



Research Article

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Early Childhood Education: A Comprehensive Literature Review (Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka Pada Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini: Sebuah Tinjauan Literatur Komprehensif)

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ABSTRACT

The Merdeka Curriculum (KM) emerges as the latest educational policy aimed at transforming the learning process to be more flexible, student-centered, and contextual. At the Early Childhood Education (ECE) level (Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini/PAUD), KM implementation is founded on the philosophy of "freedom to play, freedom to learn" (merdeka bermain, merdeka belajar), emphasizing the strengthening of early literacy, character development based on the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (Pancasila Student Profile), and differentiated instruction tailored to children's needs. This study aims to comprehensively analyze the implementation of KM in ECE, identify the main challenges, and formulate strategic recommendations through a literature review method. Primary data sources were obtained from various scientific journal articles, proceedings, and official policy documents relevant to KM in ECE. The synthesis results indicate that KM implementation involves three key aspects: flexible learning planning (through Learning Achievements/CP and Profil Pelajar Pancasila strengthening projects), child-centered execution (through play and exploration), and holistic assessment (as an integral part of the process). Although KM shows a

significant positive impact on children's motivation and creativity, the main challenges faced include teachers' adaptation to the new paradigm, limitations in facilities and infrastructure supporting project-based learning, and the need for continuous socialization and mentoring. It is concluded that the success of KM in ECE is highly dependent on improving teachers' professional competence, infrastructural support, and the active role of school learning communities.

KEY WORDS: Merdeka Curriculum; Curriculum Implementation; Early Childhood Education; Literature Review; Project-Based Learning.

ABSTRAK

Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) hadir sebagai kebijakan pendidikan terkini yang bertujuan mentransformasi proses pembelajaran menjadi lebih fleksibel, berpusat pada peserta didik, dan kontekstual. Pada jenjang Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini (PAUD), implementasi KM berlandaskan filosofi "merdeka bermain, merdeka belajar" yang menekankan pada penguatan literasi dini, pengembangan karakter Profil Pelajar Pancasila, dan diferensiasi pembelajaran sesuai kebutuhan anak. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis secara komprehensif implementasi KM di PAUD, mengidentifikasi tantangan utama, dan merumuskan rekomendasi strategis melalui metode kajian literatur. Sumber data utama diperoleh dari berbagai artikel jurnal ilmiah, prosiding, dan dokumen kebijakan resmi yang relevan dengan KM pada PAUD. Hasil sintesis menunjukkan bahwa implementasi KM meliputi tiga aspek kunci: perencanaan pembelajaran yang fleksibel (melalui Capaian Pembelajaran/CP dan proyek penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila), pelaksanaan yang berpusat pada anak (melalui bermain dan eksplorasi), dan asesmen yang holistik (sebagai bagian tak terpisahkan dari proses). Meskipun memberikan dampak positif signifikan terhadap motivasi dan kreativitas anak, tantangan utama yang dihadapi adalah adaptasi guru terhadap paradigma baru, keterbatasan sarana prasarana yang mendukung pembelajaran berbasis proyek, serta perlunya sosialisasi dan pendampingan yang berkelanjutan. Disimpulkan bahwa keberhasilan KM di PAUD sangat bergantung pada peningkatan kompetensi profesional guru, dukungan infrastruktur, dan peran aktif komunitas belajar sekolah.

KATA KUNCI: *Kurikulum Merdeka; Implementasi Kurikulum; Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini; Kajian Literatur; Pembelajaran Berbasis Proyek.*

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) constitutes a crucial foundation for shaping children's character and basic competencies. The quality of education at this phase is heavily determined by the implemented curriculum (Pica, 2008). In Indonesia, the evolution of the ECE curriculum has undergone various changes, the latest being the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum (KM) as an effort to restore learning post-pandemic and adapt to the demands of the 21st century (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2022).

