

Challenges and Opportunities in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Early Childhood Education (ECE)

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Abstract: Early Childhood Education (ECE) plays a fundamental role in supporting children's holistic development. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in ECE introduces a flexible, child-centered, and experience-based learning paradigm. This study aims to analyze the opportunities and challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in ECE and to formulate a contextual conceptual framework for its implementation. The research employs a literature review method using a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach through the synthesis of relevant scholarly sources, regulations, and previous research findings. The findings reveal that the Merdeka Curriculum provides opportunities to improve learning quality through interest-based learning, thematic project activities, strengthening character education aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile, and continuous professional development for teachers. However, several challenges persist, including limited facilities and infrastructure, insufficient teacher understanding of curriculum planning and authentic assessment, administrative burdens, and low parental involvement. As an analytical contribution, this article proposes a synthesized implementation framework consisting of four key dimensions: teacher readiness, institutional support, family engagement, and child-centered learning environments. This framework is expected to serve as a reference for strengthening the effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in ECE settings.

Kata Kunci:

Kurikulum Merdeka, Hambatan dan Tantangan, Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini

Abstrak: Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini (PAUD) merupakan fondasi penting bagi perkembangan anak secara holistik. Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka di PAUD menghadirkan paradigma pembelajaran yang fleksibel, berpusat pada anak, dan berbasis pengalaman langsung. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peluang dan tantangan implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka di PAUD serta merumuskan kerangka konseptual implementasi yang kontekstual. Penelitian menggunakan metode studi kepustakaan dengan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif-analitis melalui sintesis berbagai sumber ilmiah, regulasi, dan hasil penelitian terkait. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa Kurikulum Merdeka memberikan peluang dalam peningkatan kualitas pembelajaran melalui pembelajaran berbasis minat anak, kegiatan proyek tematik, penguatan karakter yang selaras dengan Profil Pelajar Pancasila, serta pengembangan profesionalisme guru. Namun, implementasinya masih menghadapi tantangan berupa keterbatasan sarana dan prasarana, rendahnya pemahaman guru terhadap perencanaan dan asesmen autentik, beban administrasi, serta minimnya keterlibatan orang tua. Sebagai kontribusi analitis, artikel ini menawarkan kerangka sintesis implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka di PAUD yang mencakup empat dimensi utama: kesiapan guru, dukungan kelembagaan, keterlibatan keluarga, dan lingkungan belajar yang berpihak pada anak. Kerangka ini diharapkan dapat menjadi acuan dalam memperkuat efektivitas implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka di PAUD.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is the fundamental foundation of a nation's development. Through education, society is equipped with knowledge, skills, values, and character that support social life. Education also fosters individuals who think

critically, act ethically, and behave responsibly, enabling them to participate actively in national development. Furthermore, education functions to improve welfare, reduce inequality, and prepare future generations to face upcoming challenges.

According to Williandro, J. (2024), in Indonesia, equal access to education has become a strategic agenda to realize a just, prosperous, and independent society. Education is viewed as the primary means of shaping a generation with global competitiveness and readiness. Juridically, the implementation of education in Indonesia has a strong legal foundation. This commitment is reflected in policies such as the compulsory education program and social assistance initiatives, which aim to reduce educational disparities among regions in Indonesia. Therefore, education needs to be provided optimally from an early age. At this stage, children are in the golden age, a period during which growth and development occur very rapidly. During this phase, appropriate and high-quality stimulation is crucial, as every experience and piece of information received by children significantly influences their development and future lives. Early Childhood Education (ECE) represents one form of national commitment to providing educational services aimed at supporting children's developmental processes through various learning activities appropriate to their developmental stages (Hasanah, Nur, et al., 2021). In achieving these objectives, the curriculum becomes one of the primary elements in the implementation of education.

