



## Current Research in Education: Conference Series Journal

Journal homepage: <https://ejournal.upi.edu/index.php/crecs>



### Play Methods in the Merdeka Curriculum at the Early Childhood Education Level

Salma Khoirun Nafisah<sup>1\*</sup>, Alifia Rizky Amalia<sup>2</sup>, Ikhsan Akmal Huda<sup>3</sup>, Novanti Sa'diyah Yusup<sup>4</sup>, Sakira Putri  
Zanati Salwa<sup>5</sup>, Leli Halimah<sup>6</sup>, Muh. Asriadi AM<sup>7</sup>, Kuswanto<sup>8</sup>

Pendidikan Guru Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Cibiru, Indonesia

\*Correspondence: E-mail: [salmanafisah@upi.edu](mailto:salmanafisah@upi.edu)

#### ABSTRACT

This study aims to provide a comprehensive review of the application of the play method, also known as 'play freely' or 'merdeka bermain', in the Merdeka curriculum at the early childhood education level in Indonesia. This research is a systematic literature review study where researchers rely on various literature sources to obtain research data and use a qualitative approach. The data collection techniques were carried out through a summary, analysis, and synthesis of several articles. Furthermore, the data collected will be analyzed using thematic analysis. The results of the study show that the play method in the Merdeka curriculum is something that is fundamental, so that it cannot be separated.

#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article History:

Submitted/Received 02 Nov 2023

First Revised 15 Jan 2024

Accepted 01 Mar 2024

First Available online 01 May 2024

Publication Date 01 Aug 2024

##### Keyword:

Early Childhood Education,  
Merdeka Curriculum,  
Play Method.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka curriculum is a curriculum with learning that is more optimized in varied learning, students are also given time to be able to explore knowledge concepts as well as strengthen their competencies. The implementation of the Merdeka curriculum at the Early Childhood Education level is also known as play freely or in Indonesia called 'merdeka bermain'. The presence of this curriculum also aims to overcome the problems that existed in the previous curriculum, where early childhood focused more on being able to read, write and count. Even based on the results of preliminary observations, there are kindergartens that in the learning and learning process emphasize this. As it is well known that play has a fundamental role in the early childhood education process, play activities can support children's holistic development, including cognitive, motor, social-emotional, and language aspects. An interactive and creative play environment at school can create a more enjoyable learning atmosphere, thereby increasing children's motivation and enthusiasm for learning.

The results of Jones & Reynolds (2015) research emphasize that various play activities can develop children's development with the support of teachers and parents. According to Nilsson et al. (n.d.), play is creativity in action and there is no goal or objective in play beyond the play itself. In fact, the benefits of play-based learning have been proven in the Perry Preschool Project research that the longer the data collection continues, the greater the proven benefits of play-based learning. By the age of 27, those who had been educated at an early age through play-based learning had a 44% higher high school graduation rate and were four times more likely to earn a university degree (Schweinhart, 2013).

As the above narrative suggests, learning methods incorporating play are highly recommended to be implemented, however in practice the application of learning processes carried out through play and fun in the context of early childhood education is now widely overlooked. The novelty of this research is to explain extensively about the play method in the merdeka curriculum, especially at the Early Childhood Education level. This research is expected to contribute to providing comprehensive information from all existing studies related to how this play method can be applied in the Merdeka curriculum at the Early Childhood Education level in Indonesia. The purpose of this study is to broadly review how the play method exists in the Merdeka curriculum, which is also known as play freely or in Indonesia known as 'merdeka bermain' at the early childhood education level.

## 2. METHODS

The type of research used is a systematic literature review where researchers rely on various literature to obtain research data and use a qualitative approach. The data produced is in the form of descriptions, which means collecting as much data as possible about things related to the research. The systematic literature review procedure is illustrated in **Figure 1**.



**Figure 1.** Systematic literature review procedure

The data sources in this study were obtained from research articles published between 2020 and 2023. The keywords used were "Merdeka Curriculum", play freely or known as "Merdeka Bermain", and the following term "Play Method". The articles analyzed were published in English and Indonesian academic journals. After obtaining the data, author interprets the data to derive facts about the study to be discussed, and then compiled in a systematic and structured manner. The type of data in this research is in the form of concepts and is textual. Data collection techniques were carried out in the form of summarizing, analyzing, and synthesizing from several articles.

