

Policy Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum Foundation Phase: Enhancing Collaboration and Independence among Children Aged 5–6 Years

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum Foundation Phase and its contribution to enhancing collaboration and independence among children aged 5–6 years at TK Tadika Puri, South Jakarta, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with school principals, teachers, curriculum coordinators, and parents, complemented by classroom observations and document analysis. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in Foundation Phase curriculum enactment. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-step procedure, with trustworthiness established through triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and thick description. Four major themes emerged from the analysis: policy communication and stakeholder understanding, classroom practices supporting collaboration, development of children's independence, and challenges and supporting factors in policy implementation. Findings revealed that effective policy communication, facilitated through iterative professional dialogue and principal leadership, progressively deepened teachers' conceptual understanding of Foundation Phase principles. Collaborative classroom practices—including cooperative play, joint problem-solving, and shared group responsibilities—produced observable improvements in children's peer interaction and cooperative behaviours. Children's independence developed along a scaffolded pedagogical pathway from teacher-directed support toward increasingly autonomous self-directed engagement, though individual developmental variability was consistently noted. Persistent implementation challenges included administrative documentation burden, variation in teacher readiness, and limited access to sustained professional development. The study contributes to educational policy implementation literature by demonstrating an empirical pathway linking policy communication processes, through classroom pedagogical practices, to observable child developmental outcomes, thereby positioning child competency development as a meaningful indicator of policy implementation effectiveness.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum, Foundation Phase, Policy Implementation, Collaboration, Independence, Early Childhood Education

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The twenty-first century has ushered in a paradigm shift in educational priorities, with international frameworks increasingly positioning collaboration and independence as indispensable competencies for human development and civic participation. Organisations such as UNESCO, the OECD, and UNICEF have consistently underscored that the capacity to cooperate with peers, exercise autonomous decision-making, and navigate complex social environments constitutes the foundation of lifelong learning readiness (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report (2023) similarly identifies collaborative problem-solving and self-directed learning among the most critical skill clusters demanded by rapidly evolving labour markets and democratic societies. Beyond economic imperatives, developmental psychologists and education reformers increasingly argue that the cultivation of these competencies must begin in the earliest years of formal and semi-formal education, before habitual patterns of dependence and social passivity become entrenched (Melhuish et al., 2021). Consequently, school readiness frameworks across diverse national contexts including the United States' Head Start Performance Standards, the United Kingdom's Early Years Foundation Stage, and Singapore's Nurturing Early Learners curriculum have repositioned collaboration and independence not as supplementary social skills but as central developmental benchmarks warranting deliberate pedagogical attention (Sylva et al., 2021). This global consensus reflects a broader recognition that investing in the socio-emotional architecture of early childhood yields compounding returns across academic achievement, psychological well-being, and social cohesion throughout the life course.

The developmental significance of collaboration and independence is particularly pronounced during the five-to-six-year age window, a period characterised by rapid neurological maturation, expanding theory of mind capacity, and heightened sensitivity to peer interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Bandura, 1986). Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that children who develop collaborative competencies in early childhood defined as the ability to share resources, negotiate roles, resolve interpersonal conflicts, and contribute constructively to group tasks exhibit superior outcomes in academic readiness, emotional regulation, and executive functioning (Bierman & Motamedi, 2022; Hamre et al., 2021). Simultaneously, the development of independence, understood as a child's capacity to initiate tasks, persist through challenges, make age-appropriate choices, and exercise self-regulation without continuous adult direction, has been linked to higher intrinsic motivation, reduced anxiety upon school entry, and stronger metacognitive development in middle childhood (Deci & Ryan, 2022; McClelland et al., 2023). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) provides a compelling theoretical lens, emphasising that higher mental functions emerge through guided social interaction a framework that simultaneously explains the interdependence of collaboration and independence as mutually reinforcing rather than competing developmental goals. More recent empirical work by Lillard et al. (2022) and Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2022) further confirms that playful, peer-centred learning environments structured around cooperative tasks are the most efficacious contexts for fostering these competencies among children aged five to six years.

Within this international backdrop, Indonesia has undertaken a transformative educational reform through the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*), formally implemented beginning in the academic year 2022/2023 and progressively mandated across all school levels by 2024. Derived from the national educational philosophy of *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) championed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, this curriculum represents a fundamental departure from centralised, content-heavy instructional paradigms toward a competency-based, student-centred model that privileges holistic development, character formation (*Profil Pelajar Pancasila*), and contextually responsive pedagogy (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). For early childhood education specifically, the Merdeka Curriculum designates the *Fase Fondasi* (Foundation Phase) as a distinct curricular stage covering children from early childhood through the first year of primary school, emphasising six core developmental domains: values and morality, physical-motor development, cognitive skills, language, social-emotional competence, and the arts. Crucially, the Foundation Phase policy explicitly prioritises *gotong royong* (collaborative spirit) and *kemandirian* (independence) as key character attributes to be systematically cultivated through playful, inquiry-based, and project-oriented learning experiences (Kemendikbudristek, 2022; Puspitasari et al., 2023). In this way, the policy establishes a formal alignment between Indonesia's national educational aspirations and internationally recognised frameworks for early childhood development.

Nevertheless, the existence of a well-designed curriculum policy does not, in and of itself, guarantee quality implementation at the classroom level. Scholars of educational policy implementation drawing on foundational frameworks by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), Fullan (2007), and McLaughlin (1987) have long cautioned that policy translation is a complex, contested, and context-dependent process shaped by the attitudes, capacities, and resources of front-line implementers. In the specific context of early childhood education in Indonesia, multiple challenges have been documented in the transition to the Merdeka Curriculum, including limited teacher preparedness to operationalise play-based and project-based learning principles, incomplete pedagogical understanding of developmental progression within the Foundation Phase, insufficient instructional materials and physical learning environments, and institutional resistance rooted in habitual reliance on academically oriented, worksheet-centred teaching practices (Nurhayati et al., 2023; Wulandari & Kurniawan, 2023). Furthermore, leadership capacity at the school level encompassing principals' instructional leadership, monitoring mechanisms, and facilitation of professional learning communities has been identified as a critical determinant of curriculum fidelity that remains inconsistently developed across Indonesian early childhood institutions (Sari et al., 2022; Rosyidah et al., 2023). These implementation challenges suggest that policy ambition and ground-level practice may diverge substantially, raising the empirical question of whether and how the Foundation Phase policy is actually enhancing the specific developmental outcomes it targets.