The curriculum serves as a guide in planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning process to ensure it aligns with learners' needs. Through a properly designed curriculum, learning can take place meaningfully, enjoyably, and in accordance with the principle of learning through play. A curriculum is a system or a set of plans and arrangements of learning materials that functions as the main reference in the implementation of the teaching and learning process. According to Law No. 20 of 2003 (DosenPendidikan.Co.Id, 2023), the curriculum is defined as a set of plans and arrangements covering objectives, content, materials, and methods used as guidelines in achieving educational goals.

After undergoing several curriculum reforms in Indonesia, in March 2024 the Merdeka Curriculum was officially enacted as the national curriculum for all schools in Indonesia (Jasmine, 2024). This curriculum was developed with the primary aim of strengthening students' competencies as a continuation of previous curriculum developments. According to Kelanakids.com, the curriculum

introduces several innovations, including deeper learning that is not rigidly tied to pace, alignment with students' stages of developmental achievement, and character strengthening through project-based learning aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile. Through the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in ECE, the learning process is expected to support all aspects of children's development. Thus, the Merdeka Curriculum functions not only as a guideline for instruction but also as a strategic effort to realize high-quality, relevant early childhood education services that are oriented toward children's developmental needs.

METHOD

This study employs a literature review method with a descriptive-analytical qualitative approach. Data sources were obtained from accredited scientific journal articles, books, educational policy documents, and official regulations related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Early Childhood Education (ECE). The selected literature consists of relevant and recent publications, focusing on curriculum implementation, child-centered learning, and educational policy evaluation.

The analysis process was conducted through several stages: (1) identification and selection of literature based on relevance criteria and thematic alignment; (2) data reduction and categorization to group findings related to opportunities and challenges in implementation; (3) comparative analysis across sources to identify patterns, gaps, and conceptual linkages; and (4) synthesis of findings to formulate a conceptual framework for the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in ECE. The results of the analysis are presented systematically in a descriptive-narrative format, emphasizing the integration of findings and analytical contributions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is understood as an initial phase that determines the development of children's fundamental abilities and character. According to Sutarman & Asih (2016, cited in Devianti et al., 2020), ECE programs are designed to optimize children's potential and creativity in accordance with their developmental stages, enabling them to adapt and interact positively with their surrounding environment. Therefore, learning in ECE is directed toward providing concrete and meaningful

learning experiences, positioning the child as the center of the learning process.

According to Daulay & Fauzidin (2023), the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes varied intracurricular learning with more optimal content management, allowing students sufficient time to deeply understand concepts and develop competencies. This concept aligns with constructivist theory, which views learning as an active process of constructing knowledge through experience and reflection. In practice, teachers are given flexibility to determine and utilize diverse teaching tools so that the learning process can be adapted to students' needs and interests. This flexibility enables instruction to be aligned with the needs, interests, and characteristics of early childhood learners. The Merdeka Curriculum is the latest policy currently being disseminated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemdikbudristek).

According to Fathan (cited in Retnaningsih & Khairiyah, 2022), the Merdeka Curriculum is closely linked to the concept of Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn). The Minister of Education and Culture stated that Merdeka Belajar emphasizes the implementation of a curriculum that promotes enjoyable learning processes. This perspective aligns with the humanistic learning theory proposed by Carl Rogers, which emphasizes that learners are individuals with potential, emotional needs, and an intrinsic drive to develop optimally. Learning processes conducted in a pleasant, safe, and respectful environment that values each child's uniqueness can foster motivation and positive attitudes toward learning. The success of this concept is strongly influenced by teachers' ability to develop innovative thinking, as this can cultivate positive responses among students toward learning activities. Through Merdeka Belajar, education is not solely directed toward memorization but also toward developing learners who can think critically, analyze, reason, and possess broad and in-depth understanding.

The concept of Merdeka Belajar is also related to Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, which suggests that children need opportunities to demonstrate initiative, try new experiences, and express ideas without fear. The Merdeka Curriculum, by providing freedom to learn

and explore, presents a strategic opportunity to cultivate children's self-confidence, independence, and critical thinking skills from an early age.

