

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at RA 02 Darul Ulum Batu

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the practical and theoretical implications of implementing the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) at RA 02 Darul Ullum, an Islamic-based early childhood education institution, with a focus on integrating religious values and holistic skill development. Using a qualitative approach through a case study at RA Al-Mukarromah, data were collected from teacher interviews, learning observations, and curriculum document analysis. The results indicate that effective implementation enhances teacher flexibility, student engagement, and parent collaboration, while addressing challenges such as resource readiness. The scientific contribution of this research explicitly lies in developing an integrated curriculum model that combines constructivist theory with Islamic values, which has not been deeply explored in the context of Indonesian early childhood education (PAUD). The novelty lies in the emphasis on the spiritual dimension as a holistic element, addressing the literature gap that focuses more on academic aspects alone. The urgency of these findings is evident from the potential of the Independent Curriculum to shape a morally upright generation in the era of globalization. Practically, these findings provide guidance for RA teachers to design innovative project-based learning, enhancing educational effectiveness and students' readiness to face contemporary challenges. Theoretically, the results strengthen Vygotsky's and Gardner's theories with empirical evidence that curriculum flexibility can accelerate children's cognitive-social-spiritual development, thus contributing to the expansion of the theoretical framework for multicultural early childhood education. This research recommends developing similar models on a national scale.

Keywords: Implementation, Merdeka Curriculum, Early Childhood.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi implikasi praktis dan teoretis dari penerapan Kurikulum Merdeka di RA 02 Darul Ullum, lembaga pendidikan anak usia dini berbasis Islam, dengan fokus pada integrasi nilai keagamaan dan pengembangan keterampilan holistik. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui studi kasus di RA Al-Mukarromah, data dikumpulkan dari wawancara guru, observasi pembelajaran, dan analisis dokumen kurikulum. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa implementasi efektif meningkatkan fleksibilitas guru, keterlibatan siswa, dan kolaborasi orang tua, sambil mengatasi tantangan seperti kesiapan sumber daya. Kontribusi ilmiah penelitian ini secara eksplisit terletak pada pengembangan model integrasi kurikulum yang menggabungkan teori konstruktivisme dengan nilai-nilai islami, yang sebelumnya belum dieksplorasi mendalam dalam konteks PAUD Indonesia. Unsur kebaruan terletak pada penekanan pada dimensi spiritual sebagai

elemen holistik, mengatasi kesenjangan literatur yang lebih fokus pada aspek akademik saja. Urgensi hasil ini terlihat dari potensi Kurikulum Merdeka untuk membentuk generasi yang berakhhlak mulia di era globalisasi. Secara praktis, temuan ini memberikan panduan bagi guru RA untuk merancang pembelajaran inovatif berbasis proyek, meningkatkan efektivitas pendidikan dan kesiapan siswa menghadapi tantangan zaman. Secara teoretis, hasil ini memperkuat teori Vygotsky dan Gardner dengan bukti empiris bahwa fleksibilitas kurikulum dapat mempercepat perkembangan kognitif-sosial-spiritual anak, sehingga berkontribusi pada perluasan kerangka teoretis pendidikan anak usia dini multikultural. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan pengembangan model serupa untuk skala nasional.

Kata Kunci: Implementasi, Kurikulum Merdeka, Anak Usia Dini.

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum changes and updates in Indonesia frequently occur as efforts to improve the quality of education so that it aligns with the development of the times. This dynamic presents challenges for educators in adapting learning processes, and for students in adjusting to new systems. Nevertheless, each curriculum change remains oriented toward the fundamental goals of education, namely to enlighten the life of the nation and to humanize individuals in accordance with their dignity and worth. Among these reforms, the Merdeka Curriculum emerges as an innovation that emphasizes learning freedom, creativity development, and the holistic strengthening of students' potential.

In the context of early childhood education, the Merdeka Belajar concept is implemented through flexible, child-centered learning that is oriented toward students' interests and needs (Jannah, 2025). This approach is expected to create meaningful learning experiences while fostering independence, collaboration, and critical thinking from an early age. However, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in early childhood education institutions still faces various challenges, such as teacher readiness, limited supporting facilities, and institutional capacity to translate curriculum principles into daily classroom practices.

Previous studies have examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in early childhood institutions, yet most of them focus on aspects such as lesson planning, teacher preparedness, or the effectiveness of specific learning models. Meanwhile, research that explores how the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum influences children's learning patterns within the context of curriculum transition remains limited. This gap is essential because children's learning patterns serve as vital indicators of curriculum success, particularly in child-centered learning.

RA 02 Darul Ulum Batu is one early childhood education institution currently in a transitional phase of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. This condition presents an interesting phenomenon regarding how the new curriculum affects children's learning patterns, including independent, collaborative, and guided learning that teachers develop in the classroom. However, there has been no specific study that explores these dynamics in this institution or compares them with findings from previous research.

