



Realizing “Structured Freedom”: A Case Study of Merdeka Curriculum Implementation in Pembina State Kindergartens in Yogyakarta

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze how teachers at three TK Pembina in Yogyakarta interpret the principle of child independence (merdeka) within the Merdeka Curriculum and translate it into early childhood education (ECE) practices. Employing a qualitative approach with a multiple case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with six teachers and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana. The findings indicate that teachers interpret child independence primarily as providing space for children to choose, explore, and develop activities based on their interests and abilities, rather than as boundless freedom. This principle is realized through offering activity choices, utilizing loose parts, adopting an invitation-based approach, and contextually adapting the curriculum. The study also reveals that child independence is consistently negotiated with the need for structure, scaffolding, and the attainment of developmental goals. Teachers implement a “structured freedom” strategy, where child agency is fostered within a pedagogically designed structure. Thus, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in ECE is not merely a matter of mastering curriculum terminology, but rather the teacher's ability to act as a curriculum adaptor, transforming policy into practice that is responsive to individual children's needs.

[Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana guru pada tiga TK Pembina di Yogyakarta memaknai prinsip kemerdekaan anak (merdeka) dalam Kurikulum Merdeka dan menerjemahkannya ke dalam praktik pendidikan anak usia dini (PAUD). Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan desain studi kasus multipel, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan enam guru dan dianalisis menggunakan model analisis interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldana. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru memaknai kemerdekaan anak terutama sebagai pemberian ruang bagi anak untuk memilih, mengeksplorasi, dan mengembangkan aktivitas berdasarkan minat dan kemampuan mereka, bukan sebagai kebebasan tanpa batas. Prinsip tersebut diwujudkan melalui pemberian pilihan aktivitas, penggunaan loose parts, penerapan pendekatan berbasis invitasi, serta adaptasi kurikulum secara kontekstual. Penelitian ini juga menunjukkan bahwa kemerdekaan anak secara konsisten dinegosiasikan dengan kebutuhan akan struktur, scaffolding, dan

pencapaian tujuan perkembangan. Guru menerapkan strategi “kebebasan terarah” (structured freedom), di mana agency anak dikembangkan dalam struktur yang dirancang secara pedagogis. Dengan demikian, implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka dalam PAUD bukan sekadar persoalan penguasaan terminologi kurikulum, melainkan kemampuan guru untuk berperan sebagai adaptator kurikulum yang mentransformasikan kebijakan ke dalam praktik yang responsif terhadap kebutuhan individual anak.]

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum; Early Childhood Education; Curriculum Enactment; Structured Freedom.

Introduction

Early Childhood Education is undergoing a paradigm shift from instruction focused on content delivery to an approach that positions the child as an active subject in the learning process (Herman et al., 2025; Hidayat et al., 2026). This shift stems from the understanding that young children learn through direct experience, play, exploration, social interaction, and active engagement with their environment. In the Indonesian context, this direction is increasingly emphasized through the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Merdeka Curriculum) at the foundational stage, which views early childhood learning as a process that must unfold through meaningful experiences and play (Pratiwi et al., 2025; Putri, 2026).

The 2025 Guidelines for Learning Outcomes in the Foundation Phase emphasize that early childhood education should connect knowledge with children’s everyday lives through play and exploration. Accordingly, learning should not merely be oriented toward the acquisition of factual knowledge but should instead foster deep and meaningful experiences (Kemendikdasmen, 2025). This shift is also consistent with developments in early childhood education scholarship, which increasingly recognizes children’s agency, choice, and active engagement as essential components of pedagogy. Recent studies on agency in early childhood education indicate that children’s capacity to make choices, influence their surroundings, and act autonomously constitutes an important element of progressive pedagogy during the early years (Alisa et al., 2025).

Within this framework, the Merdeka Curriculum provides greater flexibility for educational institutions and teachers to design learning in accordance with the characteristics, needs, and contexts of learners. In early childhood education, this idea is often translated into the concept of *merdeka bermain* (freedom to play), which provides children with opportunities to explore, choose activities, develop their interests, and construct learning experiences through play. Several studies in Indonesia have shown that the implementation of the *merdeka belajar* (freedom to learn) concept in early childhood education is associated with efforts to shift learning from a teacher-centered approach toward one that is more child-centered (Harefa & Suprihatin, 2023). However, children’s freedom should not be understood as unrestricted liberty without direction. Recent guidelines for early childhood learning instead position meaningful learning experiences, active engagement, competency development, and assessment as interconnected components of the learning process (Kemendikdasmen, 2025). Thus, a critical issue in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in early childhood education is not merely the extent to which children are given freedom, but rather how such freedom is intentionally designed to support children’s development and learning objectives.