A review of recent scholarly literature reveals significant contributions to understanding curriculum reform, early childhood policy, and competency development,

while simultaneously exposing important gaps. Internationally, studies by Slot et al. (2022), Burchinal et al. (2021), and Taguma et al. (2022) have examined the structural and process quality of early childhood programmes and their relationship to socio-emotional outcomes, yet these investigations are predominantly situated in high-income, Western contexts and rarely attend to the specific policy mechanisms through which collaboration and independence are cultivated. Within Indonesia, emerging scholarship has examined various dimensions of Merdeka Curriculum implementation, including teacher perceptions (Dewi et al., 2023), assessment practice transformation (Fitriani et al., 2024), and digital literacy integration (Handayani et al., 2023). Additionally, studies by Fatimah and Rakhmawati (2022) and Anggraeni et al. (2023) have explored independence and collaboration as child outcomes in early childhood settings, yet these investigations were conducted prior to full Foundation Phase implementation or focused exclusively on isolated pedagogical strategies rather than systemic policy processes. Critically, no extant study has conducted a comprehensive empirical examination of how the Merdeka Curriculum Foundation Phase policy, as a structured governmental intervention, specifically operates to enhance collaboration and independence among children aged five to six years from an integrated policy implementation perspective. This gap is consequential: without evidence-based insight into the mechanisms, facilitators, and barriers through which the Foundation Phase policy generates or fails to generate these outcomes, policymakers and practitioners lack the empirical basis needed for informed curriculum refinement and targeted professional development.

This study directly addresses the identified gap by offering a theoretically grounded and empirically informed analysis of Foundation Phase policy implementation as it relates to collaboration and independence development in early childhood settings. The novelty of this research lies in its deliberate integration of policy implementation theory specifically drawing on frameworks addressing fidelity, adaptation, and ecological conditions with developmental outcome assessment in the Indonesian early childhood education context. Unlike prior studies that have examined either curriculum policy implementation or child competency development in isolation, this investigation examines the interface between policy process and developmental outcome, thereby contributing to a relatively underexplored dimension of both early childhood education research and Indonesian educational policy scholarship. The study further extends international literature by providing empirically grounded evidence from a large, diverse developing-country context in which curriculum reform is actively unfolding, thus enriching theoretical and practical knowledge beyond the dominant Global North-centric perspectives that currently characterise the field.

This research therefore aims to analyse the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum Foundation Phase policy and examine its role in enhancing collaboration and independence among children aged five to six years. Specifically, the study investigates the extent to which the policy has been operationalised in early childhood education settings, identifies the factors that facilitate or constrain effective implementation, and assesses the relationship between implementation quality and observable outcomes related to

collaborative and independent behaviour among children in the target age group. Given the centrality of these competencies to long-term educational success, the national strategic importance of the Merdeka Curriculum reform, and the documented absence of integrative empirical research on this topic, the present investigation is not merely academically warranted but practically urgent for informing policy refinement, teacher professional development, and institutional support mechanisms in Indonesian early childhood education and, by extension, in comparable developing-country educational reform contexts globally.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum Foundation Phase and its contribution to the development of collaboration and independence among children aged 5–6 years. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate given the study's concern with understanding the meanings, experiences, and interpretations that stakeholders attach to policy implementation processes within a specific institutional context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Case study methodology, as conceptualised by Yin (2018), enables an in-depth, contextually grounded investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world setting, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined. In the present study, this approach allowed the researchers to examine not merely whether the Foundation Phase policy was being enacted, but how implementation occurred, what factors shaped it, and how it was perceived to influence children's developmental outcomes. The bounded nature of a single institutional case further facilitated a concentrated and holistic examination of stakeholder experiences, pedagogical practices, organisational dynamics, and contextual influences that would be inaccessible through survey-based or experimental designs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at TK Tadika Puri, a kindergarten institution located in South Jakarta, Indonesia, which has formally adopted the Merdeka Curriculum Foundation Phase as its curricular framework. TK Tadika Puri was selected as the research site due to its active implementation of the Foundation Phase policy, its institutional diversity in terms of classroom configurations and teacher experience, and its accessibility for sustained fieldwork engagement. The institution serves children from early childhood through the age of six and operates within the regulatory framework established by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a strategy that prioritises information richness over statistical representativeness and is particularly suited to qualitative policy research (Patton, 2015). Inclusion criteria required that all participants had direct involvement in the implementation of the Foundation Phase curriculum and possessed first-hand familiarity with its operational principles and daily practices. The final

participant group comprised one school principal, five kindergarten teachers responsible for instructional delivery with children aged 5–6 years, one curriculum coordinator, and five parents of children enrolled in the Foundation Phase programme. Collectively, these participants represented a cross-section of implementation roles, from policy interpretation and organisational leadership to classroom enactment and household perspectives, thereby enabling a comprehensive view of the implementation ecology.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through three complementary methods semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis deployed concurrently over a period of approximately eight weeks. This multi-method strategy was designed to achieve data triangulation, thereby strengthening the credibility and completeness of the findings (Denzin, 2017).

Semi-Structured Interviews. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants. Interview protocols were developed to explore participants' conceptual understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum Foundation Phase policy, the strategies employed to operationalise Foundation Phase principles in daily practice, perceived benefits and challenges encountered during implementation, and observations regarding children's development of collaborative and independent behaviours. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to accommodate participants' linguistic preferences and were audio-recorded with participants' explicit consent. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Classroom Observations. Classroom observations were conducted across multiple sessions in each participating teacher's classroom to capture naturally occurring instructional events. Observations were guided by a structured observation protocol and focused on teacher-child interactional patterns, the organisation and execution of learning activities, the presence and quality of collaborative play and cooperative group work, manifestations of children's independent learning behaviours, and the degree to which classroom practices reflected the pedagogical principles of the Foundation Phase. Detailed field notes were recorded during each observation session, supplemented by reflective memos composed immediately following each visit to capture contextual nuances and emergent analytical observations.

