



## Implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum through Joyful Learning Approaches in Early Childhood Education

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### Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the implementation of the Joyful Learning-based Independent Curriculum in early childhood learning in playgroups. Child-centered, enjoyable, non-pressuring early childhood learning that is in line with children's developmental characteristics is crucial. The study used a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study. The research subjects included the principal, group B teachers, and students aged 4-5 years. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, then analyzed through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was obtained through triangulation of sources and techniques. The results showed that the implementation of the Joyful Learning-based Independent Curriculum at KB Darul Ilmi took place through a curriculum orientation that was in line with the institution's vision, flexible learning planning, the use of varied media, the application of a center model, providing activity choices, and the implementation of child-centered learning. Teachers acted as facilitators who created a safe atmosphere, provided positive reinforcement, instilled character, and conducted authentic assessments through observation, anecdotal notes, photo documentation, work results, and narrative reports. Supporting factors for implementation include principal leadership, teacher competence, instructional media, and a conducive learning environment. Key challenges include parents' perceptions of instant literacy, time management, and classroom structure.

## INTRODUCTION

Early childhood represents a critical developmental period during which foundational cognitive, linguistic, social-emotional, physical, moral, and spiritual capacities are established (Rad et al., 2022; Thümmler et al., 2022). Developmental research consistently emphasizes that young children learn most effectively through direct experiences, play, social interaction, environmental exploration, and emotionally secure learning environments rather than through formal academic instruction (Nievas & Montes, 2023; Subhan et al., 2025).

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Consequently, early childhood education (ECE) should not be regarded as a simplified version of primary schooling focused primarily on academic achievement; rather, it should serve as a holistic pedagogical space that nurtures children's overall development. Within this perspective, enjoyable and meaningful learning experiences are essential because positive emotions, active engagement, and psychological safety significantly influence children's motivation, participation, and developmental outcomes (Masdul et al., 2024; Pratiwi et al., 2024; Widyastuti et al., 2024). International scholarship increasingly recognizes play as a central mechanism through which children develop cognitive competencies, creativity, social skills, emotional regulation, and character formation.

Recent educational reforms have further strengthened the importance of child-centered learning approaches in early childhood settings (Buldu & Buldu, 2025; Yunus & Kaddas, 2023). In Indonesia, the Merdeka Curriculum promotes greater flexibility, contextualization, and responsiveness to learners' developmental needs (Gal, 2023; Sakti et al., 2024; Siregar & Sit, 2024). Unlike traditional curriculum models that emphasize standardized content delivery, the Merdeka Curriculum encourages educational institutions to design learning experiences that accommodate children's interests, talents, and stages of development. Within the early childhood context, these principles align closely with the concept of joyful learning, which emphasizes learning environments that are engaging, meaningful, non-threatening, and developmentally appropriate (Hanafi et al., 2020; Lukman et al., 2021). Under this approach, teachers function not merely as transmitters of knowledge but as facilitators who design learning environments, provide diverse learning opportunities, observe children's progress, and support exploration through positive reinforcement (Masdul et al., 2024; Umar & Mardesia, 2023). Therefore, joyful learning within the Merdeka Curriculum should be understood not simply as creating pleasant classroom atmospheres but as a pedagogical strategy that supports meaningful learning and holistic child development.

The theoretical foundation of joyful learning is closely related to constructivist and socio-cultural perspectives, which view children as active participants in knowledge construction. Learning occurs when children interact with peers, teachers, materials, and their surrounding environment through meaningful activities (Ashari et al., 2023; Halamury et al., 2025). Joyful learning facilitates these interactions by integrating play, exploration, creativity, and collaborative engagement into daily educational practices. Previous studies have demonstrated that positive emotional experiences enhance children's willingness to participate, strengthen learning motivation, and support long-term knowledge retention (Feriyanto & Anjariyah, 2024; Little & Karaolis, 2024; Masters et al., 2023). Consequently, joyful learning has become increasingly relevant in contemporary discussions regarding quality early childhood education and curriculum implementation.

These principles are reflected in the educational orientation of KB Darul Ilmi, an early childhood education institution established in 2007 and located in Tegalsari Village, Widang District, Tuban Regency, Indonesia. The institution's vision emphasizes the development of healthy, intelligent, cheerful, morally responsible, and environmentally conscious children. Its mission explicitly promotes active, creative, innovative, and enjoyable learning experiences.

