

## **Bringing the Merdeka Curriculum to Life: Integrating Center-Based Learning and Experiential Philosophy in an Early Childhood Education in Bali**

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### **Abstract**

Early Childhood Education (ECE) becomes more meaningful when children's learning is grounded in everyday experiences that reflect their cultural backgrounds and values. In Indonesia, the Merdeka Curriculum offers space for early childhood institutions to adapt learning practices in ways that are responsive to local contexts. This study examines how the Merdeka Curriculum is enacted through the integration of Beyond Centers and Circle Time (BCCT), Dewey's experiential learning philosophy, and religious-cultural values in a private Islamic early childhood education setting in Jimbaran, Bali. A qualitative descriptive approach was adopted. Data were generated through classroom observations carried out over one instructional week, semi-structured interviews with two key participants (one teacher and one principal), and an analysis of institutional documents, including the weekly schedule, lesson plans (RPP), and the school profile. The findings suggest that the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented in ways that foreground character building and spiritual development. Learning is organized through thematic centers following the BCCT model, creating opportunities for children to explore, collaborate, and express creativity. Experiential learning principles are visible in routine classroom activities such as cooking, outdoor exploration, art-based tasks, and daily reflective practices that form part of the school culture. Overall, the study illustrates how curriculum flexibility, structured pedagogical approaches, and experiential learning can be thoughtfully combined within a religious and cultural framework. By offering a context-specific account of Merdeka Curriculum implementation, this study contributes empirical insights to early childhood education literature. The findings also provide practical considerations for educators and policymakers seeking to design experience-based and culturally responsive learning practices within national curriculum reforms.

### **Keywords:**

Merdeka Curriculum,  
Center-based approach,  
Experiential learning,  
Early childhood  
education,  
Qualitative study

## **1. Introduction**

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is widely acknowledged as a critical foundation for lifelong learning, as it shapes not only children's early academic abilities but also their socio-emotional, cognitive, moral, and physical development, reflecting a holistic approach to child development (Ionescu, 2020; Jardine, 2023). Contemporary perspectives emphasize that meaningful ECE should be adaptive, child-centered, and grounded in children's lived experiences and cultural contexts. This global shift reflects a growing recognition that early learning environments must respond to children's diverse developmental trajectories rather than relying on uniform instructional models.

In global discussions on early childhood education, adaptive curricula are increasingly viewed as a key component of effective pedagogical practice. Research highlights that flexibility in curriculum design enables teachers to accommodate differences in children's interests, learning styles, and

developmental pace, thereby fostering engagement and inclusion (Adewusi et al., 2023). Studies conducted in Indonesia similarly demonstrate that adaptive learning approaches enhance children's participation, critical thinking, and motivation when learning experiences are aligned with their abilities and everyday learning contexts (Rahman et al., 2024). Viewed through the lens of inclusive education, adapting the curriculum is crucial for creating fair and meaningful learning opportunities for all children, particularly those with diverse needs (Tarmidi et al., 2023).

To address these shifts, the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology launched the Kurikulum Merdeka as part of the broader *Merdeka Belajar* initiative. Within early childhood education, this curriculum highlights learner independence, joyful engagement, and teacher flexibility in crafting activities that are both developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant (Jannah & Rasyid, 2023; Khotimah et al., 2023). Educators are encouraged to move beyond rigid lesson formats by incorporating play, projects, and real-life experiences that connect learning to children's everyday lives (Qadafi et al., 2023). In this study, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum refers to how these principles, especially flexibility, child-centeredness, and joyful learning, are embedded in daily routines, classroom activities, and teaching practices in early childhood settings.

Despite its promise, research shows that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAUD settings is still uneven. Teachers generally appreciate the openness and flexibility it offers, yet persistent challenges remain, such as limited facilities, varying levels of teacher preparedness, and the continued overlap with practices from the previous Kurikulum 2013 (K13) (Daulay & Fauziddin, 2023; Sari et al., 2023). These issues indicate that flexibility alone does not guarantee meaningful classroom practice. Instead, successful implementation requires pedagogical models that can translate curriculum principles into concrete, everyday learning experiences. The challenges highlight the need for practical strategies that can transform curriculum principles into meaningful experiences for young learners. One approach that aligns closely with this goal is experiential learning, which offers a concrete framework for turning flexibility into purposeful practice.

Experiential learning provides a strong foundation for pedagogy. Building on Dewey's (1938) view of education as rooted in lived experience and Kolb's (1984) learning cycle, comprising concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation, this approach emphasizes learning through action and reflective meaning-making. In Indonesia, recent studies highlight that experiential methods boost children's engagement, cooperation, problem-solving skills, and long-term motivation (Suryaningsih, 2024; Ummah et al., 2025). In this study, experiential learning is understood as a process grounded in children's direct experiences, reflection, and active participation, where understanding emerges through interaction with real-life activities rather than abstract instruction. When integrated with culturally meaningful practices, experiential learning also nurtures character development and social responsibility (Tantriningsih et al., 2025).

One pedagogical approach that closely reflects both experiential learning principles and the Merdeka Curriculum is the Beyond Centers and Circle Time (BCCT) model, widely known in Indonesia as *pembelajaran sentra*. This model structures learning through thematic activity centers, creating organized opportunities for exploration, independence, creativity, and social interaction. Research has shown that BCCT effectively supports holistic development, early literacy and numeracy, and collaborative learning in early childhood settings (Maimunah, 2023; Cahyaningsih et al., 2024; Hasani, 2025). In this study, center-based learning refers to the arrangement of classroom activities into thematic centers that enable children to engage in structured play, hands-on exploration, and social interaction across multiple developmental domains. The approach also aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum's values orientation, particularly in fostering collaboration, critical thinking, and faith-based character development within play-based environments.