Analysis techniques using thematic analysis can explore what really happens in a phenomenon. This technique is used to analyze data and identify patterns or find themes within it. The stages in conducting thematic analysis include (1) Understanding the data; (2) Arranging codes; (3) Finding themes (Heriyanto, 2018).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the search results, about 2,540 articles appeared, then after going through the process of identifying the match of variables with the content of the article, 10 articles were obtained that were relevant to the study to be carried out, and the findings from the selected articles are shown in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Relevant articles findings.

| No | Author & Year         | Title                                                                                                                                  | Findings                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | Marlina et al. (2020) | The Effectiveness of Merdeka Learning Through Play on the Character of Children at Baiturridha Kindergarten in Padang Pariaman Regency | The results of the study show that merdeka learning through play is considered more effective in building children's character than classical play. Play activities in merdeka learning can help children develop various character values through role modeling, habituation, and direct experience in play activities.                                                       |
| 2  | Ramadina (2021)       | The Role of Principals in Developing the Merdeka Learning Curriculum                                                                   | The principal acts as a leader and supervisor in driving the implementation of a student-centered merdeka learning curriculum, as well as providing educators with the freedom to innovate.                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 3  | Adnyani (2021)        | Application of Science Learning Media in Early Childhood: Merdeka Learning in the Era of Learning at Home                              | Results of the research indicate that the process of implementing the "Merdeka Belajar" science learning media for early childhood during the home-based learning era is divided into three stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation. Educators also play an active role in developing a fun learning model through play.                                              |
| 4  | Putri et al. (2022)   | Kindergarten Head's strategy in preparation for the implementation of the Merdeka play concept                                         | Based on the research, there are five main strategies that school principals use to prepare a merdeka curriculum for early childhood education, such as: have a leadership role, being a role model, being willing to learn new things, providing training to teachers, and evaluating established programs so that they can quickly find solutions to overcome the obstacles. |
| 5  | Rahmah et al., (2022) | Comparative Literature Study of Pancasila Learning in the 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka Curriculum in                                    | The study found that the 2013 Curriculum emphasizes teacher-led character formation, while the Merdeka Curriculum applies Pancasila education through project-based, active, and child-                                                                                                                                                                                        |

|    |                            |                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|    |                            | Early Childhood Education                                                                                                   | centered learning.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| 6  | Susanti (2023)             | Effectiveness of Merdeka Learn with Merdeka Play for Early Childhood                                                        | The study found that Merdeka Belajar is effectively applied through Merdeka Bermain, allowing children to learn freely and joyfully based on their interests. Play-based learning fosters independence, creativity, and character development in accordance with Ki Hajar Dewantara's child-centered educational philosophy.                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 7  | Wardhani & Rahardjo (2022) | Implementation of the Merdeka Play Curriculum for Early Childhood in Salatiga                                               | Based on the research conducted, field data indicates that the learning process at Realfun Rainbow Kindergarten Salatiga has not fully embraced Merdeka Play because of the freedom of children to determine their play activities only in the morning activities. However the implementation of the concept of Merdeka Play and Merdeka Learn in this kindergarten is also presented from simple things such as making play activities more meaningful by involving children in discussions. |
| 8  | Zahro (2022)               | Merdeka Play Using the Islamic Storytelling Fingerdoll Technique to Improve Prosocial Behavior of Students at RA Al-Mansyur | This research concluded that merdeka play using media such as finger doll with islamic storytelling as the technique, can increase prosocial behavior in children from RA Al-Mansyur children. These media and techniques can be used as a means of Merdeka Play for children.                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 9  | Herniawati (2023)          | Play Methods: Efforts to Develop Children's Cognitive Abilities in the Era of the Merdeka Curriculum                        | The Merdeka Curriculum promotes the concept of Merdeka Learn, which aligns with the principles of early childhood learning, namely giving children the freedom to choose the learning activities and fulfilling their right to play. Playing for children is not just playing, but playing is a learning process that can give meaning and experience to children in getting to know their environment.                                                                                       |
| 10 | Jannah & Harun (2023a)     | Merdeka Curriculum: Early Childhood Education Teachers' Perceptions                                                         | The Merdeka Curriculum is capable of developing children's interests and talents, which is beneficial for both teachers and students, and can reduce the burden while maximizing learning, thereby allowing teachers to play a more effective role as module designers and facilitators in providing learning.                                                                                                                                                                                |