Document Analysis. Relevant institutional and policy documents were collected and systematically analysed. These included the school's annual curriculum plan, teacher-developed learning modules (*modul ajar*), daily and weekly lesson plans, student development assessment records (*laporan perkembangan anak*), and official government guidelines and regulatory documents pertaining to the Merdeka Curriculum Foundation Phase, including Keputusan Menteri Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Nomor 56/M/2022 and related technical guidance (*panduan pembelajaran dan asesmen*).

Document analysis provided an additional evidential layer through which interview accounts and observational data could be corroborated and contextualised.

Research Instrument

The interview and observation protocols were developed on the basis of two foundational policy implementation frameworks: Edward III's (1980) model of policy implementation, which foregrounds the variables of communication, resources, implementers' disposition, and bureaucratic structure; and Mazmanian and Sabatier's (1983) framework, which emphasises the tractability of the policy problem, the ability of the statute to structure implementation, and non-statutory variables influencing the implementation process. Drawing on these theoretical constructs, the instruments incorporated indicators related to the clarity and dissemination of curriculum communication, adequacy of human and material resources, teachers' attitudes and commitment toward the Foundation Phase, organisational structures supporting curriculum enactment, actual curriculum implementation practices, and observable indicators of children's collaborative and independent development. Instruments were reviewed by two academic experts in early childhood education and educational policy prior to fieldwork deployment, and minor revisions were incorporated based on their feedback to improve clarity and theoretical alignment.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-step procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). In the first step, the researchers familiarised themselves with the dataset by reading and re-reading interview transcripts, field notes, and documents, noting initial impressions. In the second step, initial codes were generated systematically across the entire dataset, capturing both semantic content and latent meaning. In the third step, codes were collated and organised into candidate themes that reflected meaningful patterns across multiple data sources. In the fourth step, candidate themes were reviewed and refined against the coded extracts and the full dataset to assess their internal coherence and external distinction. In the fifth step, each theme was defined and named in a manner that conveyed its essence and relevance to the research objectives. Finally, in the sixth step, the analysis was woven into a coherent narrative account constituting the findings section of the report. Throughout the analytical process, theme generation was guided by both deductive theoretical constructs drawn from the policy implementation frameworks and inductive patterns emerging directly from the field data, in accordance with an abductive analytical orientation (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014).

Trustworthiness

The credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings were ensured through multiple strategies following the criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Triangulation was achieved through the systematic integration of interview, observational, and documentary data. Member checking was conducted by returning

interview summaries and preliminary thematic interpretations to participants for verification, enabling correction of factual inaccuracies and confirmation of analytical accuracy. Peer debriefing was undertaken through regular consultations with a colleague experienced in qualitative educational policy research who provided critical external scrutiny of emerging interpretations. An audit trail was maintained throughout the study, comprising detailed records of data collection decisions, analytical memos, coding logs, and theme development processes that rendered the interpretive journey transparent and traceable. Finally, thick description of the research setting, participant characteristics, and contextual conditions was employed to provide readers with sufficient information to assess the transferability of findings to analogous institutional and policy contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

RESEARCH RESULT

The thematic analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis yielded four major themes: (1) policy communication and stakeholder understanding, (2) classroom practices supporting collaboration, (3) development of children's independence, and (4) challenges and supporting factors in policy implementation. Each theme is presented below with supporting evidence drawn from multiple data sources to ensure triangulation and analytical credibility.

Theme 1: Policy Communication and Stakeholder Understanding

Findings across all three data sources indicated that stakeholder understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum Foundation Phase developed gradually and unevenly, shaped substantially by the quality and consistency of internal school communication processes. At the institutional level, the principal played a central role in translating government policy directives into operational school-level expectations. Document analysis of the school's curriculum planning records confirmed that TK Tadika Puri had participated in district-level socialisation workshops organised by the local education office (*Dinas Pendidikan*) prior to full curriculum rollout, and that the principal had subsequently conducted a series of internal staff meetings to disseminate key Foundation Phase principles to teaching staff.

Teachers' initial understanding of the policy was, however, incomplete. Several participants acknowledged that the scope and philosophical underpinnings of the Foundation Phase were not immediately clear upon first exposure. Mrs. Ratna, a kindergarten teacher with six years of experience, reflected: *"At first, I honestly did not fully understand what the Foundation Phase meant in practice. I understood the name, but translating it into how I should actually teach that took time and many discussions with colleagues."* Similarly, Mrs. Dewi, who coordinated the curriculum, noted that *"the government guidelines were comprehensive but sometimes abstract. We had to work together as a team to figure out what each principle looked like in a real classroom with five-year-olds."*

Over the course of the study period, evidence from observations and follow-up interviews suggested that teachers' understanding deepened through iterative professional learning, including peer lesson study, reflective discussions, and the practical experience of implementation itself. Parents' awareness of the curriculum change was more limited, though school-based parent engagement sessions (*parenting programs*) were documented as having introduced Foundation Phase objectives to families. Parent participants generally expressed appreciation for the school's communication efforts, though some indicated that their understanding remained at a surface level. Mrs. Hani, a parent, stated: "*The school explained to us that the children would be learning through play and working together. I support this, but I am still learning what exactly it means for my child's daily activities.*"

Table 1. Stakeholder Perceptions of Foundation Phase Policy Objectives

| Participant Group | Main Understanding | Supporting Evidence |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Principal | Foundation Phase prioritises holistic child development and character formation aligned with <i>Profil Pelajar Pancasila</i> | Interview; school curriculum planning documents |
| Curriculum Coordinator | Policy requires shift from academic-oriented to play-based, competency-centred pedagogy | Interview; internal workshop records |
| Teachers | Foundation Phase emphasises collaboration, independence, and contextual learning; understanding deepened through practice | Interviews; observation field notes |
| Parents | Children learn through play and peer interaction; limited awareness of specific policy mechanisms | Interviews; parenting program documentation |

Figure 1 presents the policy communication process observed at TK Tadika Puri, illustrating the directional flow through which Foundation Phase policy was interpreted and operationalised across institutional levels.