Although research on the Merdeka Curriculum, experiential learning, and BCCT continues to expand, most studies examine these components in isolation. Few have investigated how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented through an integrated approach that combines a structured model like BCCT with experiential learning principles in everyday classroom practice. In addition, limited attention has been given to how religious and local cultural values are interwoven within these pedagogical frameworks, particularly in early childhood settings beyond major urban areas such as Java.

This gap becomes particularly in Bali, a region deeply rooted in cultural traditions, religious values, and community-based practices that influence educational experiences from an early age. In

private Islamic early childhood preschool, implementing the curriculum requires balancing national policy expectations with religious education goals and local cultural norms. In this study, character and spiritual development refers to deliberate efforts to nurture moral, social, and religious values, such as cooperation, responsibility, respect, and faith, through everyday learning activities and school routines. Recognizing how these elements interact in everyday classroom routines is essential for creating approaches that truly reflect the cultural and social realities of the learning environment.

Addressing these gaps, this study examines how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented through the integration of BCCT, experiential learning principles inspired by Dewey and Kolb, and religious–cultural values in a private Islamic early childhood education institution in Jimbaran, Bali. The study focuses on how these frameworks are translated into daily learning activities, routines, and interactions, with particular attention to character and spiritual development in early childhood.

To guide the analysis, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How is the Merdeka Curriculum implemented in daily learning practices at a private Islamic early childhood education institution in Jimbaran, Bali?
2. How are BCCT (center-based learning) and experiential learning principles integrated within classroom activities and routines?
3. How are religious and local cultural values embedded in learning experiences to support children’s character and spiritual development?

Building on these questions, the next section describes the methodological approach adopted to explore how these principles are enacted in practice.

## **2. Method**

This study used a qualitative descriptive design to explore how the Merdeka Curriculum is applied in everyday classroom practices in early childhood education. The research was carried out at PAUD Mutiara Jimbaran, a private Islamic preschool in Jimbaran, Bali, chosen purposively because it implements the Merdeka Curriculum alongside the BCCT model and integrates religious and local cultural values. The participants were the school principal and one Kindergarten B teacher, both actively involved in planning and delivering instruction.

Data collection spanned two days. On November 21, 2024, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal and the Kindergarten B teacher, each lasting about an hour. These interviews examined the school’s educational philosophy, curriculum implementation, use of the BCCT model, and integration of experiential and religious–cultural values. Classroom observation took place on November 22, 2024, during regular instructional hours, focusing on center-based activities, experiential learning practices, children’s engagement, and character-building routines. Document analysis included the weekly schedule, Kindergarten B lesson plans (RPP), and the school profile to provide context for observed and reported practices.

The data were analyzed using a manual thematic approach. Observation notes, interview transcripts, and institutional documents were reviewed multiple times, coded inductively, and compared across sources. Similar codes were grouped into categories and refined into themes that reflected patterns in curriculum implementation, pedagogical organization, experiential learning, and value integration. To strengthen credibility, data triangulation was applied across observations, interviews, and documents, and informal member checking was conducted with participants to validate interpretations.

Ethical procedures included obtaining institutional approval, informed consent from participants, and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. Permission was also secured for audio recordings and classroom documentation. This study is limited by its brief data collection period and small participant sample, which restricts generalizability. Although researcher presence during classroom observation may have influenced classroom dynamics, efforts were made to minimize this effect. The researcher adopted a non-intrusive stance by observing mostly from outside the classroom. However, the use of multiple data sources and transparent analytical steps supports the trustworthiness of the findings.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### **3.1 Results**

The findings of this study are based on classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis conducted at PAUD Mutiara Jimbaran Bali, Indonesia. Data collection took place

over two consecutive days. Interviews with the school principal and a Kindergarten B homeroom teacher were conducted on November 21, 2024, followed by classroom and extracurricular observations on November 22, 2024. This combination of data sources enabled an in-depth understanding of both observed teaching practices and the underlying intentions, planning processes, and educational values shaping curriculum implementation.

Observations focused primarily on learning activities within the school's extracurricular program, providing insight into how the Merdeka Curriculum and center-based learning were enacted beyond regular classroom routines. Interviews with the principal and teacher provided deeper explanations regarding classroom organization, curriculum planning, teacher roles, and developmental priorities. In addition, weekly schedules and lesson plans (RPP) were analyzed to contextualize observed practices within formal planning documents.

To enhance clarity and coherence, the findings are organized into three main themes aligned with the research questions: (1) the contextualization of the Merdeka Curriculum through the BCCT model, (2) the enactment of experiential and culturally grounded learning practices, and (3) the integration of religious and character education in daily learning activities. Tables and selected interview excerpts are included in each subsection to illustrate key patterns and strengthen the analytical narrative.

### ***Contextualizing The Merdeka Curriculum***

The findings indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the research site is closely aligned with the Beyond Centers and Circle Time (BCCT) model, locally referred to as *pembelajaran sentra*. Rather than being applied as an abstract policy framework, the curriculum is operationalized through concrete classroom arrangements, learning routines, and teacher practices that prioritize children's comfort, autonomy, and developmental needs.