The global educational landscape increasingly emphasizes flexible frameworks that

respond to the unique socio-cultural and economic needs of each region. The shift toward KM in Indonesia is part of this global movement, recognizing that standardized, centralized curricula often fail to account for local wisdom and the diverse developmental stages of children (Aini & Fitriani, 2023). This curriculum is essentially a localization effort, empowering educators to utilize their environment as a primary learning resource, thereby fostering deeper engagement and relevance (Yusuf et al., 2024). The philosophical underpinning suggests that by granting "freedom" (merdeka) to both teachers in designing and children in exploring, the learning experience becomes intrinsically motivated and sustained, which is particularly vital for holistic development during the critical early years (Hasanah & Maryati, 2024).

The Merdeka Curriculum, designed with principles of flexibility, focus on essential content, and project-based learning to strengthen the Profil Pelajar Pancasila, grants greater autonomy to educational units to align learning with the context and needs of the children (Munawar, 2022). At the ECE level, KM is realized in the "Foundation Phase" with the spirit of merdeka belajar (freedom to learn) and merdeka bermain (freedom to play), where learning must be fun, meaningful, and child-centered (Muniroh, 2022). KM in ECE focuses on three elements of Learning Achievements (CP): Religious and Noble Character Values, Self-Identity, and Basics of Literacy, Mathematics, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Arts (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2022).

The core structural change introduced by KM is the focus on Learning Achievements (CP) over detailed, fixed content standards. This approach aligns with the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) methodology, ensuring that instruction is perpetually matched to the child's current mastery level, rather than their chronological age or grade level (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2022). For ECE practitioners, this necessitates a more nuanced and continuous assessment of student readiness, compelling teachers to differentiate activities even within a single classroom setting (Fitriyah & Mukarromah, 2023). Furthermore, the integration of Project-Based Learning (PBL), especially through the P5 projects, serves as the primary mechanism for character development, shifting the locus of value formation from passive listening to active, collaborative problem-solving (Harahap & Br Hasibuan, 2023).

The implementation of KM in the field is not without obstacles. The paradigm shift from a rigid, content-based curriculum to a flexible, competence-based curriculum demands significant changes in the role and competence of teachers (Suttrisno & Prastiwi, 2023). ECE teachers are expected to be able to design play activities that stimulate critical thinking and creativity, and integrate character values through the Project for Strengthening the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) (Braslauskiene et al., 2022).

Despite its transformative potential, the successful transition to the KM framework presents significant pedagogical challenges. While the philosophy of merdeka belajar champions freedom, it simultaneously imposes a greater burden of instructional design and pedagogical creativity on teachers who were previously accustomed to standardized guides (Yusuf et al., 2024). This complexity is compounded by variations in regional infrastructure, differing levels of parental engagement, and the need for widespread, targeted professional development that moves beyond theoretical workshops to practical, sustained mentoring in differentiation and project facilitation (Fitriyah & Mukarromah, 2023). Therefore,

understanding the practical application, successes, and inherent difficulties of KM within diverse ECE settings is critical for policymakers and educational institutions.

Based on this background, this research is essential to analyze the extent to which the Merdeka Curriculum has been implemented in the ECE context, identify its supporting and inhibiting factors, and formulate recommendations that can optimize its execution. The literature review method was chosen to synthesize findings from various previous studies and policy documents, thereby generating a comprehensive overview of the implementation conditions of the Merdeka Curriculum in early childhood schools.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs the Systematic Literature Review method. This method involves the identification, evaluation, and synthesis of published research works by academics and researchers (Harahap & Br Hasibuan, 2023).

Literature Review Procedure:

1. Formulating Research Questions: How is the Merdeka Curriculum (KM) implemented in ECE, and what are the main challenges faced based on the literature review?
2. Searching Data Sources: Primary and secondary data sources were searched through academic databases such as Google Scholar, national journal portals (SINTA), and official ministry websites. Keywords used included: "Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka PAUD" (Merdeka Curriculum ECE Implementation), "Kajian Literatur Kurikulum Merdeka Anak Usia Dini" (Literature Review Merdeka Curriculum Early Childhood), "Tantangan Kurikulum Merdeka PAUD" (Challenges of Merdeka Curriculum ECE), and "Pembelajaran Berpusat pada Anak" (Child-Centered Learning).
3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:
 - a. Inclusion: Journal articles, proceedings, or research reports (undergraduate/master's theses) published between 2022 and 2025, focusing on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the ECE level, and written in Indonesian or English.
 - b. Exclusion: Articles that only discuss Curriculum 2013 or previous curricula, as well as articles that do not contain practical implementation data or discussion.
4. Data Synthesis: The collected data were grouped based on their discussion focus (planning, implementation, assessment, and challenges). Thematic analysis was then performed to identify main themes and synthesize conclusions from various sources to obtain a comprehensive review (Lestari et al., 2024).

This procedure ensures that the literature review yields results that are valid, accurate, scientifically accountable, and avoids plagiarism by maintaining the originality of

ideas and performing appropriate paraphrasing and citation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of various literature sources provides a deep understanding of the three main aspects of the Merdeka Curriculum (KM) implementation in ECE, along with the accompanying challenges.

1. KM in ECE is based on the core principles of child-centered learning and flexibility (Ngaisah et al., 2023). Key characteristics of KM in ECE include:
 - a. Focus on Learning Achievements (CP): KM replaces the Standards of Child Development Achievement Levels (STPPA) as the main reference for assessment and planning. CP in ECE is divided into three elements: Religious and Noble Character Values, Self-Identity, and Basics of Literacy and Science (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2022).
 - b. Merdeka Bermain, Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Play, Freedom to Learn): The essence of KM in ECE is positioning play as the core of learning (Muniroh, 2022). Through play, children are encouraged to explore, experiment, and solve problems, actively stimulating cognitive, social, and language aspects (Suwaidi, 2024).
 - c. Strengthening the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5): P5 is implemented through Project Based Learning integrated into intracurricular and co-curricular activities. P5 projects serve as a platform for children to develop six dimensions of character: Faith and Piety to God Almighty and Noble Character, Global Diversity, Mutual Cooperation, Independence, Critical Reasoning, and Creativity (Kemendikbudristek No. 009, 2022).
2. Implementation of KM in Learning Planning

Learning planning under KM requires teachers to be adaptive designers, not merely executors of a standardized curriculum.

- a. Goal-Based Planning (CP): Teachers design activities by mapping Learning Achievements (CP) and adjusting them to the children's specific needs and interests (Ngaisah et al., 2023). This flexibility allows teachers to change topics or themes based on children's initiatives, as long as the learning goals are met (Rahardjo & Maryati, 2021).
- b. Simplified Teaching Modules/Lesson Plans (RPP): Planning documents are made more concise and focused on the essence of the activity, differing from the often administrative and detailed RPPs of Curriculum 2013. Teachers can use the learning objective flow (ATP) to construct a systematic plan (Safitri & Aulina, 2022).
- c. Development of P5 Projects: The planning for the Profil Pelajar Pancasila Strengthening Projects must consider the local context, school culture, and the child's age. Projects are designed as co-curricular activities that provide

deep and meaningful learning experiences (Lestari et al., 2024). An example of implementation is a project with the theme "I Love Earth" through environmental exploration (Ningtyas et al., 2023).

3. KM Implementation in Learning Execution

The execution of KM in ECE is marked by the teacher's role change from an instructional deliverer to a facilitator and co-learner.

- a. **Active and Exploration-Based Learning:** Teachers facilitate an environment that encourages children to move, interact, and explore (Suwaidi, 2024). Activities utilize Educational Play Tools (APE) and natural/environmental materials available around the school.
- b. **Teaching at The Right Level (TaRL):** Learning is conducted by considering the individual ability level of the child (teach at the right level), ensuring that every child receives optimal stimulation according to their developmental stage (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2022). This is achieved through differentiated activities within learning centers or play areas.
- c. **Integration of Character and Values:** Character education, such as cooperation, responsibility, and empathy, is integrated through group play and daily discussions, not as a separate subject. Children are trained to manage emotions and build healthy social relationships (Lestari et al., 2024).