Figure 1. Policy Communication Process at TK Tadika Puri

Theme 2: Classroom Practices Supporting Collaboration

Classroom observations conducted across multiple sessions documented a range of learning activities deliberately structured to promote peer collaboration among children aged 5–6 years. Teachers organised children into small heterogeneous groups for project-based tasks, cooperative play scenarios, shared problem-solving activities, and rotating classroom responsibilities. Observed activities included collaborative construction using building blocks, joint painting projects in which children negotiated colour choices and spatial arrangements, group storytelling tasks, and shared gardening activities in the school's outdoor learning area.

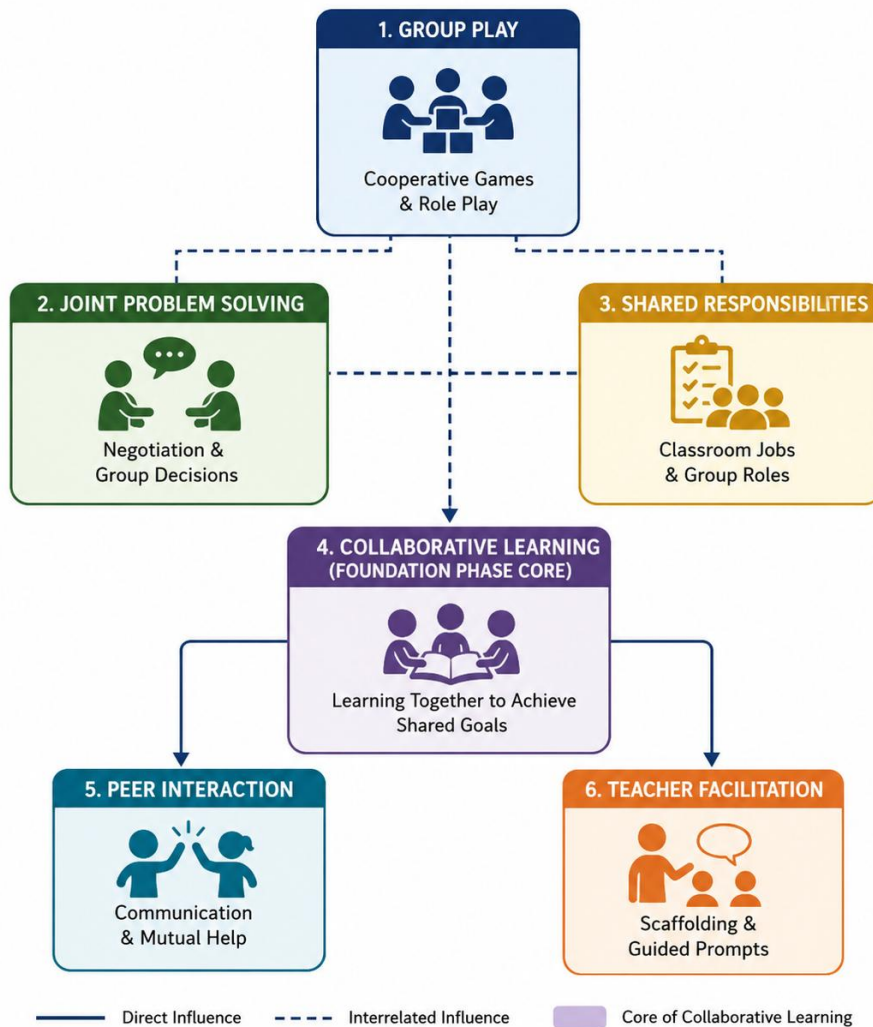
Evidence from observations indicated that children's collaborative behaviours developed progressively across the study period. During early observation sessions, several children demonstrated difficulty sharing materials and maintaining cooperative

engagement with peers for sustained periods. By later sessions, increased incidences of negotiation, turn-taking, mutual assistance, and spontaneous peer encouragement were documented. Mrs. Sari, a classroom teacher, described this progression: *"In the beginning, many children just wanted to do things their own way. But gradually, through repeated group activities, they started asking each other for help, dividing the tasks, and saying things like 'you do this part, I'll do that part.'"*

Triangulation with document analysis of teachers' lesson plans confirmed that collaborative activities were explicitly planned and sequenced, with facilitating prompts such as *"what can your friend do to help you?"* and *"how can your group solve this together?"* incorporated into instructional scaffolding notes. It is important to note that observed collaboration was not uniformly high across all children. Individual differences in temperament, prior social experience, and language development influenced the pace and depth of collaborative engagement, and teachers were observed differentiating their facilitation strategies accordingly.

Table 2. Observed Collaborative Behaviors Among Children

| Behavior Indicator | Observation Evidence | Frequency of Occurrence |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Material sharing | Children voluntarily passed crayons, blocks, and tools to peers without teacher prompting | Observed frequently in later sessions |
| Role negotiation | Children assigned tasks among themselves during group projects | Observed occasionally; increased over time |
| Peer assistance | Children spontaneously helped peers who encountered difficulty | Observed frequently |
| Turn-taking in group play | Children waited for peers during board games and cooperative construction | Observed regularly; some conflict noted early |
| Joint problem-solving | Children discussed solutions and made group decisions | Observed in structured tasks; less common in free play |
| Verbal encouragement | Children praised peers' contributions during group activities | Observed occasionally in later observation sessions |



Note. The figure represents the five interconnected dimensions of collaborative learning practice observed in Foundation Phase classrooms. Teacher facilitation functioned as an enabling condition across all other dimensions.