This issue gives rise to a pedagogical tension between granting children freedom and the need for structure, guidance, and teacher support. On the one hand, learning that is overly controlled by teachers may constrain children’s choices, initiative, and creativity. On the other hand, freedom without adequate structure may result in play experiences that lack direction and are insufficiently connected to children’s developmental goals. Research on play-based pedagogy indicates that the relationship between children’s freedom in play and the teacher’s role is not necessarily dichotomous.

Studies of PlayWorlds in the context of early childhood education in Indonesia, for example, demonstrate the importance of teachers as play partners and highlight different degrees of freedom within the learning process. The model further illustrates that freedom, learning objectives, teacher–child interaction, and meaning-making processes develop dialectically (Utami et al., 2025). Accordingly, the more substantive pedagogical question is not whether children should be “free” or “directed,” but how teachers can create spaces for freedom while simultaneously providing appropriate structure, scaffolding, and developmentally responsive support. This issue is particularly important because research on the implementation of independent learning in Indonesian early childhood education continues to identify learning practices that do not fully provide children with meaningful choices and that remain strongly shaped by teacher-determined activities (De Gomes, 2023).

This tension indicates that the success of a curriculum policy cannot be assessed solely on the basis of the existence of curriculum documents or educational institutions’ compliance with implementation procedures. Teachers are key actors who translate curriculum policy into everyday pedagogical decisions. The literature on curriculum enactment explains that curriculum does not move directly from policy documents into classroom practice; rather, it undergoes processes of interpretation, translation, and adaptation by teachers within particular contexts (Lambert & Penney, 2020).

Ross (2024), for instance, demonstrates that teachers translate curriculum from the intended curriculum into the planned curriculum and ultimately into the enacted curriculum, with this interpretation shaped by teachers’ knowledge and their understanding of learners (Ross, 2024). This perspective is particularly important for understanding the Merdeka Curriculum because teachers are not merely policy implementers but also translators, interpreters, and pedagogical decision-makers who determine how the principles of flexibility and children’s freedom are actualized in learning experiences.

This phenomenon can be observed in the experiences of teachers at three TK Pembina (state model kindergartens)) state-supported model kindergartens in Bantul Regency, Sleman Regency, and Yogyakarta City, which constitute the context of this study. Interview data indicate that teachers have sought to translate the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum through the provision of activity choices, the use of loose parts, invitation-based approaches, the adaptation of activities to children’s abilities, and the use of initial assessments to identify children’s developmental needs. At the same time, teachers encounter situations demonstrating that children’s freedom cannot be implemented in a straightforward manner. Some teachers continue to experience difficulties in understanding certain components of the Merdeka Curriculum, while others have introduced activity choices but still establish boundaries, agreements, and forms of guidance. Some teachers even perceive that certain practices described as “*merdeka*” had already been implemented prior to the introduction of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, suggesting that curriculum reform is not always perceived as an entirely new pedagogical transformation.

These initial findings reveal a process of interpretation and negotiation in which teachers embrace the idea of children’s freedom while simultaneously adapting it to children’s age, developmental abilities, learning objectives, classroom order, and expectations regarding readiness for subsequent educational levels. This phenomenon makes the three TK Pembina institutions a relevant context for understanding how curriculum policy is actually “brought to life” in classroom practice. Previous studies have examined the Merdeka Curriculum or *merdeka belajar* in early childhood education from various perspectives, including parental understanding, implementation challenges, learning quality, and forms of curriculum implementation in early childhood education settings (Indrawati et al., 2022). These studies provide important insights into implementation readiness and

