

# **Early Childhood Education Teachers' Perceptions of The Implementation of The Independent Curriculum at Sartika Mandiri Kindergate Batu Bara**

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## **Abstract**

This study aims to determine the perceptions of early childhood education (PAUD) teachers regarding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Sartika Mandiri Kindergarten, Batu Bara. The Independent Curriculum provides teachers with flexibility in developing child-centered learning and emphasizes play-based learning and character building. This study used a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collection techniques including interviews, observation, and documentation. The results indicate that teachers have a positive perception of the Independent Curriculum because it is considered more appropriate to the needs of early childhood and reduces administrative burdens. However, teachers still experience challenges in understanding holistic assessment and a lack of technical assistance. Supporting factors for implementation include teacher enthusiasm, principal support, and access to online training. Meanwhile, inhibiting factors include a lack of parental involvement and limited resources. This study concludes that the success of the curriculum implementation is strongly influenced by teacher perceptions and readiness, thus requiring ongoing training and direct field assistance.

**Keywords:** Teacher perception, PAUD, Independent Curriculum, implementation

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Early Childhood Education (ECE) represents a foundational phase in the education system that significantly shapes a child's future development. Early childhood is widely recognized as the golden age, a critical period during which various aspects of development physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, language, and moral progress rapidly and require appropriate stimulation. Therefore, education at this stage cannot be equated with other educational levels; it demands an enjoyable, flexible approach based on children's concrete experiences (Suyadi, 2020).

As part of national education reform, the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) introduced the Merdeka Curriculum, a learning policy that offers greater flexibility and is oriented toward the needs and potentials of students. At the ECE level, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes child-centered learning, conducted through play-based activities, and encourages character development through the formation of the Pancasila Student Profile. Additionally, the curriculum grants teachers the autonomy to design contextual learning activities based on local environments and cultures (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

Nevertheless, curriculum transformation cannot be fully realized without the support and readiness of teachers, who are the primary implementers at the school level. One critical aspect to consider in implementing education policy is teachers' perceptions. Teachers' perceptions of a curriculum policy significantly influence their attitudes, motivation, and how they implement it in the classroom (Gibson et al., 2012). Positive perceptions often reflect understanding and acceptance of the policy, whereas negative perceptions may hinder the successful implementation of the curriculum.

Sartika Mandiri kindergaten Batu Bara is one of the ECE institutions in Batu Bara Regency, North Sumatra Province, that has adopted the Merdeka Curriculum since the 2023/2024 academic year. The school is committed to improving the quality of early childhood education services and serves as a pilot project for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the ECE level in the region. However, in practice, the implementation of the curriculum faces various challenges. While some teachers appreciate the curriculum's flexibility, others experience difficulties in lesson planning, understanding holistic assessment, and dealing with limited resources or lack of parental involvement.

This situation indicates that the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the ECE level depends not only on its structural design but also heavily on teachers' perceptions and readiness. Therefore, it is essential to conduct an in-depth study on how teachers at Sartika Mandiri kindergaten perceive the Merdeka Curriculum, as well as the supporting and inhibiting factors affecting its implementation. This research is important to provide a real picture of the situation in the field and to serve as input for the government, curriculum developers, and other stakeholders in developing more contextual and effective support strategies.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Perception is a complex process involving an individual's understanding of stimuli or signals from the environment through the five senses, which are then interpreted based on experience, knowledge, and personal values. According to Robbins (2016), perception is the

process by which individuals organize and interpret their sensory impressions to give meaning to their environment. Gibson, Ivancevich, and Donnelly (2012) also emphasize that perception is not objective; it is heavily influenced by a person's experience, motivation, expectations, and socio-cultural background. For instance, teachers who have had positive experiences in curriculum training tend to have better perceptions of implementing a new curriculum compared to those who have not actively engaged in professional development (Nugroho, A., 2022).

#### Factors Influencing Perception

According to Gibson et al. (2012), factors influencing perception include:

1. Stimuli (external factors): Information received, such as new policies or government-provided training.
2. Individual (internal factors): Educational background, age, experience, motivation, and the psychological condition of the teacher.
3. Social and cultural environment: Interaction with colleagues, school leadership, and institutional support.

In the context of this research, early childhood education (ECE) teachers' perceptions of the Merdeka Curriculum may be influenced by their understanding of the curriculum, teaching experience, training received, and availability of resources.

### 2.1 Characteristics of ECE Teachers

ECE teachers play a dual role not only as instructors but also as facilitators of early childhood development. According to the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 137 of 2014 on National Standards for ECE, teachers must possess pedagogical, personal, social, and professional competencies that align with the characteristics of young children. They must be capable of planning meaningful and enjoyable learning activities tailored to the developmental stage of the child. ECE teachers are also expected to have creativity and high sensitivity to individual child needs (Suyanto, S., 2018).

#### The Role of Teachers in Curriculum Implementation

Teachers are not just policy implementers but also curriculum interpreters. The success of the *Merdeka Curriculum* implementation largely depends on teachers' understanding and interpretation of its content and principles.