Furthermore, the institution implements a center-based learning model consisting of religious learning centers, block centers, natural-material centers, preparation centers, and role-play centers. Such learning environments demonstrate a commitment to integrating religious values, character education, creativity, exploration, and child enjoyment within the learning process. Consequently, KB Darul Ilmi provides a relevant context for examining how joyful learning principles are operationalized within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Despite the conceptual compatibility between the Merdeka Curriculum and joyful learning, practical implementation remains challenging. One significant challenge concerns the persistent expectation among some parents that early childhood education should prioritize rapid mastery of reading, writing, and arithmetic skills (Eriani et al., 2025; Pieper, 2024). Such expectations may create academic pressure at an early age and potentially undermine the fundamental principles of developmentally appropriate practice. Preliminary findings at KB Darul Ilmi indicate that parental demands for immediate academic outcomes constitute a major challenge in sustaining joyful learning approaches. In addition, observational data reveal that while overall learning implementation demonstrates a high level of effectiveness, classroom organization and time management remain areas requiring further improvement. These findings suggest that successful implementation of joyful learning depends not only on pedagogical competence but also on institutional support, learning environments, and effective school-family communication.

Previous studies have consistently highlighted the significant relationship between play-based learning and various dimensions of child development. Research has shown that free play contributes positively to children's physical activity levels, motor competence, cognitive development, and social-emotional well-being (Erwin et al., 2023; Zosh et al., 2022). Other studies have demonstrated that guided play can enhance children's participation, curiosity, communication skills, and language development through intentional pedagogical support and scaffolding (Alramamneh et al., 2023; Rad et al., 2022). Furthermore, evidence suggests that the effectiveness of play-based learning is influenced by several factors, including the quality of play experiences, teacher facilitation, learning environment design, and the developmental objectives embedded within learning activities (Jauhari et al., 2025; Top et al., 2021). Taken together, these findings indicate that play should not be understood as a spontaneous or unstructured activity alone, but rather as a purposeful pedagogical process that supports holistic child development across cognitive, physical, social-emotional, linguistic, and behavioral domains.

Within the Indonesian context, research on the Merdeka Curriculum in early childhood education has expanded in recent years. Existing studies have examined curriculum policy implementation, project-based learning management, differentiated learning, STEAM integration, and the broader paradigm shifts associated with curriculum reform. These studies have highlighted the importance of flexibility, contextual learning, and child-centered educational practices. However, the majority of existing research focuses primarily on curriculum policy, project implementation, or instructional innovation, while relatively limited attention has been devoted to joyful learning as a comprehensive operational strategy for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in early childhood settings.

Accordingly, several research gaps remain. First, international studies have extensively investigated play-based learning, guided play, and play-based assessment, yet few have examined their relationship with the implementation of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum within community-based and religiously oriented early childhood institutions. Second, national studies predominantly focus on curriculum policy, project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and STEAM education, leaving the implementation of joyful learning as a distinct pedagogical framework underexplored. Third, previous research rarely integrates curriculum planning, child-centered implementation, positive reinforcement, authentic assessment, institutional support, and parental perceptions regarding early academic achievement within a single analytical framework. Addressing these gaps is important because joyful learning should be understood not merely as a classroom atmosphere but as a comprehensive curricular practice that shapes educational experiences and developmental outcomes.

