Between Structure and Flexibility: A Comparative Analysis of the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract/Abstrak

In Indonesian Early Childhood Education (ECE/PAUD), curriculum policy change necessitates that educational institutions modify their methods for instructional planning, execution, and evaluation. The purpose of this paper is to examine how the 2013 Curriculum (K13) and the Merdeka Curriculum are implemented differently in ECE and to establish their consequences for the evolution of learning practice at TKIT Insan Madani, Palopo City. This study uses a qualitative approach with literature review and comparative document analysis methods. Data sources consist of official government regulations on ECE and curriculum, guidelines for foundational phase learning outcomes, and relevant scholarly articles published between 2018 and 2025. The review's findings indicate that K13 is more structured and administrative, with an emphasis on comprehensive instructional planning and rigorously documented authentic assessments. In contrast, the Merdeka Curriculum is more adaptable and child-centered, emphasising meaningful play, project-based learning, and formative evaluation as integral components of the learning process. Nevertheless, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum still faces challenges related to teacher readiness, conceptual understanding, resource availability, and communication with parents. This article concludes that the comparison of the two curricula is important as a basis for ECE institutions to develop contextual and adaptive curriculum transition models while maintaining the quality of early childhood education services.

Keywords/Kata Kunci: *Early Childhood Education, Merdeka Curriculum, 2013 Curriculum, early childhood learning, comparative study*

Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE/PAUD) is the initial foundation for shaping children's character, basic abilities, and learning readiness. Therefore, curriculum change at this level cannot be understood merely as a replacement of administrative documents, but rather as a shift in the learning paradigm. During the K13 period, ECE was developed through a curriculum framework and national standards that emphasized systematic competency development. In the latest policy developments, the Merdeka Curriculum is affirmed as a curriculum that provides flexibility, focuses on essential material, and is oriented toward students' development in a more contextual manner. This change is currently regulated in the 2024 curriculum regulation and its 2025 adjustment. (Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, 2014a, 2014b; Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024; Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025).

In K13, ECE learning is structured through detailed planning instruments and authentic assessment that continuously documents children's development. Meanwhile, the Merdeka Curriculum at the foundational phase emphasizes learning outcomes built through three main elements: religious values and character, identity, and the foundations of literacy and STEAM. Official government guidelines also emphasize that learning in ECE should be child-centered, enjoyable, and provide space for children's initiative, creativity, and interests. (Anggriani et al., 2024; Hikrawati, 2024; Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c).

A number of studies show that the implementation of K13 in ECE helps teachers develop thematic learning and authentic assessment, but it often creates a high administrative workload. Conversely, research on the Merdeka Curriculum shows greater flexibility, opportunities for developing children's creativity, and space for project-based learning, although teachers still face obstacles in understanding curriculum concepts, preparing teaching materials, providing resources, and building communication with parents. In other words, both curricula have their respective strengths and limitations. (Hikrawati, 2024; Nuraeni et al., 2025; Rahelly, 2018; Rasmani et al., 2023; Tupalessy, 2024).

Based on these conditions, this article aims to analyze the comparison between the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and K13 in ECE through a comparative review of regulations and previous studies. The results of this review are expected to serve as a conceptual basis for developing case studies and curriculum implementation practices at TKIT Insan Madani, Palopo City.

Method

This article uses a qualitative approach and comparative document analysis. The primary data sources include official ECE curriculum regulations, content standards, process standards, assessment standards, Merdeka Curriculum regulations, and guidelines for foundational phase learning outcomes. The secondary data sources include national and international scholarly articles discussing the implementation of K13 and the Merdeka Curriculum in ECE. The documents were analyzed through three stages: identifying main themes, categorizing comparative aspects, and drawing a synthesis. The aspects compared include curriculum orientation, learning planning, implementation strategies, assessment systems, and implementation challenges. Because this article has not yet used original field data from TKIT Insan Madani, Palopo City, the results presented constitute a conceptual comparative review that can serve as an initial framework for empirical case study research. (Anggriani et al., 2024; Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024; Nuraeni et al., 2025; Tupalessy, 2024).

Results

The 2013 Curriculum in ECE

The implementation of K13 in ECE is built on a systematic framework. Its learning focus includes the development of children's attitudes, knowledge, and skills, which are monitored through authentic assessment. In practice, teachers are required to prepare learning activity plans, media, and documents for monitoring children's development. Assessment is carried out continuously through observation, conversation, performance, work samples, anecdotal records, and portfolios. This character makes K13 relatively strong in terms of regularity, clarity of documentation, and continuity in monitoring children's development. However, this detailed structure also often increases teachers' administrative workload. (Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, 2014b; Rahelly, 2018).

Rahelly's (2018) findings show that the implementation of K13 in ECE requires teachers to prepare daily lesson plans and learning media before the learning process takes place. The study indicates that K13 helps schools develop more planned learning, but its effectiveness depends heavily on teachers' readiness to prepare plans and conduct authentic assessment. Thus, the main strength of K13 lies in system regularity, while its weakness lies in administrative complexity. (Rahelly, 2018).