challenges. However, there remains room to further investigate how teachers, as policy actors, translate the idea of children's freedom into everyday pedagogical decisions, particularly when tensions arise between children's choices and the need for pedagogical structure. Furthermore, although research on curriculum enactment has extensively examined teachers' processes of interpreting and translating policy, studies connecting this perspective with the concrete experiences of early childhood teachers in negotiating children's freedom and pedagogical structure within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia remain limited. Thus, the research gap does not lie in the absence of studies on the Merdeka Curriculum in early childhood education, but rather in the insufficient understanding of the pedagogical and interpretive processes that occur when teachers translate the principle of children's freedom into concrete and contextually situated learning practice.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study aims to analyze how teachers at TK Pembina in Bantul Regency, Sleman Regency, and Yogyakarta City understand the principle of children's freedom within the Merdeka Curriculum and translate it into early childhood learning practices. Specifically, the study focuses on three aspects: (1) how teachers conceptualize children's freedom in learning; (2) how this principle is translated through learning planning and implementation; and (3) how teachers negotiate children's freedom with the need for structure, guidance, and the achievement of developmental goals. Drawing on the perspective of curriculum enactment, this study seeks to demonstrate that implementing the Merdeka Curriculum is not merely a matter of applying policy documents, but rather an interpretive and contextual process involving teachers' professional judgments regarding children's characteristics and needs. Ultimately, this study seeks to uncover how structured children's freedom is constituted through the interaction between curriculum policy, teachers' interpretations, and the realities of early childhood classroom practice.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a multiple case study design. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences, meanings, interpretations, and practices in translating the Merdeka Curriculum into early childhood education (ECE) learning. Creswell (2013), explain that a case study approach is used to explore a case or multiple cases in depth within particular contextual boundaries, while examining multiple cases enables researchers to develop a richer understanding through cross-case comparison (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the cases examined were the implementation practices of the Merdeka Curriculum in three TK Pembina (state model kindergartens) in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, consisting of one TK Pembina in Bantul Regency, one in Sleman Regency, and one in Yogyakarta City. The research participants consisted of six teachers, with two teachers from each school, who were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in learning implementation and their experience in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. With this design, each school was treated as a distinct case context, while cross-case analysis was employed to identify patterns of similarities, differences, and variations in how teachers understood and implemented the principle of children's freedom.

Table 1. Research Participants

No.	School	Teacher
1	TK Negeri Pembina, Bantul District	Mrs. Hn
2	TK Negeri Pembina, Bantul Distric	Mrs. Ia
3	TK Negeri Pembina, Yogyakarta City	Mrs. Ss
4	TK Negeri Pembina, Yogyakarta City	Mrs. My
5	TK Negeri Pembina, Sleman District	Mrs. Hf
6	TK Negeri Pembina, Sleman District	Mrs. Wl

Research data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the six teachers. The interview protocol covered teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, their conceptualization of children's freedom, learning planning, the provision of activity choices, the use of invitation-based approaches and loose parts, the adaptation of activities to children's needs, assessment, teacher scaffolding, as well as their experiences and challenges in implementing the curriculum. The interview data were transcribed and systematically analyzed using the interactive model of data analysis proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña , which comprises data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2014).

During the data condensation stage, the researchers repeatedly read the interview transcripts and identified units of information relevant to the research focus. The process then continued with the grouping of conceptually related data into categories and themes, following the principles of qualitative data analysis outlined by Saldaña (Saldana, 2011). The final stage involved drawing and verifying conclusions interactively by examining the relationships among the data, categories, themes, and the researchers' interpretations. Thus, the analysis did not stop at describing teachers' experiences but was directed toward identifying patterns in how children's freedom was negotiated with the need for pedagogical structure and scaffolding.

The trustworthiness of the data was established based on the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Lincoln and Guba introduced these four criteria as a framework for assessing the quality and trustworthiness of naturalistic and qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing information obtained from six teachers across three schools and three different geographical contexts, as well as through repeated examination of the consistency between the researchers' interpretations and the interview data. Transferability was supported by providing sufficient contextual descriptions of the characteristics of the schools, participants, and curriculum implementation practices, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar early childhood education contexts. Dependability was addressed through the development of an audit trail documenting the processes of data collection, transcription, category development, thematic analysis, and conclusion drawing. Meanwhile, confirmability was enhanced by ensuring that each interpretation could be traced back to the empirical data, maintaining an analytic trail, and reflecting on potential researcher bias (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Result and Discussion

Children's Freedom as a Space for Choice

The findings indicate that teachers at the three TK Pembina (state model kindergartens) primarily conceptualize children's freedom as providing opportunities for children to choose activities based on their interests and preferences. This understanding is evident in Mrs. Ia's interpretation of the Merdeka Curriculum as a condition in which teachers do not force children to engage in particular activities but instead facilitate what children want to do. She explained that differences in children's interests, such as some children preferring blocks while others are more interested in drawing, are used by teachers as a starting point for identifying and developing children's potential through activities that they enjoy.



Figure 1. Block media for exploring children's potential through block-building activities

A similar understanding is expressed more explicitly by Mrs. Hn, who describes a shift from an instructional pattern toward an invitation-based approach. According to her, whereas children were previously given specific instructions about what they had to do, under the Merdeka Curriculum teachers provide more prompts and invitations, allowing children greater space to develop their talents, creativity, and imagination. Thus, in teachers' practice, "freedom" is not understood as the absence of rules, but rather as a shift in children's position from recipients of instructions to active participants who have choices in determining their learning experiences. This finding is further reinforced by the practice of providing several activity alternatives. Mrs. Ss, for example, provides four activities and gives children the opportunity to decide which activity they would like to undertake first.