The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive examination of Merdeka Curriculum implementation through a joyful learning approach within a community-based Islamic early childhood institution. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on play activities or curriculum policies, this research analyzes the interconnected relationships among institutional vision, teacher readiness, learning design, educational media, positive reinforcement, children's participation, authentic assessment, and school-parent communication. Furthermore, the study explores how joyful learning functions as a strategic response to tensions between developmentally appropriate early childhood practices and parental expectations regarding early literacy and numeracy achievement. By addressing these dimensions simultaneously, the study contributes both theoretically and practically to the growing discourse on curriculum implementation in early childhood education.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum through joyful learning approaches at KB Darul Ilmi. Specifically, the study examines the institutional and curricular context, investigates the planning and implementation of joyful learning activities, explores positive reinforcement and character development practices, analyzes authentic assessment processes, and identifies supporting factors and implementation challenges. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of child-friendly, meaningful, and developmentally appropriate learning practices while providing practical insights for educators, school leaders, parents, and researchers seeking to strengthen the quality of early childhood education under the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study design to obtain an in-depth understanding of how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented through joyful learning practices in early childhood education. The research was conducted at KB Darul Ilmi, located in Tegalsari Village, Widang District, Tuban Regency, Indonesia. A case study was considered appropriate because it enables a comprehensive exploration of educational practices within their natural setting (Hirose & Creswell, 2023). The participants consisted of the school principal, Group B teachers, and children aged 4–5 years enrolled in Group B classes. Informants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in curriculum planning, learning implementation, and assessment

processes related to the application of joyful learning within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations focused on learning activities, teacher-child interactions, classroom organization, play-based learning experiences, and the application of joyful learning principles. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal and teachers to explore their perspectives regarding curriculum planning, instructional strategies, assessment practices, supporting factors, and implementation challenges. Documentary evidence included institutional profiles, curriculum documents, lesson plans, learning media, photographs of classroom activities, children's work samples, and developmental assessment records. The use of multiple data sources enabled a richer understanding of the phenomenon and facilitated data triangulation.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Maxwell, 2020). Data obtained from observations, interviews, and documents were systematically coded, categorized, and organized according to the main themes of the study, namely curriculum planning, learning implementation, authentic assessment, supporting factors, and challenges in implementing joyful learning. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, source triangulation and methodological triangulation were employed by comparing information obtained from different participants and data collection techniques. In addition, member checking was conducted with key informants to verify the accuracy of interpretations, while prolonged engagement in the field helped ensure a deeper understanding of the educational context.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Curriculum Orientation and Learning Context**

the curriculum orientation at KB Darul Ilmi is strongly aligned with the principles of joyful learning. Rather than focusing exclusively on academic achievement, the institution emphasizes the holistic development of children, encompassing cognitive, physical, social-emotional, moral, spiritual, and environmental dimensions. Established in 2007 in response to the educational needs of children aged 2–4 years within the local community, KB Darul Ilmi has evolved into a community-based early childhood education institution operating under the Yayasan Pendidikan Muslimat NU Bina Bakti Wanita Tuban. The institutional vision—to nurture children who are healthy, intelligent, cheerful, morally upright, and environmentally conscious—serves as the foundation for creating a child-friendly and developmentally appropriate learning environment. Likewise, the institution's mission explicitly promotes active, creative, innovative, and enjoyable learning experiences, reflecting the core values embedded within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

Field data further reveal that the implementation of joyful learning is supported by a learning environment that, although modest in terms of physical resources, demonstrates a clear pedagogical direction. At the time of the study, the institution served 20 children, consisting of 7 children in Group A (aged 2–3 years) and 13 children in Group B (aged 4–5 years), supported by one principal and two teachers. The age-based grouping system allows learning activities and developmental stimulation to be adapted to children's developmental characteristics and readiness. In addition, the curriculum integrates Islamic

educational values through seven major domains of child development, namely faith (*aqidah*), worship practices, moral conduct, physical development, intellectual growth, discipline, and time management. This integration demonstrates that joyful learning is not merely interpreted as entertaining activities but as a pedagogical approach that combines enjoyment, character formation, and holistic child development within a coherent educational framework.

**Table 1. Curriculum Orientation and Its Relevance to Joyful Learning**

Contextual Aspect	Field Findings	Academic Significance for Joyful Learning
Institutional vision	Healthy, intelligent, cheerful, morally upright, and environmentally conscious children	Learning is directed toward holistic child development
Educational mission	Active, creative, innovative, and enjoyable learning	Consistent with child-centered and developmentally appropriate practices
Characteristics of learners	Group A (2–3 years) and Group B (4–5 years)	Learning stimulation is adapted to developmental stages
Curriculum orientation	Islamic values and character education	Joyful learning is integrated with moral and character formation
Learning model	Faith center, block center, natural-material center, preparation center, and role-play center	Children learn through exploration, choice, and concrete experiences