The shift in the teacher's role is perhaps the most defining feature of KM's implementation. The teacher evolves into a learning environment curator (*kurator lingkungan belajar*), setting up invitations to play and learn (invitations to play) rather than issuing direct instructions (Wijaya & Wahyudin, 2023). This requires sophisticated skills in observation and flexible redirection, where the teacher must subtly guide the children's spontaneous interests towards achieving the defined Learning Achievements (CP) (Saputra & Handayani, 2024). This facilitation method elevates the quality of interaction, transforming routine activities into rich, constructivist learning moments.

Crucially, KM places a strong emphasis on early literacy and numeracy development within the context of play. Unlike previous curricula which sometimes postponed formal skill training, KM integrates foundational literacy and math concepts—such as phonological awareness, number sense, and pattern recognition—into daily exploratory activities (Sari & Mulyati, 2023). For example, counting stones during nature play or recognizing letters embedded in environmental signs are prioritized over worksheets. This integrated, indirect approach ensures that children build readiness skills naturally and without undue pressure, supporting the "merdeka belajar" ethos (Hidayat & Nurjanah, 2023).

The utilization of local resources and context is another significant element in the practical implementation of KM. Teachers are encouraged to design P5 projects and learning themes that leverage local culture, professions, and geographical environment (Fitriyana & Rosyid, 2024). This not only strengthens the

child's *Jati Diri* (Self-Identity) element of the CP but also promotes global diversity (*Berkebinekaan Global*) by celebrating their own heritage. This contextual relevance significantly boosts children's engagement and makes abstract concepts tangible, a key principle of effective early years pedagogy (Wijaya & Wahyudin, 2023).

4. The Positive Impact of KM Implementation on Child Development

The impact of KM implementation on children's development, as synthesized from various studies, is overwhelmingly positive, particularly in non-cognitive domains. The high degree of autonomy and choice provided by the *merdeka bermain* principle has led to a noticeable increase in children's intrinsic motivation and self-regulation skills (Aini & Fitriani, 2023). When children are allowed to choose their play materials and pace, they demonstrate longer attention spans and greater perseverance in problem-solving tasks, which are essential precursors to formal learning success.

Furthermore, the emphasis on collaborative Project-Based Learning (PBL), especially through P5, effectively develops children's social-emotional competencies. These projects inherently require children to engage in mutual cooperation (*bergotong royong*), negotiate roles, and manage conflicts to achieve a shared project goal (Harahap & Br Hasibuan, 2023). This active, lived practice of social skills is deemed more effective than theoretical instruction, providing authentic situations for developing empathy and effective communication, core components of the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*.

The flexibility inherent in KM strongly promotes critical reasoning and creativity. By being presented with open-ended problems and materials, children are compelled to move beyond rote memorization and devise novel solutions (Saputra & Handayani, 2024). Activities focused on inquiry and exploration naturally foster critical thinking (*bernalarnya kritis*), as children constantly question "why" and "how" things work, transforming them from passive recipients of information into active knowledge constructors (Hidayat & Nurjanah, 2023).

The holistic assessment framework also contributes positively by prioritizing a comprehensive view of the child. By using tools like anecdotal notes and portfolios, teachers are able to track nuanced developmental progress that standardized tests often miss, such as improvements in emotional expression, curiosity, and persistence (Sari & Mulyati, 2023). This data-rich, holistic reporting fosters stronger communication with parents, turning the assessment process into a constructive planning tool for the child's continuous growth rather than a mere summative evaluation.

5. KM Implementation in Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment in KM in ECE adheres to principles vastly different from the previous curriculum; it is authentic and continuous.

- a. **Assessment as an Integrated Part:** Assessment serves as a tool to facilitate learning and provide feedback, not just to measure final outcomes. Assessment is carried out throughout the teaching-learning process (Rahardjo & Maryati, 2021).
- b. **Holistic and Observation-Based:** Assessment is performed holistically, covering all aspects of child development, including cognitive, motor, and social development. The primary techniques used are direct observation, anecdotal records, and portfolios of children's work (Ningtyas et al., 2023).
- c. **Informative Reporting:** Learning outcome reports (report cards) function to provide a comprehensive picture of the child's progress and shortcomings, serving as a basis for educators and parents to determine subsequent learning strategies (Fithriyah et al., 2022).