Both the school principal and the kindergarten B teacher emphasized that classroom organization is intentionally designed to support child-centered learning. Each classroom is required to include core areas such as a reading corner, writing corner, and play area, while allowing teachers flexibility to creatively design their spaces based on themes and children's needs. As the principal explained:

*"Kelas didesain dengan tujuan utama agar anak belajar dengan nyaman dan kebutuhannya terpenuhi. Ada pojok membaca, pojok bermain, dan bahan belajar yang ramah anak. Selebihnya diserahkan pada kreativitas wali kelas."*

(Translate: The classroom is designed with the main goal of ensuring that children feel comfortable and that their needs are met. It includes a reading corner, a play corner, and child-friendly learning materials, while the rest is left to the creativity of the homeroom teacher.)

This flexible approach reflects a key principle of the Merdeka Curriculum, which grants teachers greater autonomy to adapt learning environments while maintaining shared curricular standards. The transition from the previous Kurikulum 2013 (K13) to the Merdeka Curriculum was described by the school principal as a response to perceived limitations of classical, whole-class instruction. According to the principal, K13 practices were considered less effective in accommodating diverse learning needs, as learning activities tended to be more uniform and teacher-directed, with limited opportunities to adjust learning pace or group arrangements.

In contrast, the Merdeka Curriculum enables teachers to differentiate activities, organize smaller learning groups, and modify learning environments in response to children's developmental and emotional needs. Despite this shift, several foundational routines, such as daily schedules and character education practices, have been retained. This indicates that the curriculum transition represents a gradual pedagogical adjustment rather than a complete departure from previous practices.

The BCCT model was selected as it enables structured yet flexible learning through multiple centers (*sentra*), allowing children to engage in smaller groups and rotate across learning domains. The school implements six learning centers on a biweekly rotation, including Religious, Math and Block, Nature and Kitchen, Science, Art and Dramatic Play, and ABC centers. Decisions regarding whether activities take place indoors or outdoors are based on the thematic focus and learning objectives of each center. For example, science activities related to plants are often conducted outdoors to enable direct observation and hands-on exploration.

Classroom observations conducted during the extracurricular program further illustrate how curriculum principles are translated into practice (see **Table 1**). Activities such as Balinese dance, drum band, drawing, and taekwondo were organized in different physical settings and facilitated by external

instructors, with classroom teachers acting as co-facilitators. This arrangement ensured professional guidance while maintaining continuity with the school's pedagogical approach. Teachers remained actively involved, supporting children emotionally, reinforcing routines, and assisting those who required additional guidance.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Classroom Observations on Extracurricular Activities*

<b>Aspect Observed</b>	<b>Description of Practices</b>
<b>Classroom arrangement</b>	During the extracurricular program, children were divided according to the specific activities offered, each taking place in a different setting. Balinese dance, drawing, and drum band sessions were conducted indoors, while taekwondo was held outdoors. Every activity was facilitated by an external instructor (coach) with expertise in the respective field and accompanied by a classroom teacher who provided additional guidance and supervision. This arrangement ensured that children received professional instruction while maintaining continuity with the school's educational approach.
<b>Learning environment</b>	The use of space was adjusted to suit the nature of each extracurricular activity, with layouts arranged to support children's participation. Both coaches and accompanying teachers moved around the groups, offering individualized guidance and helping to keep children actively involved throughout the sessions.
<b>Media and materials</b>	The tools and materials were prepared in line with the character of each extracurricular activity. In the drum band session, children used musical instruments supported by a whiteboard for rhythm practice. The drawing activity provided crayons, paper, and worksheets to encourage creativity. For Balinese dance, traditional music was played and cultural props such as bokor were introduced, while the taekwondo session employed cones and kick pads to structure movement and practice techniques.
<b>Daily routine</b>	Each extracurricular session unfolded in a clear sequence. It began with a short prayer and greetings, continued with the main activity led by the coach, and ended with a brief reflection in which children were invited to share how they felt about the experience. This routine not only provided structure but also created space for emotional expression.
<b>Focus of development</b>	The extracurricular activities were designed to foster personal development as well as artistic and physical expression. Coaches offered tailored guidance and corrections, enabling children to explore their talents while gradually strengthening confidence and discipline.

The homeroom teacher also highlighted that flexibility extends beyond spatial arrangements to include children's participation in decision-making. Seating positions, activity flow, and even task variations may be adjusted based on children's ideas and classroom dynamics:

*"Terkadang anak memberi ide untuk mengubah posisi duduk. Guru memfasilitasi selama masih mendukung pembelajaran dan anak tetap nyaman."*

(Translate: At times, children suggest changing the seating arrangement. Teachers facilitate these ideas as long as they support learning and help children remain comfortable.)

Importantly, this flexibility does not imply a lack of structure. Learning activities are guided by daily routines and *pijakan* (scaffolding stages), beginning with emotional check-ins and review of prior learning, followed by core activities and closing reflections. These routines anchor learning while allowing teachers to respond adaptively to children's emotional states, conflicts, or emerging interests. Analysis of lesson plans and weekly schedules (see **Table 3**) shows a strong alignment between formal planning documents and observed practices. While the weekly structure is predetermined, teachers retain discretion to adjust pacing and activity flow when unanticipated situations arise, such as children

experiencing emotional distress or interpersonal conflict. This balance between planning and responsiveness demonstrates how the Merdeka Curriculum is enacted not merely as flexibility in theory, but as adaptive pedagogy in practice.

Overall, the findings indicate that the BCCT model functions as a practical pedagogical framework for contextualizing and enacting the Merdeka Curriculum in everyday practice. By balancing shared structural guidelines with teacher autonomy and responsiveness to children's needs, the school translate national curriculum principles into daily learning experiences that remain well-organized while prioritizing child-centered learning.

### ***Experiential and Cultural Learning***

The findings reveal that experiential learning is deeply embedded in daily classroom practices and extracurricular activities, reflecting the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on learning through direct experience. Instead of relying primarily on verbal instruction or worksheet-based tasks, learning activities are intentionally designed to engage children physically, emotionally, and socially through hands-on exploration.