Figure 2. Collaborative Learning Practices in the Foundation Phase Classroom

Theme 3: Development of Children's Independence

Evidence from classroom observations, teacher interviews, and parent accounts collectively indicated that children's independence developed progressively during the Foundation Phase implementation period, though the pace and character of this development varied considerably across individual children. Observed independence indicators included self-care routines such as independently organising personal belongings upon arrival, selecting learning materials without adult direction, completing assigned tasks with decreasing levels of teacher assistance, making choices during free-choice activity periods, and assuming responsibility for tidying learning areas.

Teachers described a deliberate pedagogical approach in which instructional scaffolding was gradually reduced as children demonstrated readiness for greater autonomous engagement. Mrs. Rina, a classroom teacher, explained: *"I used to help them set out their materials every morning. Now I just remind them once and they do it themselves. For some children this happened quickly; for others it has taken much longer but I can see movement in all of them."* This observation was consistent with documentary evidence from student development records (*catatan perkembangan anak*), which documented teachers' systematic tracking of children's self-regulation milestones across the term.

Parent accounts provided corroborating evidence of developmental progress extending into home contexts. Mrs. Yuli, a parent, noted: *"My daughter used to wait for me to do everything for her at home. Now she prepares her own bag for school, she chooses which clothes to wear, and she tells me she wants to try things herself first before asking for help. I think the school has influenced this."* However, not all parent accounts reflected equivalent progress. Mrs. Hani observed that her son *"still prefers to be guided and does not often make choices independently,"* suggesting that individual variability in development constituted a real and persistent feature of the implementation context.

Table 3. Observed Indicators of Children's Independence

| Independence Indicator | Evidence from Observation | Parent Confirmation |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Independent material preparation | Children selected and organised learning materials without prompting | Confirmed by majority of parents interviewed |
| Self-directed task initiation | Children began assigned activities independently following brief instructions | Confirmed partially; some children still required reminders at home |
| Decision-making in free play | Children independently chose activities and materials during free-choice periods | Confirmed by several parents noting increased initiative at home |
| Self-care competence | Children managed personal belongings, snack preparation, and tidying routines | Confirmed by most parents; pace varied by child |
| Persistence in task completion | Children continued tasks despite difficulty before seeking teacher assistance | Partially confirmed; variability noted across children |
| Reduction in help-seeking behaviour | Decreased frequency of unnecessary adult assistance requests | Noted by teachers; less consistently observed by parents |



Note. The developmental pathway was not uniformly linear across all children. Individual trajectories reflected differences in developmental readiness, prior experience, and temperament.

Figure 3. Developmental Pathway of Independence in the Foundation Phase Classroom

Theme 4: Challenges and Supporting Factors in Policy Implementation

Data from all three sources revealed a nuanced implementation landscape characterised by both enabling conditions and persistent constraints. Leadership commitment emerged consistently as a primary supporting factor. The principal's active engagement in curriculum socialisation, classroom monitoring visits, and provision of structured time for teacher collaborative planning was identified by teachers as a critical source of institutional support. Mrs. Dewi, the curriculum coordinator, stated: *"Our principal really pushed us to understand this curriculum deeply. She attended our planning meetings, asked us to reflect on our lessons, and made sure we had access to the government guidelines and supplementary resources."*

Teacher collaboration was also identified as a significant facilitating mechanism. Collective lesson planning sessions, peer observation arrangements, and informal professional dialogue among classroom teachers were documented in school records and corroborated through interview accounts. Availability of government-issued curriculum resource materials, including the *Panduan Pembelajaran dan Asesmen* and teaching module templates, provided structural scaffolding that teachers found practically useful, particularly in the early months of implementation.

Nevertheless, substantive challenges were also documented. Multiple teachers reported initial uncertainty regarding the practical meaning of Foundation Phase principles, particularly concerning how to balance structured learning with child-led exploration while maintaining curriculum coverage. Documentation requirements associated with the new curriculum including competency-based assessment records and narrative developmental reports were identified as a significant workload burden. Mrs. Ratna noted: *"The assessment documentation takes a great deal of time. I sometimes feel that I spend so much time writing reports that I have less energy to focus on actually observing and responding to the children."* Differences in teacher experience and pedagogical readiness also created internal variation in implementation quality across classrooms. Time constraints for sustained professional development, particularly the limited availability of external training opportunities beyond initial socialisation workshops, were noted by multiple participants as an ongoing limitation.

Table 4. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of Foundation Phase Policy Implementation

| Category | Supporting Factors | Challenges |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Leadership | Active principal engagement; curriculum coordinator facilitation; structured planning time | Insufficient external monitoring and evaluation mechanisms |
| Human Resources | Teacher collaboration; peer lesson study; shared planning | Variation in teacher readiness; limited external professional development |
| Policy Understanding | Government resource materials; internal socialization sessions | Initial conceptual ambiguity; abstract policy language |

| Category | Supporting Factors | Challenges |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Time | Allocated collaborative planning time within school schedule | Limited time for in-depth professional learning; assessment documentation burden |
| Resources | Government curriculum templates; school learning materials | Uneven availability of supplementary teaching resources across classrooms |
| Parent Involvement | Parenting program sessions; parent interest in children's development | Variable parental understanding of Foundation Phase principles |