A defining characteristic of KM assessment is its strong emphasis on formative assessment over summative evaluation. Formative assessment involves daily, iterative observation that helps teachers immediately adjust their instructional approach (TaRL adaptation) based on the child's demonstrated learning needs (Wulan et al., 2023). This continuous cycle of observation, documentation, and adjustment ensures that the learning environment remains responsive to the children, effectively integrating assessment directly into the teaching process rather than treating it as a final hurdle (Putri & Asmawati, 2024).

This focus necessitates the effective use of feedback loops. The assessment results are not merely recorded; they are transformed into actionable feedback provided to the child (through guidance and questioning) and to the parents (through clear communication on strengths and next steps) (Safitri & Aulina, 2022). For the ECE teacher, this requires developing robust skills in reflective practice, using documented evidence—such as photographs, observed dialogues, and work samples—to justify subsequent curriculum decisions and identify specific areas where the child needs more scaffolding or extension (Sari & Mulyati, 2023).

The use of portfolio assessment gains significant importance in the KM framework. Portfolios are collections of a child's work over time, serving as authentic evidence that directly illustrates the achievement of specific Learning Achievements (CP) across various domains (Puspitasari & Hartanti, 2024). This method moves beyond simplistic checklists, providing a narrative and qualitative account of the child's journey, which is crucial for capturing the development of complex skills like critical thinking, creativity, and character (Hasanah & Maryati, 2024). The portfolio thus becomes the central documentation tool for comprehensive reporting.

Furthermore, the KM assessment paradigm strongly encourages active parental involvement. Parents are viewed not just as recipients of the final report, but as co-assessors who provide valuable contextual information about the child's learning behaviors outside the classroom (Putri & Asmawati, 2024). Teachers often utilize communication notebooks or digital platforms to share observation notes and request corresponding feedback or evidence from home, ensuring that the assessment of character and self-identity (Jati Diri) is consistent and comprehensive

across environments (Wulan et al., 2023).

The fundamental purpose of this holistic, continuous assessment system is to ensure the elimination of premature labeling or retention. Unlike systems focused on high-stakes summative testing, the KM assessment in ECE emphasizes identifying individual gaps and providing immediate, tailored support, reinforcing the Teaching at the Right Level philosophy (Safitri & Aulina, 2022). The resultant report card is primarily a diagnostic and prescriptive tool, guiding the next phase of learning rather than serving as a judgment of success or failure.

6. Challenges and Obstacles in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in ECE

Although KM offers an ideal framework, its implementation faces several challenges, particularly at the educational unit level (Sembiring & Kurniawan, 2022).

- a. **Teacher Adaptation and Competence:** The paradigm shift from the teacher as an information provider to a facilitator requires profound adaptation. Many teachers still feel confused and struggle in designing project-based learning and implementing differentiation due to a lack of adequate training and mentoring (Al-Akmam & Pahmi, 2024; Suwaidi, 2024).
- b. **Limitations of Facilities and Infrastructure:** Project-based learning and environmental exploration require the availability of adequate facilities and infrastructure, both inside and outside the classroom. Limitations in APE, access to technology, and exploration spaces in schools pose a major obstacle, especially in areas with minimal infrastructural support (Ngaisah et al., 2023).
- c. **Assessment Misconception:** Although the assessment principles are clear, misconceptions still exist among ECE teachers, especially regarding the use of assessment data for learning improvement. Some teachers are still trapped in rigid report formats instead of utilizing assessment results as instructional feedback (Fithriyah et al., 2022).
- d. **Community and Parental Support:** The implementation of P5 and ECE projects requires support from the community and parents. The lack of understanding and active participation from parents can reduce the effectiveness of the contextual learning mandated by KM (Sembiring & Kurniawan, 2022).