Children may choose writing, drawing, or experimental activities according to their interests, while the teacher continues to encourage them to complete the activities that have been provided. Mrs. My applies a similar approach by providing four activity choices. The number of activities can be adjusted according to the children's condition following physically demanding outdoor activities. For example, the teacher reduces the choices to two activities so that the children can maintain their concentration. This pattern demonstrates that the space for choice is deliberately designed by the teacher rather than being a form of spontaneous freedom without pedagogical planning.



Figure 2. Several activity stations that children can freely choose

This finding is consistent with Baker, Le Courtois, and Eberhart (2023), who explain that playful learning can support child agency by providing children with opportunities for choice, control, participation, and volition in the activities they engage in (Baker et al., 2023). Thus, the findings of this study indicate that the implementation of children's freedom across the three TK Pembina is primarily manifested through choice-making, namely providing children with opportunities to determine which activities they wish to participate in according to their interests.

However, the data also indicate that this space for choice is not absolute. Teachers continue to organize the learning environment, provide alternative activities, offer prompts, and provide guidance as children engage in their chosen activities. This is evident among teachers at TK Pembina Sleman, who explicitly stated that children are "free" to choose activities they enjoy, while teachers continue to "guide" the process. During loose parts activities, for example, teachers gradually follow children's creative processes and adjust their assessment according to the activities in which the children are engaged. When asked further about this principle, one teacher described the practice as "freedom with direction."

This finding is important because it demonstrates that children's freedom in the context of early childhood education does not constitute freedom from teacher intervention, but rather a space for choice constructed within a particular pedagogical environment. This perspective is consistent with Wood (2014), who cautions that the concepts of free choice and free play in early childhood education need to be critically understood because children's choices always take place within particular relational and institutional structures (Wood, 2014). More recent research further indicates that children's agency is strongly influenced by how teachers organize and negotiate space, time, materials, and learning interactions. Thus, the findings of this study suggest that children's freedom in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is realized as a "facilitated space for choice", rather than as unrestricted freedom. This condition provides the basis for the subsequent finding concerning how teachers negotiate children's freedom with pedagogical structure and learning objectives (Hildebrandt et al., 2026).

Teachers as Curriculum Adaptors

The findings further indicate that teachers do not implement the Merdeka Curriculum literally but instead adapt its requirements to children's characteristics, abilities, ages, and circumstances. This practice is clearly demonstrated by Mrs. Ia, who explained that the teaching module is designed for an entire semester, but that each week teachers revisit the planned activities and assess their suitability for the conditions of Group A. When an activity is considered inappropriate, it is modified without altering the predetermined learning objectives. A similar pattern was found in Mrs. My's practice. She explained that the learning theme may remain the same, but the activities are adapted to the children's circumstances because children differ in terms of their abilities and ages. Initial assessments are also used to identify individual abilities, such as cutting skills, enabling teachers to determine appropriate forms of support.

Adaptation also occurs at the group level. Mrs. Hn explained that the same learning objectives may be implemented with different levels of complexity between Groups A and B. For example, number recognition activities are adjusted to the respective ability ranges of the two groups. These findings demonstrate that teachers function as curriculum adaptors, bridging curriculum requirements with the realities of children's development by modifying activities, levels of complexity, and instructional strategies while maintaining the intended direction of the learning outcomes.

This adaptive role is also evident in the ways teachers interpret curriculum documents and make decisions collaboratively. Mrs. Hn stated that the translation of learning outcomes into learning objectives is conducted through discussions among teachers because certain aspects still require interpretation, including how particular objectives can emerge or be revisited through learning activities. Meanwhile, Mrs. My explained that teachers regularly consult one another within their learning community and exchange experiences regarding planned activities, including considering the possibility that activities already designed may not necessarily correspond to what children want or need. Even after receiving training, teachers at the school reported that they sought "easier" forms of curriculum materials so that they could be more readily understood and applied within the school context.

These findings are consistent with Ross (2024), who conceptualizes curriculum implementation as a process of interpretation and translation in which teachers transform the intended curriculum into the planned curriculum and subsequently into the enacted curriculum, drawing on their professional knowledge and understanding of learners (Ross, 2024). This perspective is also supported by research on curriculum enactment in Indonesia, which demonstrates that teachers employ professional judgment to engage in recontextualisation when confronted with policy demands and dilemmas within their practice settings (Qoyyimah et al., 2020).