Classroom observations during the extracurricular program demonstrate how learning experiences are structured to encourage active participation and learning by doing. Activities such as Balinese dance, drum band, drawing and coloring, and taekwondo offered meaningful opportunities for children to explore movement, rhythm, creativity, and self-discipline. Rather than serving as mere entertainment, these activities were treated as essential learning experiences that supported children's holistic development.

The experiential nature of learning was evident in the way activities unfolded. Each session followed a clear yet flexible routine, beginning with a short prayer and greeting, followed by guided practice led by the coach, and concluding with a brief reflection. During these reflection moments, children were invited to share their feelings about the activity, allowing them to connect emotional awareness with their lived experiences. This practice aligns with experiential learning principles that emphasize reflection as a key component of meaning-making.

Interview data further confirm that experiential learning is intentionally planned rather than incidental. The principal explained that learning activities across centers are designed to engage children's senses and curiosity, with space for adaptation based on children's responses:

*"Kalau dalam pelaksanaan anak punya ide, ide itu akan dieksekusi dengan bahan yang ada. Tapi kalau butuh bahan lain, kami tawarkan untuk dilakukan minggu depan."*

(Translate: If children come up with ideas during the activity, those ideas are carried out using the materials already available. If additional materials are needed, we suggest doing the activity the following week.)

This approach demonstrates how experiential learning is balanced with realistic classroom constraints, allowing children's ideas to be valued without disrupting broader learning goals. Teachers act as facilitators who guide exploration, pose prompting questions, and adjust activities responsively, rather than strictly following predetermined scripts.

Cultural learning is also integrated into experiential activities, particularly through arts and movement. Balinese dance, for instance, introduces children to local cultural expressions while simultaneously developing motor skills, rhythm, and concentration. The use of traditional music and cultural props enables children to encounter culture not as abstract knowledge, but as lived practice. Similarly, activities such as angklung music and art-based learning foster creativity while nurturing appreciation for cultural heritage.

The use of varied learning media further strengthens experiential engagement. Teachers and coaches employ audiovisual materials, physical tools, loose parts, and recycled materials to accommodate different learning styles. These materials are prepared collaboratively during weekly teacher meetings (KKG), ensuring that learning resources are aligned with both thematic goals and children's developmental needs. As noted by the homeroom teacher:

*"Media disesuaikan dengan sentra dan gaya belajar anak. Anak boleh menambahkan sesuai kreativitasnya selama masih dalam konteks pembelajaran."*

(Translate: Learning materials are adjusted to each learning center and to children's learning styles. Children are also encouraged to add their own ideas creatively, as long as they remain within the learning context.)

Observations of children’s responses reveal high levels of engagement during experiential learning activities. Children participated actively, showed enthusiasm, and maintained sustained attention, particularly during movement-based and creative tasks. When difficulties emerged, such as hesitation or emotional discomfort, teachers responded by providing scaffolding and emotional support rather than imposing rigid participation. This indicates that experiential learning is implemented not only as an instructional approach, but also as a relational practice that attends to children’s emotional well-being.

**Religious and Character Education**

The findings show that religious and character education serve as the primary foundation guiding curriculum enactment at the research site. These values are not positioned as a discrete area of instruction; instead, they are embedded across daily routines, classroom activities, and ongoing interactions between teachers and children. Such practices demonstrate the school’s view of the Merdeka Curriculum as an adaptable framework through which moral and spiritual dimensions can be meaningfully integrated into a holistic approach to early childhood education.

Data from both classroom observations and interviews indicate that religious practices play a central role in shaping the daily rhythm of the school. The school day consistently begins with Qur’an recitation and character-building activities, creating a moral and spiritual atmosphere before children move into sentra-based learning. As explained by the principal, religious education is viewed as the most fundamental developmental priority:

*“Basic awal itu agama, karena semua anak di sini muslim. Setelah itu baru karakter, lalu aspek perkembangan lainnya.”*

(Translate: The primary foundation is religious education, because all the children here are Muslim. Character development follows, and then other areas of development.)

This emphasis reflects the school’s effort to align national curriculum goals with its institutional identity as a private Islamic early childhood education center.

Character education is further strengthened through the use of consistent routines and teacher exemplification. Rather than relying solely on explicit instruction, teachers deliberately integrate core values such as patience, cooperation, discipline, and respect into everyday learning experiences. Storytelling, reflective activities, and conversations about children’s emotions become key moments through which moral messages are conveyed in developmentally appropriate ways. As expressed by the homeroom teacher, story time and reflection are regarded as essential and non-negotiable elements of the daily program:

*“Pijakan pilar karakter itu harus selalu ada, biasanya disampaikan lewat cerita dan ditutup dengan tanya perasaan anak.”*

(Translate: Character pillars must always be included; they are usually conveyed through storytelling and concluded by asking children about their feelings.)

Interview findings also point to teachers’ roles as moral facilitators who combine clear structure with emotional responsiveness. Instead of enforcing rigid compliance, teachers engage children in dialogue to better understand their feelings and motivations. In situations involving conflict or resistance, greater emphasis is placed on supporting emotional regulation and character growth than on completing tasks. This pattern suggests that character education is understood as a relational and caring process, grounded in empathy and attentive guidance.

Table 2 summarizes key themes from interviews with the principal and homeroom teacher, illustrating how religious values, character formation, teacher roles, and assessment practices are interwoven within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

Table 2

*Key Themes from Interviews with Principal and Homeroom Teacher*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Insights</b>
<b>Curriculum &amp; model</b>	The school applies the Merdeka Curriculum through the sentra (center-based) model. This marks a clear transition from the earlier K13 framework toward an approach that is more flexible and child-centered, while also reflecting the school’s distinctive emphasis on religious values and character education.

