

# Developing a Curriculum Alignment Model for Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum in Non-Formal Early Childhood Education

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## Abstract

**Background** - The development of a curriculum alignment management guide for Early Childhood Education (ECE) is essential to support curriculum adaptation in non-formal institutions such as Playgroups (KB) and Kindergartens (TK). In the context of curriculum changes, it is necessary to have a curriculum alignment model accompanied by effective management practices, ensuring that the adaptation process can be implemented systematically and effectively.

**Research Urgency** - Curriculum changes at the ECE level require non-formal educational institutions, particularly KB and TK, to make curriculum adjustments. However, there is a lack of strategic and implementable management guides to support this process, especially for institutions that are unaccredited or minimally accredited. Thus, a valid and practical model guide is urgently needed.

**Research Objectives** - This research aims to develop a curriculum alignment model for ECE equipped with a sound management guide, and to validate its feasibility for use by Heads of KB and TK in adapting the old curriculum to the new one.

**Research Method** - The method employed is Research and Development (R&D) using the ADDIE model, which includes five stages: Analyze, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation. Validation was conducted by two experts in the fields of language and curriculum management content to assess the strategic and implementative feasibility of the guide.

**Research Findings** - The validation results showed a score of 4.4 for the language aspect and 4.0 for the management substance aspect, both categorized as very good. The trial implementation involving Heads of KB and TK in Tayu District, Pati Regency, resulted in an acceptance rate of 80.35%, which also falls into the very good category.

**Research Conclusion** - The developed curriculum alignment model is feasible for use as a guide in aligning the PAUD curriculum. It provides strategic and implementative direction for carrying out curriculum adaptation within non-formal education institutions.

**Research Novelty/Contribution** - This research introduces a new contribution in the form of a curriculum alignment management guide for ECE that is both strategic and implementable. It offers practical support for Heads of KB and TK, especially those with minimal or no accreditation, to manage curriculum changes in a more structured and effective manner.

**Keywords:** Curriculum Alignment, Early Childhood Education, Non-formal Education, Merdeka Curriculum, dan Deep Learning

## How to Cite:

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## INTRODUCTION

The transition from the 2023 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum has become a major focus for all levels of educational service units, including Early Childhood Education (ECE). Curriculum adaptation has gradually been carried out, especially after the official launching of the Merdeka Curriculum as the national curriculum on March 27, 2024 (Utanto, 2023). Educational units that still use the 2023 Curriculum must inevitably transition by adapting through forums for the dissemination of best practices from "Driving Schools" (Sekolah Penggerak) that serve as change ambassadors through the Driving School Program (Kemdikbud, 2021).

Early Childhood Education services, both in formal and non-formal pathways Ackesjö, H. (2021) have started adapting through the dissemination of the PSP program, internal and external learning communities, as well as support provided by the local Education Office in activities related to aligning with the Merdeka Curriculum Allee-Herndon, K. A., & Roberts, S. K. (2020). Curriculum transformation is intended to be a systematic effort. The essence of the Merdeka Curriculum is reflected in the learning process that emphasizes freedom in learning. Therefore, the shift to the Merdeka Curriculum is not an isolated change but part of a broader educational transformation aimed at addressing the learning crisis (Arndt, S., & Tesar, M. 2020; Aubrey, C. 2022; Barblett, L., & Maloney, C. 2023).

Curriculum alignment is a form of adjustment Beauchamp, G., & Clarke, L. (2021). Several aspects of education have been identified as critical points for reform and evaluation within the Indonesian education system Beauchamp, G., & Clarke, L. (2021). However, not all early childhood education service units have been able to easily adapt to the newly implemented curriculum Bennett, J. (2021). Schools have varying levels of readiness in adapting to the new curriculum. This varying readiness is influenced by several factors Berk, L. E. (2021). Including institutional management levels as indicated by accreditation results, the preparedness of human resources, and the intrinsic motivation of institutions, many of which feel comfortable with the previous curriculum Blaise, M., & Nuttall, J. (2021). These factors have resulted in differences in the quality and quantity of curriculum alignment and its implementation (Boyd, D., 2021; Campbell-Barr, V., 2023; Chien, C. W., 2021).