The Merdeka Curriculum in ECE

Unlike K13, the Merdeka Curriculum places strong emphasis on flexibility, meaningful play, and child-centered learning. The 2024 curriculum regulation, later adjusted in 2025, affirms the Merdeka Curriculum framework as a curriculum focused on essential material and the holistic development of students' competencies. In ECE, this orientation is translated into foundational phase learning outcomes that place children's development at the center of learning. The official foundational phase guide also emphasizes that children's learning experiences should combine play, exploration, and opportunities to express ideas according to their interests and developmental stages. (Anggriani et al., 2024; Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024; Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025).

Recent literature shows that the Merdeka Curriculum opens opportunities for richer learning experiences for young children. Hikrawati (2024) emphasizes that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in ECE operates through the three foundational elements and aligns with the concept of "freedom to play." Rasmani et al. (2023) and Aulina and Nurdiana (2024) also show that project-based learning in the Merdeka Curriculum can strengthen creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and the connection between learning themes and children's surrounding environment. From the assessment perspective, Pyle et al. (2020) show that assessment in play-based contexts is more effective when integrated with learning objectives and teachers' continuous observation. This means that the Merdeka Curriculum provides greater space for natural learning, but it requires teachers to have more reflective and adaptive pedagogical competence. (Aulina & Nurdiana, 2024; Hikrawati, 2024; Pyle et al., 2020; Rasmani et al., 2023).

Comparison of the Implementation of K13 and the Merdeka Curriculum

Substantively, K13 and the Merdeka Curriculum differ in orientation, structure, and implementation logic. K13 tends to position orderly planning and documentation as its main strengths. The Merdeka Curriculum, on the other hand, places pedagogical flexibility, contextual relevance, and children's learning experiences at the core of practice. In K13, teachers play a strong role as designers and directors of activities that have been arranged in detail. In the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers act as facilitators who adjust activities to children's needs, interests, and development. In terms of assessment, K13 is more detailed in its instruments and documentation, whereas the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes formative assessment integrated into the learning process. (Anggriani et al., 2024; Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, 2014b; Nuraeni et al., 2025; Pyle et al., 2020; Rahelly, 2018,; Jufriadi,2014).

Table: Comparison of the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum

Aspect	2013 Curriculum	Merdeka Curriculum
Orientation	Structured and competency-based	Flexible and based on developmental outcomes
Planning	Detailed, administrative, strongly documented	Simpler, adaptive, contextual
Learning	Thematic, with teachers more dominant in directing activities	Meaningful play, exploratory, child-centered
Assessment	Authentic with detailed	Formative, integrated into the

	instruments	learning process
Challenges	Teachers' administrative workload	Teacher readiness, conceptual understanding, and resources

The table shows that the differences between the two curricula should not be understood dichotomously. In ECE practice, K13's strength in disciplined documentation remains relevant, while the Merdeka Curriculum's advantage in flexibility and meaningful learning is also very important. Therefore, ECE institutions can develop implementation strategies that take the strengths of both: orderly planning and assessment while remaining flexible in play-based approaches, projects, and adjustments to children's characteristics. (Aulina & Nurdiana, 2024; Nuraeni et al., 2025; Pyle et al., 2020; Rasmani et al., 2023; Jufriadi et al., 2023).

Implications for TKIT Insan Madani, Palopo City

As a basis for a case study at TKIT Insan Madani, Palopo City, the results of this comparison indicate several directions for strengthening practice. First, the school needs to maintain K13's strength in systematic documentation of children's development while simplifying its administrative burden using the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. Second, teachers need intensive mentoring so they can understand foundational phase learning outcomes, the flow of learning planning, and formative assessment based on evidence of children's development. Third, communication with parents needs to be strengthened because one of the challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in ECE is resistance or misalignment of understanding between home and school. Fourth, the school can develop project-based learning close to the local environment of Palopo City so that children learn contextually and meaningfully. (Anggriani et al., 2024; Aulina & Nurdiana, 2024; Nuraeni et al., 2025; Rasmani et al., 2023).

Conclusion/Kesimpulan

The comparison between K13 and the Merdeka Curriculum in ECE shows that both curricula have important orientations toward child development, but they differ in their implementation approaches. K13 is superior in orderly planning, documentation, and detailed authentic assessment. Conversely, the Merdeka Curriculum is superior in flexibility, child-centered learning, meaningful play, and the integration of projects into learning experiences. The main challenge of K13 is the high administrative workload, while the main challenges of the Merdeka Curriculum are teacher readiness, resources, and communication with parents. Therefore, ECE institutions such as TKIT Insan Madani, Palopo City, need to develop an implementation model that does not merely choose one curriculum normatively, but instead combines planning discipline with pedagogical flexibility so that the quality of ECE services is maintained.

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