<b>Classroom environment</b>	Classrooms are arranged to include a reading corner, a writing corner, and a play area as standard features. Beyond these requirements, teachers are encouraged to exercise creativity, and children's suggestions are often accommodated. For example, seating arrangements may be adjusted based on children's ideas to sustain their engagement.
<b>Media and materials</b>	Weekly teacher meetings (Kelompok Kerja Guru, KKG) are used to prepare learning materials, often made from local or recycled resources. In activities such as art and dramatic play, teachers frequently make use of loose parts and repurposed items, transforming them into meaningful media that enrich children's learning experiences.
<b>Teacher role</b>	Teachers act as facilitators rather than lecturers. They guide exploration, remain open to children's ideas in shaping activities, and adjust plans flexibly when necessary. Daily reflection sessions before dismissal also create a space for children to share their feelings and experiences, with teachers listening attentively.
<b>Child development priorities</b>	Child development is approached holistically, with religious values and character formation highlighted as the school's hallmark. At the same time, the curriculum balances attention across different developmental domains, including socio-emotional growth, cognitive and language skills, and artistic as well as cultural expression. Assessment is conducted through daily observations, anecdotal notes, portfolios, and periodic parent reports, enabling teachers to monitor children's progress in multiple dimensions.

The findings further indicate that character and spiritual development are intentionally supported through systematic assessment practices. Teachers routinely carry out daily observations, document children's learning through anecdotal records, and compile portfolios to monitor progress across multiple developmental domains. These assessment practices extend beyond academic achievement, capturing children's social behaviors, emotional expressions, and moral development. In addition, character reports are shared with parents on a three-monthly basis, reinforcing collaboration between the school and families in supporting children's growth.

Overall, religious and character education function as the moral foundation of curriculum implementation at the school. Through the integration of spiritual practices, ethical values, and reflective moments into everyday routines, the school illustrates how the Merdeka Curriculum can be enacted in ways that remain faithful to institutional values while fostering holistic early childhood development.

#### ***Alignment between Planning and Practice***

The alignment between curriculum planning and classroom practice was examined through a comparison of weekly schedules, lesson plans (RPP), interview data, and direct classroom observations. This analysis aimed to assess whether the learning structure planned under the Merdeka Curriculum was consistently enacted in daily routines and learning activities.

The weekly schedule presented in Table 3 represents a **typical instructional week** implemented at the school rather than a one-time or exceptional arrangement. Although minor adjustments may occur in response to children's needs or situational factors, both the principal and the homeroom teacher emphasized that the overall structure of the weekly program remains stable across weeks. This stability allows teachers to maintain routines while still exercising flexibility, a core principle of the Merdeka Curriculum. As stated by the principal:

*"Jadwal besarnya sudah ditetapkan, tapi pelaksanaannya tetap fleksibel. Kalau ada kondisi anak yang perlu didampingi, jadwal bisa menyesuaikan."*

(Translate: The overall schedule is already set, but its implementation remains flexible. When certain children need additional support, the schedule can be adjusted accordingly.)

Table 3 further illustrates how learning activities are organized across the week through religious routines, sentra-based learning, creative programs, and extracurricular activities. To clarify its pedagogical focus, the table also identifies the primary developmental domains addressed each day,

including religious–moral values, socio-emotional development, cognitive abilities, language, physical–motor skills, and creativity.

**Table 3**  
*Weekly Learning Schedule (Week of November 18-22, 2024)*

Day	Main Activities	Targeted Developmental Domains	Notes
<b>Monday</b>	Morning Circle; Qur'an learning (Wafa method); Sentra Religi; Character pillars; Storytelling	Religious-moral values, language, socio-emotional development	Structured around theme <i>Animals/Poultry</i>
<b>Tuesday</b>	Morning Circle; Qur'an learning; Sentra Math & Block; Character pillars; Storytelling	Cognitive development (numeracy), logical thinking, religious values	Focus on numeracy and faith-based themes
<b>Wednesday</b>	Morning Circle; Qur'an learning; Sentra Nature & Kitchen; Character pillars; Storytelling	Cognitive development, science literacy, fine motor skills	Hands-on science and cooking experiences
<b>Thursday</b>	Morning Circle; Qur'an learning; Angklung music class; Mutiara Fun Club (Islamic Rising, Junior Chef, Painting)	Creativity, cultural awareness, socio-emotional development	Combination of arts, culture, and creativity
<b>Friday</b>	Physical exercise; Extracurriculars (Balinese dance, drum band, drawing & coloring, taekwondo)	Physical-motor development, confidence, self-expression	School ends earlier (11.00)

The structure of the weekly schedule reflects key principles of the Merdeka Curriculum in early childhood education. First, the curriculum emphasizes **holistic child development**, which is evident in the balanced rotation of sentra activities from Monday to Wednesday. Each sentra targets different developmental domains through hands-on, experience-based learning, enabling children to explore concepts through play, experimentation, and social interaction.

Second, the schedule demonstrates **flexibility within a structured framework**. While Qur'an learning and character education consistently anchor daily routines, teachers retain autonomy to adjust activities, materials, and pacing based on children's responses. Observations conducted on Friday further showed that extracurricular activities, although not directly linked to weekly sentra themes, function as meaningful spaces for children to express interests, talents, and physical abilities. This practice aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on respecting children's individuality and agency.