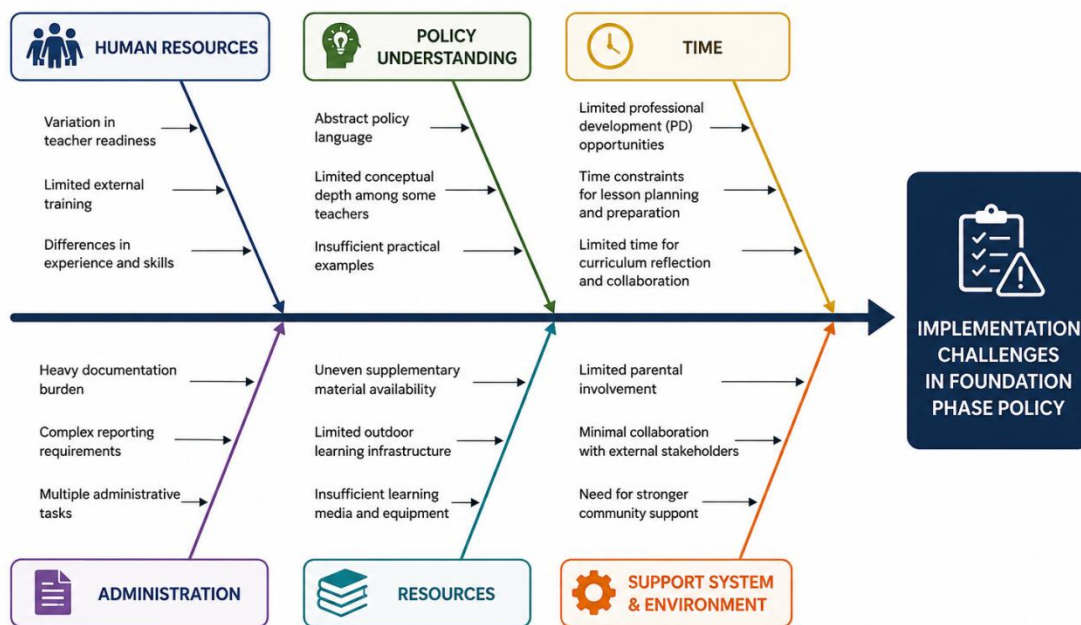


Figure 4. Implementation Challenges in Foundation Phase Policy at TK Tadika Puri (Ishikawa Diagram)

Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the four themes reveal a coherent and contextually grounded picture of Foundation Phase policy implementation at TK Tadika Puri. Effective policy communication, though imperfect and gradual, served as the foundational condition enabling teachers and school leaders to begin translating policy intentions into classroom practice. Collaborative learning activities were meaningfully incorporated into daily instruction and produced observable improvements in children's peer interaction, negotiation, and cooperative behaviour, though the depth and consistency of these outcomes varied across classrooms and individual children. Children's independence

developed along a discernible pedagogical trajectory from teacher scaffolding through guided participation toward increasingly autonomous behaviour, a progression confirmed by both observational evidence and parent accounts. However, this progression was neither uniform nor guaranteed, as individual differences in developmental readiness and contextual classroom factors produced variable outcomes. Implementation quality was shaped substantially by institutional enabling conditions most notably principal leadership and teacher collaboration while persistent challenges related to assessment documentation workload, variation in teacher preparedness, and limited access to sustained professional development introduced meaningful constraints on implementation fidelity. These findings collectively indicate that policy implementation is a complex, non-linear, and context-dependent process in which institutional support structures, stakeholder capacity, and pedagogical commitment interact to determine the degree to which Foundation Phase policy objectives are realised at the level of child developmental outcomes.

DISCUSSION

Policy Communication as the Foundation of Successful Implementation

The findings of this study demonstrate that the translation of Foundation Phase policy directives into classroom practice was not automatic but was mediated by the quality, consistency, and iterativeness of institutional communication processes. At TK Tadika Puri, the principal's active role in disseminating policy expectations, facilitating structured professional dialogue, and creating ongoing spaces for curriculum deliberation was identified as a primary enabling condition for implementation progress. This finding resonates closely with Edward III's (1980) policy implementation theory, which positions communication as the first and most foundational variable shaping implementation effectiveness. According to this framework, policy outcomes are significantly determined by the clarity, consistency, and frequency with which policy messages are transmitted to implementers, and by the degree to which those messages are understood and internalised rather than merely acknowledged. The gradual deepening of teachers' understanding observed in this study progressing from surface-level familiarity to operationally grounded comprehension through repeated collegial discussion reflects precisely the kind of iterative communication dynamic that Edwards identified as necessary for meaningful policy translation.

This interpretation aligns with and extends recent empirical scholarship on curriculum reform implementation in early childhood and school-level contexts. Fullan (2021) argues that successful educational change is characterised not by top-down mandate compliance but by the development of shared meaning among implementers, a process requiring sustained professional conversation rather than episodic policy transmission. Similarly, Cerna (2021), writing within the OECD policy implementation literature, emphasises that gaps between policy intent and classroom practice frequently originate not from teacher resistance but from communication failures that leave implementers without sufficient conceptual grounding to enact new mandates with fidelity. In the Indonesian context, Nurhayati et al. (2023) documented comparable patterns of initial conceptual

uncertainty among kindergarten teachers transitioning to the Merdeka Curriculum, noting that understanding improved meaningfully only among teachers who participated in sustained professional learning communities rather than single-session training events. The present study both corroborates and extends this finding by demonstrating that iterative communication embedded in institutional routine rather than externally delivered training alone constituted the most consequential mechanism of policy understanding development at TK Tadika Puri.

A particularly noteworthy finding in this theme was that parent stakeholders occupied the outermost and least penetrated ring of the school's communication architecture. While parents expressed general support for the Foundation Phase's play-based and collaborative orientation, their understanding of specific policy mechanisms remained limited, suggesting that communication strategies at TK Tadika Puri, while effective internally, had not yet extended with equivalent depth into the home-school partnership dimension of policy implementation. This gap represents a meaningful area for institutional development, as research by Epstein (2023) and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) consistently identifies family-school communication as a structural amplifier of early childhood programme effectiveness.

Collaborative Learning as a Mechanism for Developing Social Competence

The classroom observation data revealed that Foundation Phase learning activities created genuine and recurring opportunities for collaborative interaction, and that children's cooperative behaviours became progressively more sophisticated and self-initiated across the study period. Interpreting this finding through the lens of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, collaborative learning is not merely a pedagogical arrangement but the primary site of cognitive and socio-emotional development, as higher mental functions emerge through the co-construction of meaning in shared social activity. The small-group configurations, joint problem-solving tasks, and cooperative play scenarios documented in this study functioned as what Vygotsky termed zones of proximal development enacted through peer relationships, wherein children's capabilities were extended through interaction with more capable peers and facilitative adult guidance.