The institution’s commitment to joyful learning is further reflected in its implementation of a center-based learning model, consisting of faith-based learning centers (*Imtaq*), block play centers, natural-material exploration centers, preparation centers, and role-play centers (see Table 1). These learning centers provide opportunities for children to engage in hands-on experiences, exploration, experimentation, and social interaction. Such learning arrangements are consistent with the fundamental principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes flexibility, learner autonomy, and meaningful learning experiences. As stated by the principal, “We see the essence of the Merdeka Curriculum as flexibility and a commitment to children’s needs. Young children learn most effectively when they feel happy.” This statement reflects the institution’s understanding that curriculum implementation should prioritize children’s well-being and active engagement rather than imposing rigid academic expectations.

The implementation of joyful learning at KB Darul Ilmi extends beyond the creation of a pleasant classroom atmosphere. Instead, it represents a curriculum orientation that systematically integrates child-centered pedagogy, character education, religious values, and experiential learning. The findings support previous studies highlighting the importance of play-based learning in fostering children’s cognitive, linguistic, social-emotional, and motor development. Furthermore, the results reinforce the argument that meaningful learning experiences emerge when educational environments provide opportunities for exploration, autonomy, and positive emotional engagement. In this regard, the curriculum orientation adopted by KB Darul Ilmi demonstrates how the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum can be operationalized through joyful learning practices that simultaneously promote developmental growth, character formation, and children’s overall well-being.

## Planning Learning Activities through a Joyful Learning Approach

Rather than focusing solely on content delivery, teachers organize learning activities that encourage children to explore, make choices, and actively participate in play-based experiences. This orientation is evident in the daily learning structure, which consists of opening, core, and closing activities. During the opening session, teachers establish a positive learning climate through collective prayer, greetings, attendance, ice-breaking activities, prior knowledge activation, and introductions to the day's learning experiences. The core activities involve the use of various learning media and play experiences, including educational videos, collage making, painting, coloring, and finger painting. Such planning demonstrates that learning is conceptualized as a concrete and meaningful experience closely aligned with the developmental characteristics of young children. Within early childhood education, this approach is particularly important because children learn most effectively through direct engagement, exploration, and interaction with their environment.

Teacher readiness emerged as a critical component of joyful learning planning. The principal emphasized that implementing enjoyable learning experiences requires not only instructional commitment but also continuous professional development. As explained by the principal: "We regularly conduct internal workshops and encourage teachers to participate in training programs through the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM). I always emphasize that teachers must be creative in adapting teaching modules, utilizing natural materials and loose parts, and ensuring that classrooms are free from harsh interactions or rigid learning atmospheres."

Learning planning goes beyond administrative preparation and serves as a pedagogical process that requires creativity, professional competence, and sensitivity to children's developmental needs. Findings indicate that the institution views teacher capacity building as a crucial prerequisite for creating emotionally supportive and intellectually stimulating learning environments. The effectiveness of playful learning depends heavily on teachers' ability to intentionally design learning experiences that balance freedom, exploration, and developmental goals. These findings support previous studies showing that play-based learning requires purposeful pedagogical decision-making, not simply providing children with unstructured play opportunities.

The planning process is further strengthened through the implementation of a center-based learning model and the use of diverse educational media. Institutional documents indicate that the learning centers include faith-based learning (*Imtaq*), block play, natural-material exploration, preparation, and role-play centers. Children participate in one activity center per day, where a variety of activities are organized to ensure adequate play intensity and developmental stimulation. This arrangement demonstrates deliberate planning aimed at providing multidimensional learning experiences that support religious development, cognitive growth, language acquisition, motor skills, creativity, and social-emotional competencies. The use of natural materials and loose parts further enhances exploratory learning as children interact directly with objects that can be manipulated, transformed, and interpreted according to their imaginations (see Table 2). The physical environment and learning materials are strategically utilized to encourage active engagement, creativity, and deeper learning experiences.