The curriculum plays a crucial role in achieving educational goals. Thus the existence of programs at each school level is part of the educational process itself. The curriculum has a purpose as an organized educational program and also serves as a general guideline for the management of the education unit system. The teaching program reviewed from the curriculum must be able to describe the pedagogical objectives to be achieved, the substance of the learning process, and even the assessment activities. The description of the processes and results that emerge from each educational institution will generally be reflected in the curriculum used. In other words, the quality of students or something that will emerge from educational programs in the future and prosper life, is determined by the program developed and implemented by the educational unit (Rahmah et al., 2022).

At the PAUD level, the curriculum program implemented and designed certainly aims to develop children's potential through activities in a fun and engaging atmosphere. The goal is to achieve several aspects of child development through lifelong learning and prepare children for the transition to the next stage. The focus of Early Childhood Education (ECE) is to increase physical, cognitive, verbal, artistic, social, emotional, spiritual, self-discipline and self-awareness, as well as optimal independence and sensory development. Therefore, the PAUD level plays a crucial role in the narrative of further child development, as it serves as the foundation for the growth and development of the child's personality.

### **3.1. Play Method in Merdeka Curriculum**

The presence of a 'merdeka curriculum' in the early childhood education level explains that the process of playing while learning at the PAUD level is organized as part of an effort to maximize children's potential and development. Based on previous research, the Merdeka curriculum is able to develop children's interests and talents in learning because they are given the freedom and ease to choose and adapt to the surrounding environment during the learning process (Jannah & Harun, 2023). Reviewing more deeply about the play method in the independent curriculum at the early childhood education level is undoubtedly in line with the slogan 'Learn Freely Play Freely' or known as 'Merdeka Belajar Merdeka Bermain' in it. This aligns with one of the two critical aspects of the Early Childhood curriculum proposed by Jannah & Harun (2023) First, play activities support the learning process in line with the optimization of developmental aspects; Second, the curriculum is implemented through a planning process that measures children's development in preparation for the next level of education or developmental period. In other words, the early childhood curriculum is learner-centered.

As for the play method itself, it is not a new method; Ogunyemi & Ragpot (2015) also said that Froebel was among the first to know the educational benefits of formal play in the 1890s. The play method also has various benefits, as Marlina et al. (2020) also mentioned that the moment when children play is the moment when they can explore all their potential. This is mentioned because he said that the utilization of the play method in the teaching and learning process, especially for the early childhood education level, is that children can be free to move, interact with peers, share ideas to achieve play goals, help children to be disciplined, learn new things, respect their friends, and express the language they understand.

The play method, also known as play freely or 'merdeka bermain' in the Merdeka curriculum at the early childhood education level in Indonesia, according to Susanti (2023), can be interpreted as the freedom given to children in choosing the variety of play activities to be played, which is in accordance with their interests and desires during the learning process. In his words, he also explained that there are three concepts regarding independent play, namely (1) giving children the freedom to determine the goals and activities of playing in their own way; (2) neither parents nor teachers are the only source of learning for children; (3) making good use of the environment around children who are rich in play tools and materials so that children can learn many things.

The findings above certainly break the stigma about the process of play, which is often underestimated and even considered an unimportant process and waste of time. The statement was reinforced by research conducted by Pyle et al., (2017) which stated that in 2017 there were 50 (fifty) scientific publications which broadly stated that there were three main benefits of play in kindergarten education: (1) cognitive development, (2) social-emotional development and (3) self-regulation. There are also various literatures that have

explained the benefits of the play method, especially in the use of this method in an independent curriculum, including a scientific journal published by Herniawati (2023) in the digest journal as an effort to develop children's cognitive abilities. In it, it is explained more fully by showing that in the process of playing children can learn to solve problems, recognize cause and effect, and recognize various concepts of shape, size, number, color which can also stimulate their intellectual development.