Third, alignment between planning and implementation was evident in the consistency between RPP documents and observed classroom practices. Lesson plans outlined thematic goals, learning materials, and activity sequences that were largely reflected in daily routines and extracurricular programs. When spontaneous adaptations occurred, such as extending discussions or modifying group arrangements, these adjustments did not contradict planned objectives but instead supported children's engagement and emotional well-being.

The findings indicate a strong alignment between curriculum planning and classroom enactment. The weekly schedule functions not merely as an administrative tool but as a flexible pedagogical framework that integrates religious values, character education, sentra-based learning, and experiential activities. This alignment demonstrates how the Merdeka Curriculum can be operationalized in practice through intentional planning that remains responsive to children's developmental needs.

Across data sources, classroom observations and interview data present a coherent account of how the Merdeka Curriculum and the sentra model are enacted in everyday practice. Observations of Friday extracurricular activities illustrate the school's commitment to supporting children's interests and talents through flexible groupings, adaptive use of learning spaces, and culturally meaningful media. At the same time, interview data underscore teachers' creativity, collaborative planning processes, and the central role of religious and character education in shaping learning experiences.

The weekly schedule further demonstrates how these principles are embedded in daily routines. Qur'an learning and character formation consistently anchor each morning, while sentra activities rotate

through different developmental domains during the first half of the week. Creative programs, such as angklung music and the Mutiara Fun Club, are scheduled on Thursdays, and Fridays are devoted to extracurricular activities including Balinese dance, drum band, drawing, and taekwondo. Together, these findings suggest that daily routines function as intentionally designed spaces where organizational structure and underlying values intersect, offering meaningful insight into how curriculum implementation in early childhood education balances flexibility with moral orientation.



Kedatangan anak disambut Ustadzah di lobby sekolah



Senam pagi diikuti anak KB hingga TK B



Ruang kelas Excellent B



Writing corner



Play area



Reading corner



Ekstrakurikuler Tari Bali



Ekstrakurikuler Drum Band



Ekstrakurikuler Menggambar dan Mewarnai



Story time dan berdoa sebelum pulang

## 3.2 Discussion

### 3.2.1 Key findings summary

This study addresses three research questions related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, the integration of the sentra (center-based) model with experiential learning, and the incorporation of religious and cultural values in early childhood education.

First, the findings demonstrate that the Merdeka Curriculum at the research site is operationalized through the sentra model as a practical and organized approach that translates curricular flexibility into everyday classroom practice. Rather than remaining at the level of policy discourse, the curriculum is enacted through deliberate classroom organization, rotating learning centers, and adaptive scheduling. These elements create learning environments that support children's sense of comfort, autonomy, and holistic development.

Second, the study shows that principles of experiential learning are embedded in daily pedagogical practices. Learning takes place through hands-on activities, flexible grouping, reflective routines, and the use of varied learning media. Within this process, teachers assume the role of facilitators who guide exploration while remaining attentive to children's ideas and emotional conditions, allowing learning to emerge from children's lived experiences.

Third, the findings indicate that religious values and character education constitute a central foundation of the learning program. Religious routines, moral storytelling, and character habituation are consistently woven into both sentra-based activities and extracurricular programs. Through this integration, children's socio-emotional development is nurtured alongside their cognitive, artistic, and physical growth.

Overall, the findings suggest that curriculum reform in this context involves more than a technical transition from Kurikulum 2013 (K13) to the Merdeka Curriculum. Instead, it reflects a broader pedagogical reorientation grounded in child-centered learning. What distinguishes this study is its illustration of how national curriculum principles are meaningfully localized through the sentra model, experiential learning practices, and religious-cultural values, resulting in a coherent and context-sensitive early childhood education program.

### 3.2.2 Adaptive and experiential learning

The findings suggest that children's learning was facilitated through flexible group arrangements, the purposeful use of loose parts, and planned opportunities for daily reflection. Rather than directing learning rigidly, teachers acted as facilitators who supported exploration and allowed children's ideas and emotional responses to influence the direction of activities. Ending each learning session with reflection created space for children to express emotions, make meaning from their experiences, and gradually strengthen emotional awareness and a sense of agency.

These practices align with Dewey's conception of education as arising from lived experience (Dewey, 1938) as well as Kolb's experiential learning cycle, which emphasizes movement from concrete experience to reflection, conceptual understanding, and experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Comparable patterns have also been identified in Indonesian early childhood contexts, where experiential approaches have been shown to support children's motivation, cooperation, and creativity (Suryaningsih, 2024; Ummah et al., 2025).

This study contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating how experiential learning within the Merdeka Curriculum is reinforced through the intentional integration of daily reflective routines and open-ended materials (loose parts) within a sentra-based structure. In this setting, reflection functions beyond a purely cognitive exercise; it operates as a socio-emotional and moral practice that supports character development, thereby extending the application of Dewey's and Kolb's theories in culturally grounded early childhood classrooms.

Notably, the experiential practices observed were accompanied by systematic assessment processes. Teachers tracked children's development through daily observations, anecdotal records, and portfolio documentation, enabling experiential activities to be connected to observable socio-emotional, cognitive, and creative outcomes. This finding supports earlier studies highlighting the importance of aligning experiential pedagogy with structured assessment practices in early childhood education (Suryaningsih, 2024; Ummah et al., 2025).