**Table 2. Components of Joyful Learning Planning**

Planning Component	Field Findings	Academic Significance
Teaching modules	Teachers are encouraged to creatively adapt teaching modules based on learning outcomes and children's needs	Planning is flexible, contextual, and developmentally responsive
Teacher readiness	Internal workshops and professional development through the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM)	Teacher competence is a prerequisite for effective joyful learning
Learning media	Natural materials, loose parts, videos, collage activities, painting, coloring, and finger painting	Concrete materials stimulate exploration, creativity, and active engagement
Learning centers	Imtaq, block play, natural-material, preparation, and role-play centers	Learning experiences are multidimensional and holistic
Activity choices	Children are provided with alternative activities and play corners	Supports autonomy, interest-based learning, and active participation
Learning environment	Classrooms are designed to be accessible, attractive, and non-restrictive	Promotes emotional safety, comfort, and freedom to explore

Another important finding concerns the provision of learning choices for children. According to the Group B teacher: “We no longer require all children to do the same activity at the same time. Instead, we prepare different activity options or play corners, allowing children to choose what interests them and giving them greater control over their learning experiences.” This statement indicates a shift from uniform instructional practices toward a more responsive and differentiated learning approach. By providing children with meaningful choices, teachers acknowledge differences in interests, readiness levels, and learning preferences. Such practices encourage autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and active engagement, all of which are central principles of joyful learning. Furthermore, this approach aligns closely with the philosophy of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes meaningful play as a manifestation of learner autonomy and developmentally appropriate education. Consequently, joyful learning at KB Darul Ilmi is not positioned merely as an entertaining classroom atmosphere but as a deliberate pedagogical design that integrates flexibility, child agency, and holistic developmental goals into the planning process.

### Child-Centered Learning Implementation

The findings demonstrate that the implementation of joyful learning at KB Darul Ilmi is carried out through a structured yet flexible learning process that prioritizes children's needs, interests, and developmental characteristics. The learning activities begin with an opening session designed to establish a safe, warm, and emotionally supportive environment. Daily classroom observations revealed that learning sessions typically commence with collective prayer, greetings, attendance checking, ice-breaking activities, activation of prior knowledge, and an introduction to the day's play-based activities. Rather than immediately directing children toward instructional tasks, teachers first focus on building emotional readiness, social connectedness, and a sense of security. Observation data further showed that teachers consistently welcomed children with warmth, encouraged positive interactions, guided collective prayers, and communicated learning objectives in simple and developmentally appropriate language. All observed indicators within the opening phase received the highest

evaluation score. These findings suggest that child-centered learning begins before the core instructional activities take place, as emotional security and positive relationships constitute essential foundations for children's engagement, confidence, and willingness to explore.

The core learning activities illustrate a significant shift from traditional instructional practices toward a child-centered approach that promotes choice, exploration, and active participation. Classroom observations indicated that children engaged in a variety of learning experiences, including watching topic-related videos, exploring learning materials, creating collages, painting, coloring, and participating in finger-painting activities. Teachers provided diverse and attractive learning media while encouraging children to explore according to their interests and developmental readiness. The principal explained this approach as follows: "Every morning, teachers begin by warmly welcoming the children. During the core activities, children are given choices. For example, in a project activity, they may choose which materials they want to use. The teacher's role is primarily to facilitate, observe, and provide encouragement rather than simply giving instructions."

This statement highlights a fundamental transformation in pedagogical practice, whereby teachers function as facilitators of learning rather than as the dominant source of knowledge. Instead of directing every aspect of children's activities, teachers intentionally create learning environments that allow children to make decisions, experiment with materials, and construct meaning through direct experiences. Such practices are closely aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes learner autonomy, meaningful play, and active participation in the learning process.



Figure 1. Joyful Learning in The Classroom

Children's active involvement emerged as another defining characteristic of joyful learning implementation (see Figure 1). The findings indicate that children were not positioned as passive recipients of teacher instructions but as active participants who selected activities, manipulated learning materials, solved problems, and expressed their understanding through creative products. According to the Group B teacher: "In the Merdeka Curriculum, the essence of joyful learning is child-centered education. We no longer require every child to do exactly the same thing at the same time. Instead, we provide different activity

options or play corners so that children feel happy because they have control over what they want to learn that day.”

This approach reflects a pedagogical commitment to respecting children's individuality and agency. Freedom of choice is not interpreted as the absence of guidance; rather, it serves as a deliberate strategy for fostering intrinsic motivation, independence, and ownership of learning. From the perspective of early childhood education, such practices are consistent with the principles of developmentally appropriate practice, which advocate learning experiences that are responsive to children's age, interests, abilities, and developmental stages. Consequently, joyful learning at KB Darul Ilmi supports not only children's enjoyment but also their autonomy and active engagement in knowledge construction.