Zosh et al. (2018) also emphasize that play can support holistic early childhood development. Holistic development refers to all aspects of development in early childhood, such as moral, affectionate, physical, intellectual (cognitive), emotional and social development, as well as language development, to help meet the demands and challenges of everyday life (Lombard & Du Toit, 2021). In fact, the concept of play-based learning has been around for a long time and around 2000 this concept was introduced in the UK as play-based learning. In the process of play-based learning. Play activities in play-based learning are process-oriented and not result-oriented.

### **3.2. Play Method Applied in Merdeka Curriculum**

The concept of playing with play freely or known as 'merdeka bermain' is implemented in an merdeka curriculum at the PAUD level with various characteristics in it, the Ministry of Education and Culture states that among them are (1) Meaningful Play or explained as a meaningful process for Early Childhood, of course by playing fun and playing with the aim of being able to develop various aspects of children's holistic development; (2) Free Play or explained as children's freedom to choose play activities and even games, so that children have the initiative to play and can explore play activities; (3) Child-Centered or explained as providing opportunities for children to be able to lead themselves in the play process which is part of learning; (4) Foundation Phase or explained as a phase where good values can be instilled for children, especially in the merdeka curriculum are the values that have been contained in the Pancasila student profile.

There are various literatures that explain the play method in several kindergartens in Indonesia, including one of the kindergartens in Padang Pariaman Regency, namely Baiturridha Kindergarten, which applies the concept of independent play in learning at its school with the aim of being able to develop various aspects of development, freely, without pressure to learn and provide space to play so that it is expected to shape children's character through play (Marlina et al., 2020). Besides that, there are also benefits from the play method with independent play used at RA Al-Mansyur by using the islamic storytelling finger doll technique or a technique that uses media in the form of finger puppets to convey Islamic stories which apparently can increase prosocial behavior (Zahro, 2022).

The play method in the implementation of the independent curriculum in Salatiga at Realfun Rainbow Kindergarten researched by Wardhani & Rahardjo (2022) makes the concept of merdeka play in the freedom of children to determine their play activities only in the morning activities, this is a consideration for small classes with children aged one and a half years to four years who still need intensive guidance but overall the school and teachers still strive to provide child-centered learning by not forcing children to follow the play activities set by the teacher and instead the teacher will provide other activities or free children to choose play activities according to their wishes and interests. The realization of the concept of freedom to play and freedom to learn in this kindergarten is also presented from simple things such as making play activities more meaningful by involving children in discussions that are customised to the child's developmental stage.

As stated above, the implementation of the play method in the independent curriculum at the early childhood education level is child-centered, but besides that the role of educators is no less important in it. Adnyani (2021) states that although this independent play is designed by giving children the freedom to play, teachers or educators also continue to play a role as facilitators who provide supervision and assistance when children experience various obstacles that are considered difficult. More broadly, the principal in an institution at the early childhood education level also has an equally important role.

This is based on research conducted by Putri et al. (2022) at Mutiara Bunda Kindergarten located in Cirebon Regency. In the study, it was stated that even in preparation for the application of the independent play method, the principal is required to have strategies including (1) understanding the duties of a leader, this is also emphasized by Ramadina (2021) that the principal must be able to facilitate supervision in his school on behalf of common progress, and the principal must be able to design a new curriculum to further develop the school curriculum; (2) being a role model; (3) being open to new things, in this context it means being open to various things about the independent curriculum and especially independent play; (4) providing training to teachers so that teachers can understand various procedures and policies in the independent curriculum at the PAUD level; (5) evaluating programs that will or have been implemented by the institution. In addition, based on various literature reviewed, the researcher sees that if viewed more broadly, one of the efforts to optimize the application of the play method in the independent curriculum also requires cooperation by all parties involved, apart from teachers or educators and principals, parents, even education staff and policy makers also play an important role here.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Based on the results of research on various literatures, the play method itself has been proven to have various benefits in the early childhood learning process and in the independent curriculum at the early childhood education level, this method is fundamental. This is indicated by the slogan that only the early childhood education level has in interpreting the independent curriculum program, namely 'Learn Freely Play Freely' or known as 'Merdeka Belajar Merdeka Bermain'. The play method in the independent curriculum at the PAUD level has been realized a lot, while in optimizing it, it still requires the cooperation of all related parties such as teachers or educators and principals, parents, even educational staff and policy makers.