### 3.2.3 *Merdeka Curriculum and the sentra model*

The school's shift from Kurikulum 2013 (K13) to the Merdeka Curriculum was evident in its adoption of sentra learning, an adaptation of the Beyond Centers and Circle Time (BCCT) model originally developed by Pamela Phelps. BCCT is grounded in play-based, child-centered learning organized around thematic activity centers. Through scaffolding, multisensory engagement, and integrated exploration, this approach supports children's development across cognitive, social, emotional, and moral domains (Maimunah, 2023; Hasani, 2025). At the research site, the sentra model functioned not merely as a structural arrangement for activities but as a strategy for contextualizing Merdeka principles in practice. Learning centers such as Math and Block, Nature and Kitchen, Art and Dramatic Play, and Religi enabled teachers to align national curriculum objectives with the school's emphasis on religious values and character formation.

Evidence from previous studies further underscores the relevance of BCCT within early childhood education. Center-based learning has been shown to support early literacy development through the integration of listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities (Cahyaningsih et al., 2024), while also enhancing school readiness by fostering pre-literacy and numeracy skills within a structured yet engaging environment (Herawati & Sukiman, 2024). These findings position BCCT not simply as a teaching method, but as a holistic pedagogical framework that addresses multiple dimensions of child development.

At this preschool, the implementation of sentra learning was strengthened through regular KKG meetings, microteaching sessions, and collaborative lesson planning. These professional forums provided opportunities for teachers to design, reflect on, and refine center-based activities in line with Merdeka Curriculum principles. The use of local and recycled materials further highlighted teacher creativity and contextual adaptation, reflecting studies that identify teacher agency and innovation as critical factors in successful Merdeka Curriculum implementation (Hariyani et al., 2023; Wahyuningsih et al., 2024).

Compared with other reported implementation contexts, the present study suggests that the enactment of the Merdeka Curriculum in a private preschool outside Java benefits from higher levels of institutional flexibility and leadership support. Rather than foregrounding structural constraints, the findings emphasize how strong school leadership can create favorable conditions for pedagogical experimentation. The principal's role in facilitating professional learning communities, encouraging reflective practice through KKG and microteaching, and maintaining alignment between curriculum vision and classroom enactment emerged as a key enabling factor in the consistent and sustained implementation of the sentra model.

### 3.2.4 *Religious and character education as distinctives*

At this preschool, religious and character education set the cadence of each school day. Qur'an recitation, moral storytelling, and structured routines, such as greetings and collective reflection, frame

the beginning and end of daily activities. Teachers do more than facilitate instruction; they deliberately model values in their interactions, ensuring that character formation is woven through the curriculum rather than appended to it. Parents participate by reinforcing these habits at home, creating a continuity of practice between school and family.

These patterns mirror findings across Indonesian ECE settings, where character education is enacted through routine, role modeling, and habituation. Studies by Mubarroroh and Akbar (2023) show that practices like greetings, Qur'an recitation, and charitable acts nurture discipline and empathy, while Pamuji et al. (2024) outline a three-stage progression: introduction, training, and habituation, for cultivating faith-based values. Similarly, Cinantya et al. (2019) identify assignment, direction, and hidden curriculum as key mechanisms for embedding character within everyday school culture. PAUD Mutiara exemplifies these approaches, integrating religious rituals with the Merdeka Curriculum's flexibility and the sentra model's child-centered pedagogy.

Analytically, the case adds nuance to wider debates on values education in early childhood. Whereas much international literature situates character education primarily within social-emotional competencies or moral reasoning, the Indonesian experience positions spiritual development and religious culture as foundational elements of early learning. The incorporation of Qur'anic literacy, moral habituation, and culturally grounded practices suggests that curriculum reform is not merely pedagogical innovation but also a process of cultural translation: adapting global child-centered principles to local religious and social contexts.

This integration also warrants reflection. Religious routines supply moral structure and continuity, yet they raise questions about how collective, patterned practices intersect with the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on child agency and flexibility. In this study, religious activities were enacted through reflective, interactive, and experiential modes, signalling an adaptive rather than prescriptive orientation. Local cultural values, especially Balinese principles such as *Tri Hita Karana* (harmony with God, others, and nature), appear to mediate this balance by framing learning as relational, spiritual, and environmentally situated. Although the school does not explicitly reference *Tri Hita Karana* in its curriculum discourse, the observed learning practices reflect its core dimensions in practice. Harmony with God is evident in daily religious routines and Qur'anic recitation, harmony with others is fostered through collaborative sentra activities and collective reflection, and harmony with nature is supported through outdoor exploration and nature-based learning activities. Even so, sustaining such alignment requires ongoing pedagogical sensitivity and collaborative support, as the combination of sentra-based learning, religious routines, and extracurricular programs complicates teachers' work. It is also important to note that resource availability and strong parental involvement in this private-school context raise considerations of equity and transferability, indicating that adjustments may be needed when similar practices are applied in settings with more limited institutional support.

### 3.2.5 *Extracurriculars as cultural and developmental enrichment*

In this preschool setting, extracurricular activities such as Balinese dance, drum band, drawing, and taekwondo, are positioned not as supplementary programs, but as integral elements of the school's approach to character and cultural education. These activities extend sentra-based learning by offering structured yet expressive spaces where children can explore personal interests, develop discipline, and engage collaboratively with peers. Through Balinese dance, children are introduced to local cultural traditions, while taekwondo emphasizes self-regulation, respect, and perseverance. Together, these programs support children's socio-emotional growth alongside cultural identity formation.

This pattern is consistent with existing research on the developmental benefits of extracurricular participation. Previous studies have shown that involvement in structured extracurricular activities contributes to the development of leadership, resilience, and time-management skills (Christison, 2013), as well as teamwork and peer interaction (Christison, 2013; Rahayu & Dong, 2023). In early childhood contexts, extracurricular engagement has also been linked to gains in expressive vocabulary and school readiness, particularly among children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Allen et al., 2022). Within Indonesia, extracurricular programs are frequently framed as vehicles for character education, embedding values such as cooperation, discipline, and social responsibility within everyday school practices (Rahayu & Dong, 2023).

