

Challenges and Teacher Efforts in Facing Independent Curriculum at RA. Munawwarah

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education plays a crucial role in shaping the foundation of a child's development, encompassing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. In an effort to improve the quality of education in Indonesia. This study aims to examine the extent of teachers' enthusiasm in implementing the Independent Curriculum, challenges in understanding curriculum content, limitations of technological infrastructure in schools, and the role of teachers and school leaders in overcoming these problems. This research method uses a qualitative approach with a case study design at RA. Munawwarah, data was collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The research findings revealed that teachers showed high enthusiasm for the Independent Curriculum, but they still faced obstacles, especially in understanding new concepts such as Learning Outcomes, Learning Objectives, and differentiated learning, as well as limitations in digital devices such as projectors and other supporting technologies. To overcome these challenges, teachers actively participate in training and professional development programs. The principal plays an important role through supportive leadership, continuous evaluation, and the creation of a conducive learning environment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education plays a crucial role in shaping the foundation of a child's development, encompassing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. In an effort to improve the quality of education in Indonesia, the government has developed the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) as a form of educational transformation that emphasizes more flexible, enjoyable, and student-centered learning. This curriculum also provides educators with the freedom to design learning activities based on the needs and characteristics of each child (Aniza, Hendriawan, & Arzaqi, 2024).

The curriculum is a critical component in achieving the goals of national education. In 2022, the Indonesian government launched the Independent Curriculum as part of a systemic change in education that requires significant adjustments from various stakeholders, especially teachers as the primary implementers in the field (Haniah, Aman, & Setiawan, 2020). The Independent Curriculum

focuses on student-centered learning, character building, and individual potential development through project-based methods and comprehensive assessment (Pranata, Sukmayadi, & Budiman, 2024).

RA. Munawwarah, as one of the Islamic early childhood education institutions in Lhokseumawe, is participating in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Early childhood education requires a very specific approach due to the developmental characteristics of children who are still in their formative stages. This context adds complexity to curriculum implementation, where teachers must understand not only pedagogical aspects but also the psychological development of children. Based on initial observations, there are variations in teacher responses to this curriculum, in terms of readiness, understanding, and available supporting resources (Akbar, Sulisty, Megawati, & Nuralisaputri, 2022). Several challenges have emerged, such as the level of teacher enthusiasm in applying the Independent Curriculum, difficulties in understanding the curriculum content, limited access to technological tools such as projectors, and a lack of access to digital resources. Finally, the researcher also observed the extent of teachers' efforts in addressing these challenges, as well as the role of the school principal and the educational institution in supporting the implementation of the Independent Curriculum (Ariaini & Sanaya, 2023).

The purpose of this research is to examine the level of teacher enthusiasm in implementing the Independent Curriculum, identify the challenges faced by teachers or educators in understanding the curriculum content, review the limitations of technological tools available in the school, and finally assess the efforts made by teachers to overcome these challenges, including the role of the principal and the educational institution in the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at RA. Munawwarah. This approach was chosen to illustrate the experiences, perceptions, and challenges encountered by teachers in applying the curriculum. A qualitative approach is considered suitable as it provides a comprehensive picture of the teachers' experiences in dealing with curriculum changes. Qualitative research reveals the natural condition of phenomena authentically through systematic, structured, orderly, and meticulous patterns of thinking, while also interrelating various data within the contextual framework of the problem being explored. Emphasis on accuracy and the interconnection of information is crucial in this approach (Prayogi, 2021).

The data collection techniques in this study utilized method triangulation, which included observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Direct observation was conducted at the school to observe the learning process and teacher-student interactions. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with four active teachers at RA. Munawwarah to thoroughly explore their understanding, challenges, and strategies implemented in relation to the curriculum.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of observations and interviews conducted at RA. Munawwarah, it was found that the teachers welcomed the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum with enthusiasm and openness to change. They recognized that this curriculum provides opportunities to design learning that is more flexible, creative, and child-centered. However, behind this enthusiasm, some teachers also expressed challenges in its implementation, particularly related to the limited technological facilities that support the teaching and learning process. The absence of projectors,

computer devices, and stable internet access has become a significant obstacle in delivering interactive and engaging digital learning media (Lee, Hoe Looi, Faulkner, & Neale, 2021). One teacher even stated that the lack of technological tools makes it difficult for them to facilitate learning activities that optimally stimulate children's activeness and curiosity. This condition indicates that technological infrastructure support is essential to ensure the effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, especially in creating enjoyable and meaningful learning experiences for early childhood students.

In facing these challenges, the teachers at RA. Munawwarah have demonstrated strong efforts to continuously improve their competencies as part of their adaptation strategy to the Merdeka Curriculum. One concrete step they have taken is participating in various professional development activities, such as training, workshops, and seminars facilitated by the Department of Education and other training institutions (Putranta & Wilujeng, 2019). Their active participation in these activities reflects the teachers' commitment to deepening their understanding of the concepts and implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, as well as enhancing their skills in designing creative learning experiences aligned with children's developmental needs. Through these trainings, teachers have also gained new insights into innovative learning strategies, the use of alternative media, and assessment techniques relevant to experiential learning approaches (Obloberdiyevna D S, 2022). Thus, despite the limitations in facilities, teachers continue to make active and sustained efforts to develop their professional capacity in order to support the quality of learning in accordance with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum (Hadi et al., 2023).