Thus, the adaptations identified in this study should not simply be viewed as inconsistencies with the Merdeka Curriculum documents. Rather, they can be understood as a process of curriculum enactment, through which teachers draw upon their knowledge of children and their pedagogical experience to make the curriculum relevant and feasible within actual classroom situations. This finding is also consistent with recent research on curriculum enactment in early childhood education, which indicates that teacher adaptation, teacher agency, and the negotiation between policy requirements and local needs constitute important dimensions of curriculum implementation (Ghunu & Utari, 2025).

Negotiating with Developmental Diversity

Providing children with opportunities for choice is continuously negotiated in relation to differences in age, experience, abilities, and developmental pace. Mrs. My, for example, explained that although the learning theme may remain the same, activities need to be adjusted because children differ in their

abilities, particularly in fine and gross motor skills. Initial assessments are used to identify these abilities and understand the underlying causes of children's difficulties. In Group A, teachers also provide simpler activities than those offered in Group B, including the use of concrete materials for numeracy activities because the children are still at the stage of developing basic conceptual understanding.

Mrs. Hn demonstrates a similar pattern by differentiating the complexity of learning objectives between Groups A and B in number recognition. For example, number-related activities are presented within a simpler range for Group A and at a more complex level for Group B. Even within the same group, teachers acknowledge that some children are already able to complete activities independently, while others still require individual guidance. Thus, children's freedom in this study cannot be separated from teachers' ability to understand individual children's conditions and adjust the level of support provided accordingly.

These findings are consistent with research on guided play, which positions adaptation to children's individual needs, interests, and levels of understanding as an important component of pedagogical practice. Teachers provide children with opportunities for freedom while simultaneously employing scaffolding through questions, modeling, prompts, and assistance tailored to children's needs. From this perspective, developmental diversity is not viewed as an obstacle to implementing children's freedom but rather as a basis for teachers to determine the degree of freedom, level of activity complexity, and forms of support appropriate for each child (Skene et al., 2022).

Teachers' Curriculum Knowledge and Its Application in Learning

Teachers' knowledge of the Merdeka Curriculum does not automatically correspond to their ability to implement it effectively in classroom practice. This is evident in teachers' experiences of having to translate curriculum terminology and structures into forms of activities that are easier to understand and implement. Mrs. My, for example, explained that after receiving training, the curriculum materials were further disseminated within the school, and teachers selected forms that were "easier" to understand while remaining consistent with the Merdeka Curriculum. According to her, the most important consideration is how these concepts can be translated into actual learning practices.

A similar process can be observed in Mrs. Hn's experience. She understands that the Learning Outcomes (CP) serve as benchmarks to be achieved, but their translation into learning objectives and activities needs to be adapted to the school context and children's abilities. Even when the learning objectives are relatively similar, teachers adjust the assessment processes according to differences in children's abilities. These findings demonstrate that implementation competence extends beyond knowledge of curriculum content and terminology. It also encompasses the ability to interpret, contextualize, and make pedagogical decisions based on the characteristics and needs of learners.

This finding is consistent with Ross (2024), who explains that teachers do not simply receive the intended curriculum but engage in processes of interpretation and translation toward the planned curriculum and subsequently the enacted curriculum. In this process, teachers' curriculum knowledge interacts with their knowledge of learners and their professional experiences. Thus, the data reveal a gap between curriculum knowledge and curriculum enactment: the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum depends more on teachers' ability to transform curriculum knowledge into contextualized instructional decisions than merely on their mastery of curriculum terminology or documents (Ross, 2024).

Conclusion

This study shows that teachers at three TK Pembina (state model kindergartens) in Bantul, Sleman, and Yogyakarta City conceptualize children's freedom as a space for choosing, exploring, and developing activities according to children's interests and abilities, rather than as unrestricted freedom. This principle is translated into learning practices through the provision of alternative activities,

invitation-based approaches, the use of loose parts, assessment of children's abilities, and the adaptation of activities to children's developmental conditions and characteristics. Thus, teachers do not merely implement the curriculum as prescribed in official documents but function as curriculum adaptors and translators, transforming the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum into contextualized and feasible pedagogical practices.

At the same time, the study finds that children's freedom is continually negotiated with the need for structure, guidance, and the achievement of developmental goals. Teachers continue to organize the learning environment, provide structured choices, establish agreements, offer scaffolding, and adjust the complexity of activities to accommodate children's developmental diversity. These findings indicate that the practice of freedom in early childhood education is more appropriately understood as "structured freedom," namely providing children with opportunities to exercise choice and agency within a pedagogical structure intentionally designed by teachers. Therefore, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in early childhood education is not merely a matter of mastering curriculum documents and terminology, but primarily involves teachers' ability to translate such knowledge into pedagogical decisions that are responsive to children, enabling freedom, structure, and developmental goals to be balanced.

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