#### **5. REFERENCES**

- Adnyani, N. W. (2021). Penerapan media pembelajaran sains pada anak usia dini" merdeka belajar" di era belajar di rumah. *Pratama Widya: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*, 6(1), 13–28.
- Heriyanto. (2018). Thematic Analysis sebagai Metode Menganalisa Data untuk Penelitian Kualitatif. *Anuva: Jurnal Kajian Budaya, Perpustakaan, dan Informasi*, 2(3), 317–324.
- Herniawati, A. (2023). Metode bermain: Upaya mengembangkan kemampuan kognitif anak di era kurikulum merdeka. *Jurnal Intisabi*, 1(1), 10–18.
- Jannah, M. M., dan Harun, H. (2023). Kurikulum merdeka: Persepsi guru pendidikan anak usia dini. *Jurnal Obsesi : Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*, 7(1), 197–210.

- Jones, E., and Reynolds, G. (2015). *The play's the thing: Teachers' roles in children's play*. Teachers College Press.
- Lombard, A., and Du Toit, M. (2021). Facilitating development and learning through sensory play. *Rethinking Learning through Play*, 1–15.
- Marlina, S., Qalbi, Z., dan Putera, R. F. (2020). Efektivitas kemerdekaan belajar melalui bermain terhadap karakter anak TK Baiturridha Kabupaten Padang Pariaman. *Jurnal Ilmiah Potensia*, 5(2), 83–90.
- Nilsson, M., Ferholt, B., and Lecusay, R. (n.d.). *'The playing-exploring child': Reconceptualizing the relationship between play and learning in early childhood education—Monica Nilsson, Beth Ferholt, Robert Lecusay, 2018*. Retrieved November 6, 2025, from
- Ogunyemi, F. T., and Ragpot, L. (2015). Work and play in early childhood education: Views from Nigeria and South Africa. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 5(3), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v5i3.344>
- Putri, N. K., Jolaekha, J., dan Latiana, L. (2022). Strategi kepala taman kanak-kanak dalam persiapan implementasi konsep merdeka bermain. *Eduprof: Islamic Education Journal*, 4(2), 121–133.
- Pyle, A., DeLuca, C., and Danniels, E. (2017). A scoping review of research on play-based pedagogies in kindergarten education—Pyle—2017—Review of Education—Wiley Online Library. *Review of Education*, 5(3), 311–351.
- Rahmah, H., Ummah, L., fauzia, S., Rahmadani, S., dan Hasanah, L. (2022). Studi literatur perbandingan pembelajaran pancasila dalam kurikulum 2013 dan kurikulum merdeka di PAUD. *Jurnal Pelita PAUD*, 7, 179–189.
- Ramadina, E. (2021). Peran kepala sekolah dalam pengembangan kurikulum merdeka belajar. *Mozaic : Islam Nusantara*, 7(2), 131–142.
- Schweinhart, L. J. (2013). Long-term follow-up of a preschool experiment. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 9(4), 389–409.
- Susanti, B. (2023). Efektifitas merdeka belajar dengan merdeka bermain untuk anak usia dini. *Prosiding Dewantara Seminar Nasional Pendidikan*, 1(02). <https://seminar.ustjogja.ac.id/index.php/d-semnasdik/article/view/810>
- Wardhani, A. A., dan Rahardjo, M. M. (2022). *Implementasi kurikulum merdeka bermain anak usia dini di salatiga*. 2(4).
- Zahro, I. F. (2022). Merdeka bermain dengan teknik islamic storytelling fingerdoll untuk meningkatkan perilaku prososial siswa ra al-mansyur. *Aulada : Jurnal Pendidikan dan Perkembangan Anak*, 4(1), 49–60. <https://doi.org/10.31538/aulada.v4i1.2587>
- Zosh, J. M., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Hopkins, E. J., Jensen, H., Liu, C., Neale, D., Solis, S. L., and Whitebread, D. (2018). Accessing the inaccessible: Redefining play as a spectrum. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9.