The closing phase of learning functions as an opportunity for reflection, appreciation, and character reinforcement. Daily learning records indicate that children are encouraged to recall and discuss the activities they have completed through simple question-and-answer sessions before concluding with a closing prayer. Observational data showed that teachers consistently facilitated brief reflections, acknowledged children's efforts and achievements, celebrated their work, and ended learning sessions in a positive atmosphere. All indicators associated with the closing phase received the highest observational scores. From a pedagogical perspective, this practice is particularly significant because young children require opportunities to consolidate learning experiences through repetition, verbal reflection, positive feedback, and value reinforcement. By ending activities in a supportive and appreciative manner, teachers help children develop positive attitudes toward learning while strengthening their confidence and sense of accomplishment. Therefore, the implementation of joyful learning at KB Darul Ilmi extends beyond enjoyable play activities and encompasses a comprehensive pedagogical structure that includes emotional preparation, exploratory learning experiences, reflection, and character development. As summarized in Table 3, the implementation of child-centered learning at KB Darul Ilmi demonstrates a coherent integration of joyful learning principles across all stages of the learning process, from the opening session to the closing reflection activities.

**Table 3. Child-Centered Learning Implementation at KB Darul Ilmi**

Learning Stage	Classroom Practices	Evidence from Findings	Academic Significance
Opening activities	Prayer, greetings, attendance, ice breaking, prior knowledge activation, introduction to play activities	Teachers warmly welcome children, create a safe atmosphere, and communicate simple learning objectives	Builds children's emotional, social, and spiritual readiness for learning
Core activities	Watching videos, exploring learning materials, collage making, painting, coloring, and finger painting	Children actively participate, use diverse media, and are encouraged to explore freely	Promotes concrete, participatory, and meaningful learning experiences
Teacher role	Observing, facilitating, providing choices, and offering encouragement	The principal describes teachers as facilitators rather than instructors	Demonstrates a shift from teacher-centered to child-centered learning
Children's	Choosing activities,	Teachers provide	Encourages autonomy,

participation	manipulating materials, and creating products	multiple activity options and play corners	intrinsic motivation, and independent learning
Closing activities	Reflection, discussion, children's work, and closing prayer	simple appreciation of work, and children's efforts	Teachers facilitate reflection and recognize children's efforts
			Reinforces learning experiences, character development, and children's sense of achievement

The findings indicate that joyful learning at KB Darul Ilmi is implemented as a comprehensive child-centered pedagogical approach rather than merely a strategy for creating enjoyable classroom atmospheres. Through intentional planning, active participation, meaningful choice, and reflective closure, the institution operationalizes the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum while supporting children's holistic development and well-being.

## Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at KB Darul Ilmi is closely aligned with the principles of joyful learning through an institutional orientation that prioritizes holistic child development. The school's vision and mission emphasize not only intellectual growth but also physical well-being, emotional development, moral character, religious values, and environmental awareness. This orientation reflects a broader shift in early childhood education from outcome-based academic achievement toward child-centered developmental approaches. The integration of Islamic values with play-based learning further illustrates that joyful learning can coexist with character education and value formation rather than functioning solely as a recreational activity. Such findings support the view that meaningful learning in early childhood emerges when educational experiences address multiple developmental domains simultaneously. Previous studies have argued that play-based pedagogies contribute significantly to cognitive, social-emotional, language, and moral development because children construct understanding through authentic experiences and social interaction (Brown & Shay, 2021; Burke et al., 2023; Kilinc, 2022). Therefore, the curriculum orientation adopted by KB Darul Ilmi demonstrates how joyful learning can serve as a practical mechanism for operationalizing holistic education within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum.