At the same time, this case invites reflection on the influence of socio-economic context in shaping curriculum implementation. The integration of extracurricular activities into the regular weekly

schedule at PAUD Mutiara illustrates how schools with adequate resources can intentionally design holistic learning experiences that combine academic, cultural, and character-oriented goals. However, such opportunities may not be equally available across all early childhood settings, particularly in schools with more limited institutional support. This suggests that while extracurricular programs demonstrate strong potential within the Merdeka Curriculum framework, their adaptation in other contexts requires careful consideration of access, resources, and sustainability to ensure inclusive implementation.

### 3.2.6 *Weekly schedule as curriculum localization*

The weekly schedule illustrates how national curriculum objectives are translated into consistent daily routines. From Monday to Wednesday, children rotate through sentra activities that address different developmental domains. Thursday is dedicated to creativity and collaboration through angklung music and the “Mutiara Fun Club,” while Friday focuses on extracurricular programs such as Balinese dance, drum band, drawing, and taekwondo. This structure combines the predictability of routine with opportunities for enrichment, responding to concerns in the literature that experiential and adaptive learning may be difficult to reconcile with consistency (Enache, 2023; Ionescu, 2020). In contrast to studies that emphasize managerial challenges during the Merdeka Curriculum transition (Sabila, Formen, & Sutarto, 2025), this case demonstrates how curriculum flexibility can be balanced with local identity and the school’s distinctive character.

From a sustainability perspective, the continuity of these practices appears to be supported by several interrelated factors. First, the weekly schedule functions as a shared organizational framework that is understood and consistently implemented by teachers, reducing reliance on individual improvisation. Second, regular collaborative structures such as KKG meetings and microteaching sessions enable ongoing reflection, adjustment, and collective ownership of curriculum practices. Third, leadership support plays a central role in maintaining alignment between curriculum vision and daily implementation. At the same time, the sustainability of this model remains partially dependent on institutional conditions, including stable leadership, teacher commitment, and available resources. This suggests that while the observed practices demonstrate strong potential for long-term implementation, their continuity requires deliberate organizational support rather than relying solely on individual teacher initiative.

## 4. Conclusion

This study explored how the Merdeka Curriculum is enacted in a private early childhood education setting through the integration of the sentra (BCCT) model, experiential learning, and religious–cultural practices. Rather than representing a technical shift from Kurikulum 2013 (K13), the findings demonstrate a deeper pedagogical reorientation in which curriculum flexibility is translated into daily routines, learning environments, and teacher practices grounded in local values.

Four key findings are particularly significant. First, adaptive and experiential learning was realized through flexible grouping, the use of open-ended materials, and daily reflective routines that supported children’s emotional awareness and agency. Second, the sentra model functioned as a practical bridge between the autonomy promoted by the Merdeka Curriculum and the need for structured, holistic child development. Third, religious and character education emerged as the moral foundation of the curriculum, embedded through habituation, storytelling, and teacher modeling rather than direct instruction alone. Fourth, extracurricular activities such as Balinese dance, drum band, drawing, and taekwondo, played a central role in supporting cultural identity, socio-emotional development, and discipline, rather than serving as peripheral enrichment.

Taken together, these findings contribute to the body of knowledge on early childhood curriculum reform in Indonesia by illustrating how national policy can be localized through pedagogical models and experiential practices that remain culturally and spiritually grounded. This study extends discussions on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by showing that BCCT and experiential learning are not only compatible with local religious and cultural values, but can be strengthened by them. Theoretically, the findings suggest that experiential learning frameworks inspired by Dewey and Kolb can be expanded in early childhood contexts to include reflective, moral, and cultural dimensions, offering a more holistic interpretation of learning through experience.

From a practical perspective, several implications emerge. From a practical perspective, several implications emerge. For early childhood teachers, the findings highlight the importance of reflective

routines, flexible grouping, and the creative use of local or recycled materials to support child-centered and experiential learning. These strategies allow teachers to respond to children's emotional and developmental needs without sacrificing curriculum structure. For school leaders, the study underscores the critical role of instructional leadership in sustaining curriculum implementation. Regular collaborative forums such as KKG meetings and microteaching sessions were central in aligning curriculum vision with classroom practice and in managing the pedagogical complexity associated with sentra-based learning. For policymakers and early childhood education stakeholders, the findings suggest that curriculum flexibility under the Merdeka framework should be accompanied by continuous professional development and institutional support. Policies that recognize local cultural and religious contexts, while ensuring equitable access to learning resources, are essential for the sustainable implementation of curriculum reform across diverse early childhood settings.

This study also acknowledges several limitations. As a single-case qualitative study conducted within a limited observation period, the findings cannot be generalized to all early childhood settings. The focus on one institution and one age group provides depth but restricts broader comparison across regions, school types, and socio-economic contexts. These limitations point to important directions for future research, including longitudinal studies that examine the sustainability of Merdeka implementation over time, comparative studies across public and private or urban and rural settings, and research that incorporates the perspectives of parents and children to better understand home-school dynamics and lived learning experiences.

In conclusion, this study affirms the importance of integrating national curriculum reforms with local cultural and religious values in early childhood education. The Merdeka Curriculum holds significant potential not only as a policy framework, but as a living curriculum that gains meaning through contextual interpretation and everyday practice. Moving forward, educators, school leaders, and policymakers are called upon to view curriculum implementation as a culturally responsive and collaborative process, one that honors local identity while supporting children's holistic development in an increasingly diverse educational landscape.

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