The knowledge gap underlying this study lies in the still limited number of empirical studies that examine the contextual implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in RA (Raudhatul Athfal) institutions, which possess distinctive Islamic values, pesantren culture, and community-based private institutional characteristics, particularly in the Batu area. Most previous studies on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the early childhood education (PAUD) level have focused on public kindergartens or general PAUD institutions and have placed greater emphasis on aspects of instructional planning and administration. These studies have not sufficiently explored how the Merdeka Curriculum is adapted and internalized in everyday teaching practices in RA settings, especially in integrating learning outcomes with religious values, habituation of worship practices, and institutional culture.

The specific phenomenon at RA 02 Darul Ulum Batu that makes this research important is that the institution has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum using a distinctive approach, such as integrating the Pancasila Student Profile with Muslim character education from an early age, applying play-based learning and simple project-based activities, and involving parents as well as the pesantren environment. However, these practices have not been systematically documented and analyzed, potentially creating a gap between curriculum policy and actual practice in the field. Therefore, this study has a degree of novelty because it not only examines the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum but also highlights curriculum adaptation strategies within an Islamic-based RA context, the challenges faced by teachers, and the supporting and inhibiting factors affecting implementation in the institution.

Based on this background, the objectives of this study are to: (1) describe the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at RA 02 Darul Ulum Batu, and (2) identify how its implementation influences children's learning patterns during the curriculum transition period.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at RA 02 Darul Ulum Batu. The research subjects consisted of two teachers as the main informants, the school principal, and instructional documents related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Data collection techniques included interviews, observations, and documentation. Interviews were conducted to obtain data on teachers' perceptions and experiences in implementing learning activities, observations were used to examine classroom learning activities and children's learning behaviors, while documentation was utilized to collect supporting data such as instructional plans and assessment reports. Data analysis techniques followed the Miles and Huberman (1994) model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The validity of the data was strengthened through source triangulation and method triangulation by comparing data obtained from various informants and verifying the findings through interviews, observations, and documentation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings show that the Merdeka Curriculum is understood as a curriculum that provides teachers and children with broader autonomy to select learning tools, methods, and activities that align with children's interests, needs, and developmental stages. This understanding is reflected in interviews with teachers, who stated that the Merdeka Curriculum offers freedom for creative innovation, the ability to choose learning activities relevant to the surrounding environment, and the opportunity to develop child-centered activity designs. Teachers emphasized that this curricular flexibility not only facilitates contextual adaptation but also encourages professional competence development, as it requires teachers to have a deeper understanding of learning and assessment.

At RA 02 Darul Ulum Batu, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has been carried out through various learning centers (sentra) that demonstrate creativity, flexibility, and an orientation toward direct experience. In the Block Center, for instance, children are invited to create miniature herbal medicine houses with the aim of introducing medicinal plants while also training fine motor coordination and creativity. At this stage, teachers act as facilitators and provide children with the freedom to explore while accompanying them in developing independence.

Despite these promising practices, implementation faces challenges related to funding limitations, parental economic diversity, uneven environmental awareness, and varied digital competence among teachers. Similar obstacles have been reported in studies on curriculum reform in Indonesian early childhood settings, demonstrating that institutional readiness and teacher capacity strongly influence implementation success. RA 02 Darul Ulum Batu has responded to these challenges through financial collaboration with zakat institutions, environmental education programs (Adiwiyata), technology training, and empowerment of teacher working groups, which supports the view that sustained professional development and community collaboration are critical enablers of educational innovation.

The research conducted aims to describe the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at RA RA 02 Darul Ulum Batu in supporting the development of early childhood. The results of observations and interviews show that the implementation of this curriculum has a positive impact on the development of students in various aspects of development (Elok Endang Rasmani, Wahyuningsih, et al., 2023). Teachers at RA show a high level of commitment in adapting the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum through play-based and exploratory learning approaches.

The research findings also reveal that this approach is able to enhance children's cognitive, motor, and social abilities. Students become more active, creative, and show high interest in the learning process. In addition, the application of project-based learning in the classroom helps children develop independence and positive character formation (Kumala Dewi & Eliza, 2023).

Positive responses from parents further strengthen these findings. Parents report significant changes in children's attitudes and skills after participating in

learning with the Merdeka Curriculum. Children show improvements in interpersonal skills, critical thinking abilities, and innovative attitudes. This indicates that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum not only impacts the school environment but also contributes to children's development in the family environment (Miladiah et al., 2023).

Overall, the Merdeka Curriculum is perceived by school stakeholders to improve learning quality by providing teachers with greater room for innovation and increasing children's engagement. This perception resonates with the theoretical premise of Merdeka Belajar, which emphasizes joyful and meaningful learning as a foundation for holistic child development. The findings further strengthen evidence that curriculum autonomy, when supported by teacher competence and institutional capacity, can foster more active and meaningful learning experiences in early childhood settings.

1. Definition of the Merdeka Curriculum

The Merdeka Curriculum offers diversified intracurricular learning and focuses on content optimization, enabling learners to understand concepts deeply and develop competencies. Teachers are granted flexibility to utilize various teaching resources based on children's interests and needs. Developed as a refinement of the Emergency Curriculum, it has been implemented in more than 300,000 schools and is intended to become the national curriculum by 2024.