A significant finding concerns the way learning planning is conceptualized as a pedagogical rather than merely administrative process. Teachers at KB Darul Ilmi intentionally design learning experiences that provide opportunities for exploration, creativity, and active engagement through flexible teaching modules, center-based activities, and the use of natural materials. This approach reflects the fundamental assumption that young children learn most effectively when they interact directly with objects, environments, and peers. The institution's investment in teacher professional development through workshops and the Merdeka Mengajar Platform also highlights the importance of teacher competence in sustaining joyful learning practices. Effective play-based learning requires teachers to make intentional pedagogical decisions regarding learning environments, materials, and interactions rather than simply allowing children to play without guidance. Research has shown that teacher intentionality plays a decisive role in determining the educational quality of play-based learning

environments and children's developmental outcomes (Fuligni et al., 2012; Heberle et al., 2025). Consequently, the planning practices observed at KB Darul Ilmi suggest that successful implementation of joyful learning depends on teachers' capacity to balance child autonomy with carefully designed educational experiences.

The implementation phase revealed a substantial transformation from traditional teacher-directed instruction toward child-centered learning practices. Teachers functioned primarily as facilitators who provided learning choices, guided exploration, and supported children's participation rather than controlling every aspect of classroom activities. Such practices are consistent with the philosophy of the Merdeka Curriculum, which promotes learner agency and meaningful engagement in the learning process. The provision of alternative activities and play corners allowed children to exercise choice and participate according to their interests and developmental readiness. Educational research suggests that autonomy-supportive environments foster intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and deeper engagement in learning activities because children perceive themselves as active contributors to their own learning experiences (Al-Dababneh & Al-Zboon, 2022; Chen et al., 2024). Furthermore, child-centered environments have been associated with higher levels of creativity, confidence, and social competence among young learners. Therefore, the learning implementation observed in this study indicates that joyful learning functions not merely as a classroom strategy but as a pedagogical framework that redefines the relationship between teachers, children, and learning processes.

The use of learning centers, loose parts, natural materials, visual media, and creative art activities provided children with diverse opportunities to investigate, manipulate, and construct knowledge through firsthand experiences. Such learning environments encourage exploration, experimentation, and problem-solving, which are essential characteristics of meaningful learning in early childhood education. The findings suggest that the effectiveness of joyful learning is strongly influenced by the availability of flexible and stimulating learning resources that allow children to engage actively with their surroundings. Previous studies have emphasized that well-designed physical environments contribute significantly to children's cognitive engagement, creativity, and social interaction by promoting opportunities for self-directed exploration and collaborative learning (Umiarso et al., 2021; Vidal Carulla et al., 2021). Importantly, the findings also demonstrate that meaningful learning environments do not necessarily require sophisticated facilities; rather, they require intentional pedagogical design that transforms available resources into opportunities for learning and development.

The findings further indicate that joyful learning serves as a strategic response to the tension between developmentally appropriate practice and parental expectations regarding early academic achievement. While some parents continue to associate educational success with rapid acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills, the institution promotes a broader understanding of learning that values play, exploration, creativity, and character formation. Through reflection activities, positive reinforcement, and continuous communication with families, teachers seek to demonstrate that meaningful developmental outcomes can emerge through enjoyable learning experiences. The experience of KB Darul Ilmi illustrates that successful implementation of the

Merdeka Curriculum requires not only pedagogical innovation within classrooms but also cultural transformation among stakeholders regarding the purposes of early childhood education. Therefore, joyful learning should be understood as both a pedagogical and institutional strategy for promoting holistic child development while addressing societal expectations surrounding educational achievement.

## CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at KB Darul Ilmi is effectively realized through a joyful learning approach that places children at the center of the educational process. The findings reveal that joyful learning is not merely used to create enjoyable classroom experiences but functions as a comprehensive pedagogical framework encompassing curriculum orientation, learning planning, instructional implementation, character development, and authentic assessment. The institution's vision of holistic child development is reflected in flexible learning designs, center-based activities, the use of diverse and exploratory learning media, and the provision of meaningful choices that encourage children's autonomy, creativity, and active participation. Teachers play a crucial role as facilitators who intentionally design emotionally supportive and developmentally appropriate learning environments, while positive reinforcement and reflective practices strengthen children's engagement and character formation. Furthermore, the study highlights that joyful learning serves as an effective strategy for operationalizing the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum while addressing challenges related to parental expectations of early academic achievement. Therefore, joyful learning offers a practical and sustainable model for promoting meaningful, child-friendly, and holistic early childhood education within the context of contemporary curriculum reform.

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