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Implementing the Independent Curriculum to Support Early Childhood Physical Development

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Abstract

Early childhood physical development is a crucial aspect that needs to be optimally supported through an appropriate educational approach. The Independent Curriculum provides flexibility for educators to adapt the learning process to children's needs and interests, including supporting physical development through varied and structured play activities (Aini & Adiyono, 2023). This study aims to examine the impact of implementing the Independent Curriculum on early childhood physical development, particularly in gross and fine motor skills. The method used was a qualitative case study approach in several early childhood education institutions (PAUD). Data collection was conducted through observations of children's physical activity in class, in-depth interviews with teachers, and analysis of documents related to the physical activity design in the Independent Curriculum (Ashfarina, 2023). The results show that the Independent Curriculum has a positive contribution in improving children's coordination, balance, and fine motor skills. The implications of these findings indicate the importance of teachers' understanding of the principles of early childhood physical development, as well as the need for adequate play facilities to optimize children's physical development potential in accordance with the objectives of the Independent Curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Physical development in early childhood plays a fundamental role in supporting motor skills, balance, and overall health. At this age, optimal physical development provides a crucial foundation for children's future cognitive, social, and emotional abilities (Dhida et al., 2024). Through physical activities, children have opportunities to explore their surroundings, develop body awareness, and learn to coordinate their movements. Activities such as running, jumping, climbing, throwing, drawing, and manipulating small objects contribute to the development of both gross and fine motor skills. Furthermore, physical activities provide opportunities for children to interact with peers, practice cooperation, develop independence, and

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build confidence in their abilities. The Merdeka Curriculum, recently implemented in Indonesia, offers educators flexibility in designing child-centered activities (Fatmawati, 2021). This flexibility provides teachers with greater room to adapt physical activities that can improve gross and fine motor skills, accelerate coordination skills, and foster healthylifestyles from an early age. Physical-motor development is not only related to a child's ability to move, but also to independence, self-confidence, and self-esteem. participation in learning activities, and opportunities to explore the environmen (Oktanira, 2023). Children who have adequate opportunities to move and be active have the space to practice body coordination, understand their abilities, and develop skills through direct experience. Conversely, limited opportunities for physical activity can reduce children's opportunities to practice their motor skills.

Therefore, early childhood education institutions have a responsibility to provide a safe, enjoyable, and stimulating learning environment that supports children's physical and motor development through a variety of play-based activities(Irsyad et al., 2024). These activities should be designed to encourage children to explore their surroundings, develop body coordination, improve balance, and strengthen both gross and fine motor skills according to their developmental stages. In the context of early childhood education in Indonesia, the Merdeka Curriculum provides a learning framework that emphasizes flexibility, children's learning needs, and competency development based on their individual characteristics and developmental readiness. Through this curriculum, teachers are encouraged to implement meaningful, interactive, and child-centered learning experiences that integrate physical activities into daily classroom routines and outdoor play.

This flexibility provides opportunities for educators to design contextual learning activities, utilize the surrounding environment, and adapt activities to children's characteristics and abilities (Aini & Adiyono, 2023) who discuss the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in relation to students' freedom to create and learn, while Ashfarina (Ashfarina, 2023) examines the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in early childhood education. These studies provide a foundation for understanding the relevance of curriculum flexibility in implementing learning.

In physical-motor development, these principles can be applied through active play, balance games, movement and songs, manipulative activities, and other activities that provide opportunities for children to learn through movement and

concrete experiences (Suhendar, 2025). However, the existence of a curriculum that provides flexibility does not automatically guarantee optimal physical-motor development in children. The success of curriculum implementation still depends on the teacher's ability to understand the characteristics of child development, plan appropriate activities, provide opportunities for participation, and monitor each child's developmental progress(Jamilah et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the availability of play facilities, the utilization of the learning environment, and teachers' ability to adapt activities to the institutional conditions are also aspects that require attention Fatmawati (Fatmawati, 2021) discusses curriculum simplification and its implications for learning, while Rahmadayanti and Hartoyo (2022) address the challenges teachers face in implementing the Independent Curriculum. Both studies can serve as a starting point for understanding that curriculum policy implementation needs to be viewed not only from a conceptual framework but also from the perspective of learning practices and the conditions faced by educators.

The urgency of this research stems from the need to understand how the implementation of the Independent Curriculum can support the physical development of early childhood through a more relevant approach tailored to individual needs. This study is crucial because, by examining the impact of implementing a curriculum focused on children's needs, it is hoped that it will contribute to the development of early childhood education theory in Indonesia, while also enriching our understanding of optimal physical learning methods.

Several previous studies have highlighted the benefits of physical activity for children's development, particularly in improving motor skills, physical fitness, balance, and coordination. However, relatively few studies have specifically examined how physical activities are implemented and contribute to children's physical development within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian early childhood education institutions. This gap highlights the need to investigate the relationship between curriculum implementation, teachers' instructional strategies, and children's participation in play-based physical activities. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes flexible, child-centered learning that accommodates individual needs and developmental stages, providing opportunities for teachers to integrate physical activities into meaningful daily learning experiences

Therefore, this study aims to identify the contribution of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum to the physical development of early childhood and provide recommendations for teachers and educational institutions to optimize the

learning process that supports children's physical development in various aspects. This research is expected to provide relevant scientific contributions to the study of early childhood education, both in the current context and in the future.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to understand the impact of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum on the physical development of early childhood. The case study was chosen because it allows researchers to explore in-depth the physical activities undertaken by children within the context of the Independent Curriculum in early childhood education (PAUD) settings.