Based on the data collection results, several key findings emerged as the focus of this study, namely:

- **Teachers' Enthusiasm for the Merdeka Curriculum**

Teachers at RA. Munawwarah have shown openness and enthusiasm in welcoming the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. They believe that this curriculum aligns with their teaching needs, as it provides the flexibility to design learning experiences that are not only enjoyable but also appropriate to the developmental stages of young children. The Merdeka Curriculum is seen as a means to foster teachers' creativity in designing more contextual and meaningful activities for early childhood learners. This positive attitude is a key factor in the successful implementation of the curriculum, as teachers who welcome change with enthusiasm tend to adapt more quickly and are more willing to explore new methods and teaching strategies. Internal support such as training, teacher collaboration, and leadership from the principal that encourages innovation further strengthens teachers' motivation to carry out their roles effectively.

In the context of Early Childhood Education (ECE), the Merdeka Curriculum places children at the center of the learning process, emphasizing exploration, play, and hands-on experiences. This experiential learning process is specifically designed to align with the cognitive, emotional, social, and motor development stages of children. Through this approach, teachers are granted the freedom to create a joyful learning environment that stimulates imagination and fosters curiosity (Bakken, Brown, & Downing, 2017). They are also expected to observe and adjust learning activities to suit each child's unique characteristics and needs. Thus, ECE teachers play a crucial role in creating a safe, inclusive, and developmentally supportive learning environment. The Merdeka Curriculum is not just a policy, but an opportunity to build more meaningful learning experiences for the future of Indonesian children (Nuraeni, Nuroniah, & Hendriawan, 2025).

- **Challenges in Understanding the Curriculum Content**

One of the common problems faced by early childhood education teachers is the heavy reliance on textbooks as the primary source for delivering curriculum content. This condition is often caused by limited resources, such as lack of access to alternative learning media, insufficient training in developing creative teaching materials, and suboptimal support from educational institutions in providing varied learning tools (Ramlah, Riana, & Abadi, 2022). In fact, in the context of early childhood education, an effective learning process should encourage freedom, creativity, and flexibility in designing activities that are aligned with children's world activities that are explorative and enjoyable (Nabilah Mokhtar, Lim Zhi Xuan, Lokman, & Noor Hayati Che Mat, 2023).

Excessive dependence on textbooks not only restricts teachers' ability to develop innovative teaching methods but also limits children's opportunities to experience diverse learning situations. The main challenge lies in how teachers can broaden their knowledge and understanding of materials independently by utilizing various sources such as the surrounding environment, digital media, educational games, and collaboration with parents and the community (Sahabuddin, Liskawati, & Syamsiah, 2023). To overcome this issue, continuous training and institutional support are essential to equip teachers with the competence to design more holistic, interactive, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences. In this way, teachers are not merely transmitters of knowledge but also facilitators who create meaningful and joyful learning experiences for every child (Rahmaningtyas & Wijayanti, 2024).

For teachers, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is a real and dynamic learning experience, as they are not only required to deliver content but also to create contextual and meaningful learning processes for children. One teacher stated, "For example, if we're discussing rice fields, the children must be taken to the rice field." This statement reflects the core spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum experience-based learning that is relevant to children's lives (Ainis Rohtih, Saifuddin Hamzah, & Sakdiyah, 2023). This approach aims to connect learning with the real world, enabling children to grasp concepts concretely through observation, exploration, and direct involvement.

However, although this contextual approach is ideal and well-suited to the characteristics of early childhood education, in practice, teachers often face various challenges. Budget constraints, lack of transportation facilities, limited parental involvement, and time limitations are real obstacles that hinder the implementation of outdoor learning. In addition, not all surrounding environments offer easily accessible and safe learning resources for children. Therefore, teachers are required to be more creative and adaptive in designing experiential learning activities, such as by using simulations, teaching aids, or creating thematic learning environments within the classroom. Support from the school and collaboration with the community are also key factors in effectively and comprehensively realizing the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum.

- **Limited Technological Infrastructure**

Several teachers stated that the technological facilities available at the school are very limited, which poses a serious obstacle in implementing digital learning media aligned with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum. The absence of projectors, computers, or a stable internet connection makes it difficult for teachers to create interactive, innovative, and engaging learning experiences for children. In fact, one of the key aspects of the Merdeka Curriculum is the use of technology as a learning support tool that can stimulate students' creativity, curiosity, and active participation. When technological facilities are unavailable or inadequate, teachers are forced to revert to conventional

methods that are less relevant to the demands of the current era and the learning needs of today's children (Syamsul, Basyaruddin, & Yuhdi, 2020).