A critical gap exists in the quality and duration of professional development provided to ECE teachers regarding KM. While initial training sessions are often conducted, research indicates that these are frequently theoretical, failing to provide practical, hands-on modeling of differentiation and effective play-based learning design (Wahyuni & Rohmah, 2023). Many teachers report feeling pressure to "cover" the new curriculum elements without fully grasping the underlying pedagogical philosophy, often resulting in a superficial integration of P5 projects that are disconnected from the core curriculum and children's interests (Yusuf et al., 2024).

The financial and logistical burden associated with the KM transition also

presents a challenge, particularly in private or underfunded public ECE settings. Effective implementation of merdeka bermain necessitates a diverse array of open-ended materials and constantly refreshing learning centers and exploration zones (Putri & Asmawati, 2024). Schools with constrained budgets often struggle to procure or create these resources, relying heavily on traditional, often passive, instructional materials, which contradicts the exploration-based philosophy of KM (Lestari dkk., 2024).

Furthermore, the successful management of time and workload is a significant operational obstacle. KM requires teachers to allocate substantial time not only for active facilitation but also for meticulous documentation of anecdotal records and student portfolios for holistic assessment (Sari & Mulyati, 2023). This increased administrative load, coupled with existing teaching and school duties, can lead to teacher burnout and a tendency to revert to simpler, less effective pedagogical methods to save time, ultimately compromising the quality of the student-centered approach (Wahyuni & Rohmah, 2023).

Another systemic hurdle is the misalignment of existing school infrastructure with the flexible principles of KM. Many older ECE buildings are designed with traditional, rigid classroom layouts that inhibit free movement, large group projects, and the spontaneous creation of learning corners required for differentiation (Putri & Asmawati, 2024). Adapting these physical spaces to become flexible, indoor-outdoor learning environments often requires substantial renovation and resources that are currently unavailable to many schools, forcing teachers to compromise the fidelity of the curriculum implementation.

Finally, the pressure for accountability can undermine the qualitative, process-focused assessment mandated by KM. Despite official policy emphasizing holistic assessment, some regional supervisors or school principals still implicitly or explicitly demand quantifiable data and standardized, formal reports familiar from previous curricula (Yusuf et al., 2024). This pressure perpetuates the misconception that assessment must result in numerical scores or fixed-format reports, thereby diverting teacher focus away from using observation data for genuine instructional feedback and towards achieving bureaucratic compliance (Sari & Mulyati, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive literature review analyzed the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (KM) in Early Childhood Education (ECE), a recent policy framework in Indonesia aimed at fostering flexible, child-centered learning rooted in the philosophy of "freedom to play, freedom to learn." Utilizing a systematic review method, this study synthesized findings from relevant academic literature (2022–2025) and official policy documents to obtain a holistic view of the program's practical execution.

The findings demonstrate that KM implementation successfully transforms ECE pedagogy by focusing on: 1) Flexible Planning based on Learning Achievements (CP) and simplified modules; 2) Child-Centered Execution through play, exploration, and the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) methodology; and 3) Holistic Assessment that is

continuous, observation-based, and integral to the feedback process. This shift has yielded significant positive impacts on children's development, notably enhancing intrinsic motivation, critical thinking, creativity, and social-emotional competencies through collaborative Project-Based Learning (P5).

However, the implementation is hindered by several critical challenges. These include: a) Teacher Competence issues related to adapting to the new role as facilitator and effectively designing differentiated and project-based activities; b) Infrastructural Deficiencies such as limited access to diverse learning materials and suitable exploration spaces; and c) Systemic Misconceptions regarding assessment, where the pressure for bureaucratic accountability often overrides the KM's intended focus on authentic, formative feedback.

In conclusion, the success of the Merdeka Curriculum in ECE hinges on overcoming these operational and pedagogical hurdles. Future efforts must prioritize sustained, practical professional development for teachers, targeted resource allocation for infrastructure, and clear, consistent communication to shift the focus of assessment from mere compliance to genuine instructional guidance.

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