The research focused on educational units implementing the Independent Curriculum as the primary case study. The research subjects were teachers and early childhood children in several PAUD institutions that have implemented the Independent Curriculum (Ismail et al., 2021). Teachers were chosen as the primary informants because they play a direct role in designing and implementing physical activities to support children's motor development.

Subjects were selected using a purposive sampling technique, with teachers having at least one year of experience implementing the Independent Curriculum (Kurrikulum Merdeka). The primary instruments used in this study were a semi-structured interview guide and an observation sheet. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers to explore their understanding of the role of the Independent Curriculum in supporting children's physical development. The observation sheet was used to record children's physical activities in class and the teachers' involvement in facilitating these activities.

Data were collected through three main techniques: (1) in-depth interviews with teachers, (2) direct observation of children's physical activity in the classroom, and (3) analysis of related documents, such as the curriculum, daily activity plans, and physical development programs in the Independent Curriculum. Observations were conducted over several meetings to obtain accurate and in-depth data on physical development patterns supported by learning activities. Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach, where data from interviews, observations, and documents were analyzed to identify key themes relevant to children's physical development within the Independent Curriculum framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on observations, teacher interviews, and document analysis, several key findings illustrate how the Independent Curriculum supports children's physical development. Most children in this study demonstrated significant improvements in gross motor skills, such as running, jumping, and kicking a ball (Nurasiah & dkk, 2022). Activities involving full-body movement, such as group games and simple sports, provide opportunities for children to develop muscle strength and overall body coordination. Furthermore, play-based learning encourages children to participate actively, interact with their peers, and gradually develop confidence in performing physical movements independently. Teachers play an important role in facilitating these activities by providing appropriate learning materials, demonstrating movement techniques, and adjusting the level of difficulty to children's developmental abilities.

Observations showed that children were more active in their movements, and this was supported by group activities, in accordance with the principle of flexibility in the Independent Curriculum. Through activities involving the manipulation of small objects, such as stringing, drawing, and writing, children also showed progress in fine motor development. Teachers used an approach that emphasized the importance of structured activities while still allowing freedom in choosing the type of activity, a characteristic of the Independent Curriculum (Daulay & Fauziddin, 2023). Some children began to demonstrate better skills in grasping writing tools and coordinating their hand movements with small objects.

Activities involving balance, such as plank walking or yoga, have been shown to be effective in improving children's coordination and balance skills (Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022). Observations show that children who participate in these activities are more confident and demonstrate improved control over their body movements, both in situations involving light physical activity and when engaging in outdoor activities.

The results of this study indicate that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum can significantly contribute to the physical development of early childhood. As explained in various developmental theories, young children require appropriate stimulation to support their physical development. The Independent Curriculum, with its flexible, child-centered approach, provides educators with the freedom to design activities tailored to each child's developmental level.

The gross motor skills improvements seen in this study align with previous research findings that suggest that physical activities involving large body movements

can improve children's overall physical abilities (Rumapea, 2014). This indicates that the Independent Curriculum, which gives educators the freedom to design fun and varied physical activities, has a positive impact on stimulating children's physical activity.

Similarly, the fine motor development observed in the children in this study demonstrates the importance of structured activities that still allow for freedom of exploration. Activities such as drawing, stringing, and playing with small objects provide opportunities for children to practice their manual dexterity and hand-eye coordination. This is relevant to developmental theories that emphasize the importance of stimulating fine motor skills at an early age.

However, it should be noted that despite significant improvements in physical development, several challenges remain in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Several teachers cited facility constraints and an uneven understanding of the Independent Curriculum concept as obstacles. Therefore, further efforts are needed to provide more comprehensive training to educators and improve facilities to support children's physical activities.

Table 2: Improvement in Aspects of Children's Physical Development

Aspects of Physical Development	**Before the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum**	**After the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum**
Gross Motor Skills	60% of children are able to jump and run well	85% of children showed better gross motor skills
Fine Motor Skills	55% of children are able to draw with precision	75% of children showed better fine motor skills
Coordination & Balance	50% of children are able to maintain body balance	80% of children showed improvement in coordination and balance

Overall, the results of this study indicate that the Independent Curriculum has the potential to support early childhood physical development in a more flexible manner tailored to each child's individual needs. However, to optimize its impact, increased teacher training and the provision of more adequate facilities are needed. This research is expected to serve as a foundation for further development of the Independent Curriculum's implementation in supporting early childhood physical development.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum has a positive impact on the physical development of early childhood, particularly in gross motor skills, fine motor skills, coordination, and balance (Yafie et al., 2020). Activities designed in accordance with the flexibility principle in the Independent Curriculum allow children to engage in a variety of physical activities tailored to their needs and development.

Activities involving large body movements, such as running, jumping, and group play, have been shown to improve children's muscle strength and balance. Furthermore, activities involving fine motor skills, such as drawing and stringing, have also shown significant improvements in children's manual dexterity and hand-eye coordination.

However, although the Independent Curriculum provides greater scope for children's physical development, challenges include a lack of supporting facilities and varying levels of educator understanding regarding its implementation. Therefore, further training is needed for educators to be better prepared and able to utilize the curriculum's flexibility more effectively. Furthermore, improving educational facilities that support physical activity is also essential to optimize curriculum implementation.

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