One crucial factor that supports the success of educational programs in the learning process is the availability of adequate facilities and infrastructure. Educational facilities and infrastructure are part of the resources that serve as indicators of the quality of an educational institution. Educational facilities include all tools and equipment directly used in the teaching and learning process, such as teaching aids, digital learning media, and technological devices. Meanwhile, infrastructure refers to physical support facilities such as classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and internet networks (Taufik, 2020). These two components must be continuously improved in line with the development of science and technology in order to support high-quality learning processes. Without adequate facilities and infrastructure, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum will be difficult to achieve optimally, as teachers lack the proper tools to design effective, adaptive, and student-centered learning. Therefore, a strong commitment is needed from all parties, including the government, educational institutions, and the community, to collectively enhance the quality of educational infrastructure for a better future for children (Nurfasha, 2021).

- **Teachers' Efforts in Overcoming Challenges**

In facing the challenges of transitioning from the 2013 Curriculum to the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum) at the Early Childhood Education level, teachers have shown various creative and adaptive initiatives to navigate the limitations of available facilities and infrastructure. One common approach has been independently participating in online training, either through official platforms provided by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag) or through educational channels on YouTube. These training sessions help teachers understand the philosophy of the Kurikulum Merdeka and how to implement child-centered learning practices (Galvis, 2018). In addition, to overcome the limited access to interactive digital media, teachers have also innovated by creating simple teaching aids using materials available in their local surroundings as alternative learning media. Collaborative practices have also emerged, where teachers share experiences, strategies, and learning materials through social media platforms such as WhatsApp Groups and Instagram, creating supportive learning communities (Agustina, Siregar, Husain, Asfahani, & Pahmi, 2023).

Moreover, parental involvement has become an essential part of the Kurikulum Merdeka implementation efforts. Teachers actively communicate with parents—either directly or through the school principal to ensure that the children's learning process is aligned between the school and home environments. All these efforts reflect the spirit of PAUD teachers to remain adaptive and committed to improving the quality of education despite existing limitations.

- **The Role of the Principal and the Institution**

The Principal of RA. Munawwarah plays a highly strategic role in supporting the successful transition and implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka within the institution. One tangible form of support provided is the establishment of open discussion spaces for teachers, enabling them to exchange ideas, share challenges they encounter, and collectively seek solutions. These discussions serve as a vital platform to build a shared understanding of the philosophy and learning approach within the Kurikulum Merdeka, which emphasizes diversity, independence, and the holistic developmental needs of children.

In addition, the principal consistently provides regular guidance, both in the form of academic supervision and assistance in preparing teaching modules and learning activity plans. This guidance

not only enhances the teachers' professional capacities but also boosts their confidence in implementing more flexible and contextual learning processes (Sugiarti & Husain, 2021). Furthermore, the principal encourages and facilitates teachers to participate in various training programs, whether organized by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud) or other educational institutions, as part of continuous competency development. This proactive attitude and ongoing support from the principal foster a positive and collaborative work environment, which serves as a critical foundation for the successful implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka at RA. Munawwarah.

Within the framework of the Kurikulum Merdeka, the principal is also responsible for ensuring the continuity and relevance of the curriculum in accordance with the needs of the institution and the dynamics of the times. By conducting regular evaluations of curriculum implementation, the principal is able to identify opportunities for improvement and necessary development (Yang, 2022). Through a proactive and responsive approach, school leadership ensures that the educational institution continues to evolve in alignment with current demands.

To promote the development of Early Childhood Islamic Education, the principal is also responsible for creating a supportive and inspiring learning environment. This includes providing adequate facilities, fostering an inclusive school culture, and cultivating an atmosphere that supports teaching and learning activities. A conducive environment contributes to increased student motivation and strengthens the development of children's character, ethics, and faith (Wathon, 2025).

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals a paradox in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at RA. Munawwarah. On the one hand, teachers show high enthusiasm and a positive attitude towards the new curriculum. Viewing the Independent Curriculum as a relevant innovation and in line with the needs of early childhood education today, because it provides greater flexibility for educators to design flexible, fun, and child-centered learning experiences. The curriculum is considered capable of improving the quality of the learning process and supporting the development of children's potential optimally cognitively, socially emotional, and motorically. However, on the other hand, teachers also face various complex challenges, especially in understanding and implementing new concepts introduced in the curriculum, such as Learning Outcomes, Learning Objectives, and differentiated learning approaches. The lack of in-depth training and limited access to learning resources have caused some teachers to feel confused and not fully confident in adopting these approaches in the classroom. In this context, the principal of RA. Munawwarah plays an important role as an agent of change through a transformational leadership style.

The principal not only acts as an administrative manager, but also as a visionary and inspiring leader who actively guides, motivates, and supports teachers during their adaptation period to the new curriculum. This inclusive and supportive leadership is reflected in various principal initiatives, such as organizing internal training sessions, facilitating teacher discussion forums, and conducting periodic evaluations to review the implementation of learning. Furthermore, the principal strives to create a collaborative, open, and conducive learning environment where teachers feel valued and motivated to continue learning and developing themselves. This proactive approach has proven to be a key factor in the initial success of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at RA. Munawwarah, because this approach fosters a school culture that is adaptive to change and oriented towards improving the quality of education.

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