These findings are consistent with international evidence on the developmental benefits of collaborative early childhood pedagogy. Bierman and Motamedi (2022) demonstrated that structured cooperative learning experiences in preschool and kindergarten settings produce measurable gains in social competence, emotional regulation, and readiness for peer collaboration in primary school. Slot et al. (2022) similarly found that the quality of peer interaction opportunities in early childhood settings was a stronger predictor of social-emotional outcomes than structural quality indicators such as class size or educator qualifications. Within the Indonesian context, Anggraeni et al. (2023) observed that kindergarten children in settings employing project-based cooperative activities exhibited higher rates of prosocial behaviour and peer negotiation than those in teacher-directed instructional environments, a finding that the present study substantiates and contextualises within a specific policy implementation framework.

A particularly significant interpretive contribution emerging from the present data is that collaboration at TK Tadika Puri was not primarily the product of isolated cooperative tasks but arose from children's repeated participation in a classroom community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) constituted by shared norms, collective responsibilities, and relational expectations embedded within the Foundation Phase curriculum structure. This suggests that the developmental mechanism was not task design per se but the cumulative social ecology of the Foundation Phase classroom, in which collaborative disposition was progressively normalised through cultural participation. This finding extends cooperative learning theory by situating collaboration as an emergent property of community membership rather than a discrete skill acquired through targeted instruction, and it offers a nuanced reframing of how curriculum policy can function as a vehicle for social-ecological transformation in early childhood settings.

The Gradual Development of Independence through Scaffolding

The developmental pathway from teacher scaffolding through guided participation to independent practice and ultimately autonomous behaviour, documented in both classroom observations and teacher accounts, reflects a theoretically coherent process consistent with Vygotskian principles of internalization and the Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) framework articulated by Pearson and Gallagher (1983) and subsequently elaborated by Fisher and Frey (2021). Within this model, competence transfers from the social plane to the individual plane through a structured reduction of external support as the learner demonstrates increasing capability for self-direction. The teachers at TK Tadika Puri appeared to operate whether explicitly theorised or not within this pedagogical logic, progressively withdrawing instructional support as children evidenced readiness for autonomous engagement.

Importantly, the data reveal that children's independence was cultivated not merely through task completion but through the provision of structured choice-making opportunities within the Foundation Phase curriculum framework. This finding aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2022), which identifies autonomy understood as the experience of volitional self-initiation rather than external compulsion as a fundamental psychological need whose satisfaction in educational contexts produces intrinsic motivation, sustained engagement, and self-regulatory development. The distinction between task independence and autonomous agency is conceptually significant: a child who completes a teacher-assigned task without assistance has demonstrated procedural competence, while a child who independently selects a learning activity, persists through difficulty, and evaluates their own output has demonstrated the deeper autonomy that the Foundation Phase curriculum intends to cultivate. Evidence from both observations and parent accounts in this study suggested that meaningful progress toward the latter, more substantive form of independence was occurring, albeit unevenly across the sample.

The variability in children's independence development documented in this study is consistent with a developmental perspective that recognises individual differences in self-regulation maturation, executive function development, and prior socialisation experiences

(McClelland et al., 2023). Rather than representing an implementation failure, this variability reflects the biological and contextual heterogeneity of the 5–6-year developmental window. The study's contribution in this respect is to suggest that the Foundation Phase curriculum, by providing what might be termed structured autonomy defined as a pedagogical environment that is neither directive nor laissez-faire but deliberately scaffolded toward increasing self-direction creates conditions that support independence development across a range of developmental starting points, even if the pace of progress differs. This reframing distinguishes the Foundation Phase approach from both traditional directive pedagogy and informal unguided free play, positioning it as a distinctive and theoretically coherent model for early independence development.

Contextual Factors Shaping Policy Outcomes

The persistent implementation challenges identified in this study documentation burden, variation in teacher readiness, limited sustained professional development, and uneven resource availability must be interpreted not as indicators of policy failure but as manifestations of the structural conditions characteristic of educational reform in complex institutional environments. Drawing on Edward III's (1980) resource dimension of policy implementation, the adequacy of human, informational, financial, and temporal resources constitutes a necessary condition for policy fidelity, and deficits in any of these dimensions will predictably attenuate the translation of policy intent into practice quality. The assessment documentation demands associated with the Foundation Phase curriculum, noted by multiple teacher participants as a significant workload burden, represent a particularly salient resource constraint in that they compete directly with teachers' available cognitive and temporal capacity for reflective pedagogical practice.

This finding is consonant with Fullan's (2021) characterisation of implementation dip a period of performance decline or uncertainty experienced by practitioners as they navigate the demands of new practice systems before achieving proficiency and comfort. Rosyidah et al. (2023), examining leadership and curriculum fidelity in Indonesian early childhood institutions, similarly found that administrative burden and workload intensification were among the most consistently reported barriers to full Merdeka Curriculum implementation, a finding that contextualises the present study's observations within a broader national pattern rather than representing a site-specific anomaly. Levin (2021), drawing on comparative educational governance research, argues that curriculum implementation failures are most commonly traceable not to policy design inadequacy but to the gap between policy aspiration and the institutional infrastructure available to support its enactment. The present study substantiates this argument within an Indonesian early childhood education context.

It is equally important to note that despite these constraints, meaningful implementation progress was documented across all four thematic areas, suggesting that leadership commitment and teacher professional collaboration functioned as compensatory mechanisms that partially offset resource limitations. This aligns with organisational change literature emphasising that change capacity a school's collective

ability to mobilise existing human and relational resources in service of reform is a more reliable predictor of implementation outcomes than material resource abundance alone (Hallinger & Heck, 2023).