Research by Nirwana et al. (2025: 269) indicates several opportunities arising from the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in ECE. Children are given the freedom to make choices according to their interests, from selecting types of play in learning centers, choosing materials to explore, to collaborating with peers in group play activities. This environment is created because teachers are required to adapt learning processes to be more flexible, exploratory, and child-oriented. Teachers are expected to integrate various engaging activities, such as environmental-themed projects, sensory-based play, and nature exploration.

Furthermore, research by Kurniyati et al. (2025: 433) highlights that a primary opportunity in this implementation lies in improving the quality of planning and execution of learning in ECE institutions. Teachers who possess adequate understanding of the substance of the Merdeka Curriculum are able to move beyond administrative compliance and design learning activities aligned with children's interests, needs, and developmental stages. This condition fosters more meaningful, contextual, and experience-centered learning. However, this study also identifies several challenges. One major challenge concerns teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in mapping learning outcomes, preparing teaching modules, and ensuring alignment with the principles of Merdeka Belajar. This often results in inconsistencies between lesson planning and implementation. Another challenge is the limited involvement of parents. Some parents have not yet fully understood the Merdeka Curriculum and remain oriented toward traditional approaches that emphasize memorization and formal academic achievement.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum also opens opportunities for strengthening teachers' competence and professionalism on an ongoing basis. Participation in formal training, ECE learning communities, and the utilization of digital learning platforms encourages the development of a lifelong learning culture among educators. Through these processes, teachers have opportunities to deepen their understanding, share best practices, and enhance their reflective and innovative capacities in

designing instruction. Teachers' understanding of positioning children as the center of the learning process creates opportunities for more adaptive and inclusive pedagogical innovation. Approaches that consider the zone of proximal development enable teachers to adjust strategies according to children's individual characteristics and needs, including those with communication challenges, making learning more inclusive and responsive to diversity.

The Merdeka Curriculum also provides opportunities to strengthen experiential learning through thematic project activities and interactive learning media. This approach supports children's integrated cognitive, social, and emotional development through direct interaction with the environment and peers, prioritizing the quality of learning experiences over the quantity of delivered content. In addition, the integration of Pancasila Student Profile values into learning activities creates opportunities to strengthen character development from an early age. Through collaborative activities and interest-based learning, children are encouraged to think critically, demonstrate initiative, cooperate effectively, and develop positive social and emotional attitudes. Despite these significant opportunities, it cannot be denied that several challenges persist in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

One challenge identified in this study relates to the limited availability of supporting facilities and infrastructure. The lack of technology-based teaching aids, space for project activities, and access to interactive digital media constrains teachers in realizing active, concrete, and enjoyable learning in accordance with Merdeka Curriculum principles. Moreover, the diversity of early childhood characteristics—ranging from interests and learning styles to socio-emotional abilities—demands diverse and individualized instructional strategies. However, the limited number of educators and dense learning schedules often hinder teachers from providing optimal individualized support. Another challenge concerns the transition process from previous curricula, particularly in understanding changes in learning outcomes, implementing formative assessment, and preparing flexible and context-appropriate teaching modules. This condition is exacerbated by limited ongoing technical training and high administrative

workloads, which reduce teachers' focus on developing meaningful learning experiences.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the literature review, it can be concluded that the Merdeka Curriculum plays a strategic role in improving the quality of learning in Early Childhood Education (ECE). This curriculum provides teachers with the flexibility to design learning experiences that align with children's interests, needs, and developmental stages, while also promoting character development through the values of the Pancasila Student Profile. In addition, the Merdeka Curriculum contributes to fostering pedagogical innovation and enhancing teacher professionalism through reflection and the continuous development of instructional practices.

Nevertheless, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in ECE continues to face various challenges, including limited supporting facilities, teachers' difficulties in understanding learning outcomes and authentic assessment, limited technical training, and insufficient parental support due to differing levels of understanding. Therefore, sustained support and collaboration among teachers, educational institutions, parents, and the government are essential to ensure that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum can proceed optimally and generate meaningful positive impacts on the holistic development of early childhood learners.

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