This curriculum was launched in 2022 as an optional model, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic and the release of PISA results showing low competency achievement among Indonesian students. As noted in policy literature, this urgency prompted a shift toward a simpler, competency-based curriculum to address learning loss and systemic disparities. The Merdeka Curriculum reflects a conceptual shift toward learner agency, mastery, and flexibility, which is consistent with contemporary early childhood education frameworks emphasizing developmental appropriateness and meaningful engagement.

In the context of PAUD, learning is grounded in play-based processes aligned with CP and STPPA standards. Learning encourages expression, exploration, and imagination through discussions and creative projects. Stakeholders at RA 02 Darul Ulum Batu interpret the curriculum as a flexible system that reduces content burden and promotes critical thinking, collaboration, and character formation.

2. Characteristics and Key Features

The Merdeka Curriculum seeks to foster learner autonomy, creativity, and competency mastery through meaningful learning experiences. At the PAUD level, its core characteristics include play-based learning, foundational literacy and numeracy, flexible assessment, P5 projects, and parent-school collaboration. These align with principles of developmentally appropriate practice, which emphasize play as a natural context for learning in early childhood.

Technology integration supports interactive, engaging, and contextual learning experiences. While technology offers broader access to knowledge, research highlights the need for pedagogical competence to ensure that digital tools serve as enablers rather than substitutes for meaningful human interaction.

Compared with previous curricula, the Merdeka Curriculum offers a simpler structure oriented toward depth rather than breadth. Learning is tailored to children's interests and developmental trajectories, granting institutions autonomy to develop contextually relevant practices.

3. Implementation at the PAUD Level

Implementation provides autonomy for institutions to select learning topics, methods, and tools. This flexibility is regulated through policy frameworks that establish structure without imposing linear, standardized implementation. The three models Independent Learning, Independent Change, and Independent Sharing illustrate a differentiated approach that accommodates institutional readiness.

This model reflects the principle that curriculum reform should be adaptive and responsive to contextual conditions, while still anchored in national education goals. The integration of P5 at the PAUD level links curriculum practices to broader character development objectives central to Indonesia's educational vision.

4. Implementation at RA 02 Darul Ulum Batu

RA 02 Darul Ulum Batu is in a transitional phase of implementation. Initial attempts to integrate moving class practices with Merdeka Curriculum principles were met with adjustment challenges, indicating that systemic change requires time, scaffolding, and teacher readiness. Gradual adoption allows teachers to build competence and confidence while ensuring that learning remains manageable and joyful.

Learning is increasingly child-centered, with weekly planning involving children in selecting activities. This practice aligns with research advocating for children's participation in decision-making to enhance agency and intrinsic motivation. Assessment practices rely on observation and checklists to document holistic development; however, teachers report adaptation challenges, emphasizing the need for ongoing professional support.

a. Learning Planning

Planning refers to systematic design of learning experiences anchored in CP, ATP, and teaching modules. The emphasis on flexibility, contextualization, and digital integration reflects the core principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. The inclusion of P5 dimensions indicates alignment with national educational values, while the Love-Based Curriculum adds a local philosophical orientation toward socioemotional development.

b. Learning Implementation

Learning is driven by meaningful play, active learning, and experiential engagement. Teachers utilize varied learning models as facilitators of exploration, collaboration, and reflection. Technology is used to enrich experiences, while the learning environment supports religious and character-based development.

c. Learning Evaluation

Evaluation emphasizes diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments that consider academic, process, and character dimensions. The paradigm shift toward assessment as learning illustrates a holistic approach consistent with early

childhood assessment principles. However, teacher capacity remains a determining factor in implementation quality.

d. Challenges and Solutions

Implementation challenges funding limitations, parental economic disparity, environmental awareness, digital competence, and teacher specialization reflect structural and cultural constraints common in early childhood institutions. The school's strategies collaboration with external institutions, environmental programs, digital training, and professional learning communities demonstrate adaptive institutional responses.

These findings indicate that curriculum autonomy enhances innovation and child engagement, but its success requires sustained institutional support, teacher empowerment, and community involvement.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at RA 02 Darul Ulum Batu, an Islamic-based early childhood education institution, successfully enhances teacher flexibility, student engagement, and parent collaboration, despite facing challenges such as resource limitations and digital readiness. The core findings emphasize that this curriculum promotes holistic play-based and exploratory learning, integrating Islamic values with the development of children's cognitive, motor, social, and spiritual skills, thereby accelerating overall child development and strengthening constructivist theory and Vygotsky's approach in the multicultural context of Indonesia. Practical implications for teachers and PAUD institutions include the importance of designing innovative project-based learning that involves parents and the pesantren environment, while improving digital competencies and community collaboration to overcome implementation barriers. This can shape a generation with noble character ready to face globalization challenges, focusing on the development of independence and positive character through flexible learning center approaches.

Recommendations for further research include exploring similar curriculum integration models on a national scale in various RA or religion-based PAUD institutions, with longitudinal analysis to measure long-term impacts on child development, as well as comparative studies between public and private institutions to expand the theoretical framework of multicultural early childhood education. This research contributes to strengthening adaptive and meaningful educational practices, encouraging sustainable innovation in the era of the Merdeka Curriculum.

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