Theoretical Contribution

The central theoretical contribution of this study resides in its empirical demonstration of a pathway linking policy communication processes to observable child developmental outcomes through classroom-level pedagogical practices. Previous research on Merdeka Curriculum implementation has predominantly focused on teacher perceptions, institutional compliance, and structural adoption (Dewi et al., 2023; Fitriani et al., 2024), while early childhood developmental studies in Indonesia have largely examined collaboration and independence as isolated competency constructs without situating them within the dynamics of policy implementation processes (Fatimah & Rakhmawati, 2022; Anggraeni et al., 2023). The present study bridges these two bodies of literature by demonstrating that the quality of policy communication at the institutional level, the character of classroom practices at the pedagogical level, and the developmental outcomes manifested at the child level constitute an integrated and mutually constitutive sequence rather than discrete analytical domains.

This pathway from policy communication, through classroom collaborative and independence-building practices, to measurable child developmental indicators suggests that child outcomes can serve as a meaningful, field-accessible indicator of policy implementation effectiveness, supplementing the compliance-oriented metrics that typically dominate educational monitoring systems. This reorientation has implications for how both researchers and policymakers conceptualise implementation success: rather than asking whether teachers have received training or whether schools have adopted new lesson plan formats, the more consequential evaluative question becomes whether children are developing the competencies that the policy intends to cultivate. The present study demonstrates that qualitative case study methodology, drawing on triangulated evidence from multiple stakeholder perspectives and observation contexts, is well-suited to answering this more demanding but more policy-relevant question.

Practical Implications

The findings carry substantive implications for schools, teachers, policymakers, and parents. For schools, the study underscores the value of establishing continuous professional learning communities that sustain ongoing curriculum dialogue beyond initial policy socialisation, as understanding developed through iterative professional practice proved more durable and actionable than understanding acquired through one-time workshops. For teachers, the findings affirm the centrality of intentional scaffolding structured through explicit modelling, graduated support withdrawal, and deliberate provision of autonomous choice opportunities as the pedagogical mechanism through which both collaboration and independence are cultivated. Professional development

programmes should therefore prioritise scaffolding competency rather than content transmission.

For policymakers, the study highlights the need to accompany curriculum mandates with sustained implementation support infrastructure, including accessible professional development, simplified assessment documentation systems, and monitoring mechanisms that attend to classroom process quality rather than administrative compliance alone. The administrative burden identified by teachers in this study represents a correctable policy design challenge that, if unaddressed, risks undermining the pedagogical energy available for child-centred instruction. For parents, the findings suggest that home-school partnership initiatives should be developed as a structural component of Foundation Phase implementation, enabling families to extend collaborative and independence-supporting practices into home contexts and thereby reinforcing the developmental gains initiated in school settings.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. As a single-site qualitative case study, the findings are necessarily bound to the specific institutional, cultural, and geographic context of TK Tadika Puri in South Jakarta and cannot be generalised to Indonesian early childhood education settings as a whole. The reliance on qualitative data, while enabling depth of contextual understanding, precludes quantification of developmental outcomes or causal attribution of observed child behaviours to specific implementation variables. The study period, while sufficient for thematic saturation within the qualitative tradition, did not extend long enough to trace long-term developmental trajectories, and the cross-sectional observational design limits conclusions regarding individual children's longitudinal progress.

Future research should address these limitations through multi-site comparative studies that examine Foundation Phase implementation across diverse institutional, geographic, and socioeconomic contexts within Indonesia, enabling assessment of whether the communication-practice-outcome pathway identified in this study is generalisable or context-specific. Mixed-methods designs incorporating standardised child developmental assessments alongside qualitative data collection would strengthen the evidentiary basis for linking policy implementation quality to child outcome measures. Longitudinal studies tracking children from Foundation Phase entry through the transition to primary school would illuminate whether the collaborative and independence competencies documented in this study demonstrate durability and transfer across educational contexts. Finally, comparative analyses across schools at different stages of Merdeka Curriculum implementation maturity would provide valuable insight into the temporal dimensions of policy adaptation and the institutional conditions associated with accelerated or sustained implementation quality, thereby generating evidence directly applicable to national curriculum reform strategy.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum Foundation Phase at TK Tadika Puri, South Jakarta, constituted a complex and contextually embedded process whose outcomes extended beyond curriculum adoption to encompass observable changes in children's developmental competencies. Effective policy communication, sustained through iterative professional dialogue rather than one-time dissemination, served as the foundational condition enabling teachers and school leaders to translate abstract policy directives into purposeful classroom practice. Leadership commitment and structured teacher collaboration further amplified implementation quality, creating an institutional environment in which collaborative learning activities and deliberate scaffolding strategies fostered progressive growth in children's cooperative behaviours and autonomous engagement. Importantly, these developmental gains were neither uniform nor instantaneous; individual variability in children's trajectories underscored that meaningful outcomes depend upon the sustained and differentiated enactment of Foundation Phase principles rather than superficial procedural compliance. Alongside these enabling conditions, persistent challenges including administrative documentation burden, variation in teacher pedagogical readiness, resource constraints, and limited access to continuous professional development emerged as consequential factors moderating implementation quality, reinforcing that policy aspiration and ground-level practice require active and ongoing institutional mediation.

The principal contribution of this study lies in its empirical articulation of a pathway linking policy communication processes, through classroom-level pedagogical practices, to observable child developmental outcomes in collaboration and independence a linkage that has been insufficiently examined in prior curriculum implementation and early childhood education research. This integrative perspective offers a more comprehensive and developmentally grounded framework for evaluating policy implementation effectiveness than compliance-oriented metrics alone. For schools and teachers, the findings affirm the indispensability of continuous professional learning communities and intentional scaffolding as mechanisms for translating policy into developmental impact. For policymakers, the study provides evidence-based justification for investing in sustained implementation support, including streamlined assessment systems and accessible professional development, to enable educators to sustain pedagogical quality amid administrative demands. Future research should extend this investigation through multi-site comparative designs, mixed-methods approaches, and longitudinal studies that trace the durability of collaboration and independence competencies across diverse institutional contexts and developmental stages, thereby generating a more generalisable understanding of how the Merdeka Curriculum Foundation Phase can be most effectively implemented to support holistic early childhood development.

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