ECE teachers are responsible for:

1. Preparing play-based and exploratory lesson plans.
2. Creating a stimulating learning environment that sparks children's curiosity.
3. Fostering healthy social interaction between children and between children and teachers.

### 2.2 Principles and Objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum

The *Merdeka Curriculum* is designed to respond to the challenges of globalization and digitalization while upholding national values. It focuses on character development through the *Pancasila Student Profile*, provides flexibility for teachers and schools, and promotes contextual and joyful learning (Robbins, S. P., 2016).

At the ECE level, the principles of the *Merdeka Curriculum* include:

1. Play-based learning.
2. Flexibility in planning daily activities.

3. Less emphasis on academic content and more on developmental stimulation.
4. Holistic and descriptive assessment.

### **2.3 Implications of the Merdeka Curriculum for ECE Practices**

The *Merdeka Curriculum* requires ECE teachers to adapt not only in terms of lesson planning, but also in teaching methods, assessment, and documentation of children's development. This poses challenges, especially for teachers unfamiliar with flexible, interest-based thematic learning. On the other hand, the curriculum opens up creative and innovative opportunities for teachers to tailor learning to the needs of students and the socio-cultural context of their environment.

### **2.4 The Relationship Between Teachers' Perceptions and Curriculum Implementation**

A positive perception from teachers toward education policy will enhance curriculum implementation. Conversely, negative or skeptical perceptions can hinder the learning process. Nugroho (2022) found that teachers with a deep understanding of the *Merdeka Curriculum* are more confident in planning learning activities and assessing child development. Therefore, it is essential to explore ECE teachers' perceptions of the *Merdeka Curriculum* to identify potential obstacles, development opportunities, and training support needs more accurately.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research Approach and Type**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive research type. This approach is chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of early childhood education (PAUD) teachers' perceptions regarding the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in a real-world setting, specifically at Sartika Mandiri kindergaten Batu Bara. Qualitative research is suitable for exploring views, experiences, and subjective interpretations of individuals or groups regarding a phenomenon (Moleong, 2017).

The descriptive type is used because this research does not aim to test hypotheses or establish causal relationships. Instead, it seeks to present facts, narratively describe teachers' perceptions, and explain the various factors influencing curriculum implementation from the informants' point of view.

### **3.2 Research Location and Time**

The study was conducted at TK Sartika Mandiri, located in Desa Sukamaju, Lima Puluh Subdistrict, Batu Bara Regency, North Sumatra Province. This location was chosen purposively as Sartika Mandiri kindergaten is one of the early childhood education units in the region that has gradually implemented the *Kurikulum Merdeka* since the 2023/2024 academic year.

The research took place between August and October 2025, covering the phases of observation, data collection through interviews and documentation, data analysis, and the preparation of the research report.

### 3.3 Data Collection Techniques

Three primary techniques were used for data collection:

- a. In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted directly with informants using flexible open-ended interview guidelines. The purpose was to explore teachers' understanding, attitudes, challenges, and experiences in implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.
- b. Observation: Observations were made on classroom learning practices to assess the alignment between teachers' perceptions and their actual implementation. Observations also included the learning environment, teacher-child interactions, and the use of teaching aids.
- c. Documentation: Collected documents included: Lesson Plans (RPPH), teachers' daily notes, activity photographs, and training materials related to the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Moleong, L. J., 2017).

### 3.4 Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which consist of six steps:

1. Transcribing data from interviews and observations.
2. Reading and thoroughly understanding the data.
3. Performing initial coding to identify patterns or themes.
4. Grouping codes into main themes.
5. Reviewing and refining the themes.
6. Writing interpretations and drawing conclusions.

To ensure data validity, a triangulation technique was applied by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and document analysis.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Sartika Mandiri Kindergarten is one of the early childhood education institutions located in Batu Bara Regency, North Sumatra Province. The institution has been operating since 2010 and holds an official operational license from the local Department of Education. Currently, Sartika Mandiri Kindergarten has four learning groups with a total of 85 children and six teachers, including the principal.

Since the 2023/2024 academic year, Sartika Mandiri Kindergarten has been selected as one of the pilot project schools for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum (Independent Curriculum) at the early childhood education (PAUD) level. The school actively participates in both online and offline training programs, as well as mentoring sessions led by district-level *guru penggerak* (teacher facilitators).

### 4.1 Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Sartika Mandiri Kindergarten, Batu Bara

Based on the results of observation and documentation, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Sartika Mandiri Kindergarten has progressed gradually and satisfactorily. The following are key aspects of the implementation that were identified:

- a. Lesson Planning. Teachers design learning plans based on children's interests and contextual themes. Daily Learning Implementation Plans (RPPH) are created flexibly

and are no longer burdened with excessive administrative tasks. Teachers also apply the principle of "learning through play" when designing daily activities.

