s potential. Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes flexibility and formative assessment, is considered relevant for accommodating individual differences. Nevertheless, such flexibility requires teachers’ competence in observing developmental progress and designing meaningful play-based activities. Without these competencies, flexibility may lead to a lack of clear instructional direction.

The development of ECE curriculum policy in Indonesia demonstrates a significant paradigm transformation. In earlier periods, policy was more oriented toward academic readiness and basic moral formation. Over time, there has been a shift toward a more holistic and integrative approach, particularly since the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum, which strengthened character education and the scientific approach. The Merdeka Curriculum further expands this direction by granting greater autonomy to educational institutions. Compared to previous curricula, its main distinction lies in the degree of flexibility and its emphasis on projects aimed at strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile. The literature suggests that this change reflects efforts by the education system to respond more effectively to 21st-century challenges, including fostering creativity, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking from an early age.

In terms of learning models, the literature identifies Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) as the most frequently

recommended approaches to support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Comparative analysis indicates that PjBL offers a more systematic sequence of stages, ranging from formulating fundamental questions to evaluating project outcomes. This model is considered effective in building contextual and integrative learning experiences. In contrast, IBL places greater emphasis on flexible exploration and investigation processes, thereby encouraging curiosity and children's critical thinking skills.

However, the literature also identifies several challenges. In PjBL, teachers often face difficulties in determining projects that are appropriate for early childhood characteristics and environmental contexts. In IBL, the primary constraints relate to time management and teachers' ability to facilitate investigative processes without dominating learning activities. This indicates that the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum depends not only on the selection of learning models but also on teachers' professional capacity and the supportiveness of the learning environment.

Conceptually, the Merdeka Curriculum aligns with the principles of relevance, flexibility, continuity, efficiency, and effectiveness in curriculum development. Flexibility emerges as the most prominent and distinguishing aspect compared to previous curricula. However, the literature indicates that flexibility must remain within the framework of national education goals in order to avoid excessive disparities in quality among educational institutions. Therefore, a balance between autonomy and accountability is essential in its implementation.

Furthermore, the literature emphasizes the importance of parental involvement as educational partners within the Merdeka Curriculum in ECE. Project-based and play-based experiential approaches will be more optimal when supported by consistent stimulation at home. Thus, the curriculum is not solely the responsibility of schools but forms part of a broader educational ecosystem.

Overall, this discussion demonstrates that the Merdeka Curriculum has a strong conceptual foundation aligned with child development theories and principles of early childhood education. Policy transformation reflects a paradigm shift toward more humanistic, flexible, and contextual learning.

However, the effectiveness of implementation depends greatly on teacher readiness, institutional support, and comprehensive understanding of children's developmental characteristics. Therefore, strengthening educators' competencies and providing continuous professional support are crucial factors in ensuring the optimal implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in ECE settings.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the literature review, the curriculum can be understood as a framework that regulates the learning process from beginning to end in order to support all aspects of children's development. The evolution of curriculum policy in Indonesia reflects continuous efforts to adapt early childhood education to children's needs and the demands of the times, leading to the emergence of the Merdeka Curriculum policy. This curriculum emphasizes flexibility and a child-centered approach. Learning models such as Project-Based Learning, Problem-Based Learning, Inquiry-Based Learning, and others can assist educators in implementing creative and engaging learning experiences while still taking into account the characteristics of early childhood. The selection of learning models and strategies must also be aligned with children's characteristics, as this alignment has been shown to maximize the achievement of learning objectives. Therefore, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Early Childhood Education must be grounded in a thorough understanding of its principles, components, and children's developmental characteristics. The appropriate selection of learning models and strategies represents a strategic step toward improving the quality of early childhood education in Indonesia.

## **REFERENCES**

- Agustini., dkk. (2024). *Inquiry Based Learning dalam Kurikulum Merdeka*. PT Mifandi Mandiri Digital.
- Ashfarina, I. N., Soedjarwo, & W., D. T. W. (2023). Implementasi kurikulum merdeka belajar di pendidikan anak usia dini (PAUD). *EDUKASIA: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pembelajaran*, 4(2), 1355–1364. <http://jurnaledukasia.org>

- Damiati, M., Junaedi, N., & Asbari, M. (2024). Prinsip pembelajaran dalam Kurikulum Merdeka. *JISMA: Journal of Information Systems and Management*, 3(2), 11–17.
- Kemendikbud RI. (2021). *Buku Saku Tanya Jawab Kurikulum Merdeka*. Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia.
- Kurniah, N., & Sapri, J. (2025). *Pengembangan Kurikulum PAUD*. Eureka Media Aksara.
- Maula, I., Pangastuti, R., Nurhayati, I., Marini., dkk. (2021). *Kurikulum Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*. CV Azka Pustaka.
- Ni'mah, R. (2017). Pengembangan kurikulum pendidikan anak usia dini. *Al Ulya: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 2(1), 16–27.
- Prameswari, T. W. (2020). Merdeka belajar: Sebuah konsep pembelajaran anak usia dini menuju Indonesia Emas 2045. *Prosiding Seminar Nasional Penalaran dan Penelitian Nusantara*, 1, 76–86.
- Rani, P. R., Asbari, M., Ananta, V., & Alim, I. (2023). Kurikulum Merdeka: Transformasi pembelajaran yang relevan, sederhana, dan fleksibel. *Journal of Information System and Management*, 2(6), 78–84.
- Retnaningsih, L. E., & Khairiyah, U. (2022). Kurikulum Merdeka pada pendidikan anak usia dini. *Seling: Jurnal Program Studi PGRA*, 8(2), 143–158.
- Rohayani, F. (2018). Model pembelajaran inkuiri untuk pendidikan anak usia dini. *Golden Age Jurnal Ilmiah Tumbuh Kembang Anak*, 3(1), 43–52.
- Rosa, E., Destian, R., Agustian, A., & Wahyudin. (2024). Inovasi model dan strategi pembelajaran dan implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka. *Journal of Education Research*, 5(3), 2608–2617.
- Sari, A. Y., & Astuti, R. D. (2017). Implementasi pembelajaran Project Based Learning untuk anak usia dini. *Jurnal Motoric: Media of Teaching-Oriented and Children*, 1(1).
- Shofiyah. (2018). Prinsip-prinsip pengembangan kurikulum dalam upaya meningkatkan kualitas pembelajaran. *Edureligia: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam*, 2(2), 122–130.
- Suryani, Y., Khoirunnisa, D., & Sari, D. A. (2024). Kebijakan kurikulum PAUD Indonesia dari masa ke masa. *JPMP: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan*, 1(2), 86–106.
- Ulfa, M. (2021). Pembelajaran anak usia dini dalam teori humanistik. *Hamka Pendidikan Islam: Jurnal Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Tarbiyah*, 1(1), 108–121.

- Wardani, I. R., Zuani, M. I. P., & Kholis, N. (2023). Teori belajar perkembangan kognitif Lev Vygotsky dan implikasinya dalam pembelajaran. *Dimar: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 4(2), 333–346.
- Zahra, E. (2022). Studi literatur: Konsep Kurikulum Merdeka pada satuan pendidikan anak usia dini. *Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini Undiksha*, 10(2), 1–9.
- Zulkarnaen., Wardhani, J. D., Katoningsih, S., & Asmawulan, T. (2023). Manfaat model pembelajaran Project Based Learning untuk pendidikan anak usia dini dan implementasinya dalam Kurikulum Merdeka. *Jurnal Bunga Rampai Usia Emas (BRUE)*, 9(2), 394–409.