- b. Learning Implementation. Learning activities are conducted using thematic-integrative approaches through learning centers and corners. Children are encouraged to explore a variety of activities such as role-playing, painting, gardening, and storytelling. Teachers provide opportunities for children to explore according to their interests.
- c. Assessment and Documentation. Assessments are carried out descriptively and holistically, focusing on the development of religious and moral values, physical-motor skills, cognitive, language, social-emotional, and artistic aspects. Teachers document children's development through portfolios and narrative reports, instead of numeric scores.
- d. Learning Environment. The school's physical environment has been redesigned to be more child-friendly, featuring attractive visuals, cheerful colors, and educational play materials. Teachers acknowledge the importance of classroom layout as the "second teacher."
- e. Training and Self-Development. Most teachers participate in Merdeka Curriculum training via the *Merdeka Mengajar* platform, Ministry of Education webinars, and teacher practitioner communities in Batu Bara.

#### 4.2 PAUD Teachers' Perception of the Merdeka Curriculum Implementation

Based on in-depth interviews with six teachers at TK Sartika Mandiri, the overall perception of the Merdeka Curriculum tends to be positive, although accompanied by several critical notes.

- a. Understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum  
Most teachers understand that the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes child-centered learning, contextual learning, and character building through the *Pancasila Student Profile*. They appreciate the reduced administrative workload and the opportunity for innovation. "We used to spend a lot of time writing reports. Now we have more time to directly assist the children." – (Teacher A)
- b. Readiness to Implement  
Teachers feel more confident applying the play-based learning method, although some admit they are still learning how to adjust to narrative assessment and flexible planning. "I still get confused about how to assess children who don't like to talk in class, but I learned that it can be noted as behavioral observation, not a sign of lack of development." – (Teacher B).
- c. Support for Teachers  
Teachers feel supported by the principal and the teacher community, though some believe they need direct in-class assistance as theory alone is insufficient. "We need real-life examples, not just modules. Sometimes we need direct mentoring." – (Teacher C)

Overall, the teachers' perception falls under the *adaptive-progressive* category, meaning they are open to the new curriculum and continue learning through reflective practices.

### 4.3 Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of Implementation

Supporting Factors:

1. Teacher Commitment – Teachers at Sartika Mandiri Kindergarten show high motivation to learn and adapt, and actively participate in the PAUD teacher community at the district level.
2. School Leadership – The principal encourages innovation and supports teachers in attending training and applying Merdeka Curriculum practices.
3. Supportive Learning Environment – The school provides educational play tools, storybooks, and classrooms that support children's exploratory activities.
4. Availability of Digital Resources – Teachers are accustomed to using the *Merdeka Mengajar* platform to access training and teaching materials.

Inhibiting Factors:

1. Lack of Technical Assistance – Despite participating in online training, teachers feel the need for direct classroom mentoring by facilitators to optimize curriculum implementation.
2. Limited Understanding of Holistic Assessment – Some teachers are still unsure how to record and report children's development, especially in social-emotional and character aspects.
3. Limited Classroom Resources – Although creative, teachers face constraints due to a lack of locally relevant teaching materials, especially in rural areas of Batu Bara.
4. Lack of Parental Involvement – Many parents still do not understand that early childhood education is no longer academically driven (e.g., reading and writing) but rather focuses on attitude and character development.

## DISCUSSION

The teachers at Sartika Mandiri Kindergarten hold generally positive and adaptive perceptions toward the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum), although challenges remain. They acknowledge that the curriculum grants them the flexibility and autonomy to manage learning more creatively. Teachers appreciate the simplification of administrative tasks and the learning approach that aligns more closely with the developmental characteristics of early childhood learners (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This perception is consistent with Gibson's theory (2012), which states that perception is influenced by individual experiences, expectations, and interpretations of external stimuli. In this case, experiences from training sessions and participation in learning communities have made teachers more receptive to the new policy.

However, a positive perception does not always translate into technical competence in implementing all components of the curriculum. Teachers still require training that goes beyond theory training that is practical and contextual such as classroom simulations, on-site assistance, or technical mentoring from local facilitators.

This study shows that early childhood education (ECE) teachers can serve as curriculum change agents if they are provided with ample opportunities for learning and practice. A positive perception is a strong initial asset, but it must be supported by effective training systems, strong learning communities, and continuous assistance.

The implications of this research suggest that the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* must be contextual and collaborative. It should not rely solely on learning modules and online training, but also include in-person mentoring tailored to the real needs of teachers in different regions (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

Parental involvement also emerges as a crucial aspect that needs to be strengthened. Teachers cannot work alone in educating young children. Therefore, strong synergy between schools and families is essential for the success of character building and the development of children's competencies through this curriculum.

## CONCLUSION

The implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at Sartika Mandiri Kindergarten in Batu Bara has shown significant progress. The teachers hold a positive perception of the curriculum, although there remains a need for ongoing support, deeper understanding of holistic assessment, and stronger assistance from various stakeholders. The spirit of adaptation and teacher commitment has been the main driving force in facing challenges during this transitional phase.

The implementation is on the right track, marked by the teachers' openness and eagerness to learn. Their perceptions are generally positive and adaptive, though still constrained by technical limitations and a lack of external support. Therefore, a more comprehensive approach in terms of training, policy support, and cross-sector collaboration is essential to ensure the effective implementation of this curriculum at the early childhood education (ECE) level. (Nuryanto, T., 2023).

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