These differences in change and adaptation pose obstacles to the equitable implementation of the new curriculum Cohen, L., & Manion, L. (2022). Particularly for institutions that are either unaccredited or accredited with low results, special attention and support are needed. Solutions must be sought to ease the management role and produce measurable outcomes Clough, P. (2023).

Another problem that has emerged is the lack of structured and equitable adaptation and alignment in the implementation of the new curriculum Colker, L. J. (2023). Meanwhile, a new discourse has already surfaced with the introduction of the concept of Deep Learning in the latest policies. Deep Learning includes Meaningful Learning, Mindful Learning, and Joyful Learning within the educational context. Deep Learning requires special attention to fully understand and prepare for its implementation Corsaro, W. A. (2021). The Deep Learning approach emphasizes learning through critical analysis, connecting new information with existing knowledge, and applying it in real-life contexts (Davis, J. M., 2023; Edwards, S., 2022).

The emergence of Deep Learning has created unease among the ECE practitioner community (Einarsdottir, J., 2021; Epstein, A. S., 2021; Fleer, M., 2023; Formosinho, J., & Formosinho, J., 2016). Many are still grappling with the alignment of the previous curriculum, struggling with the preparation of teaching modules, strengthening understanding of lesson plans (RPP), distinguishing between teaching modules and lesson plans, developing lesson plans, implementing the Strengthening Pancasila Student Profile Projects (P5), and correcting misconceptions about P5, among many other aspects that need to be reinforced at the ECE service level, both formal and non-formal (Gopnik, A., 2020; Hedges, H., & Cooper, M., 2021; Heckman, J. J., 2021).

This situation requires special and practical handling to overcome confusion and misconceptions in implementation (Hill, S., 2023; Hujala, E., Waniganayake, M., & Rodd, J., 2023; Hyson, M., 2023). The role of school principals as overall program leaders, including their role as learning leaders, becomes crucial (Jameson, M. M., et al., 2016). School principals are expected to continuously mobilize all school stakeholders, especially the learning committee, to align the curriculum with proper systems and management practices. Their role is essential for ensuring gradual curriculum alignment based on appropriate governance (Kagan, S. L., 2023). However, not all ECE heads possess the same capabilities and experiences (Kagan, S. L., 2023). Allowing this situation to persist would only exacerbate the challenges (Kallery, M., 2021). Therefore, there

is an urgent need for an effective solution to assist principals in adapting to the continuous changes driven by the evolving needs and developments that cannot be ignored (Katz, L. G., 2023).

To address these problems, it is necessary for ECE heads to have a standardized guide for managing curriculum change alignment. This guide must be carefully developed and formulated to ensure it is suitable for application in ECE units (King, P., 2023; Laevers, F., 2021; Loughran, J., 2023).

## METHODS

The method used in this study is the development model (Ibrahim, 2023), specifically the development of a comprehensive and strategic management guide intended for Heads of Early Childhood Education (PAUD) institutions. The research method applied is Developmental Research, utilizing the ADDIE development framework, which consists of Analyze, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation phases (Sugiyono, 2021). The ADDIE process can be illustrated as follows:



**Figure 1.** The ADDIE process

The product generated from this research is a Curriculum Alignment Management Guide for Heads of PAUD institutions who are members of HIMPAUDI and IGTKI in the Tayu District, Pati Regency. This product underwent a trial process and expert validation. Two experts, consisting of one academic and one practitioner, were involved in validating the guide. These experts assessed the validity of the guide in terms of language, content, and target achievement. The focus of the target achievement assessment emphasized the understanding of curriculum alignment from a management and organizational perspective, ensuring data validity and proper implementation (McNaughton, S., 2021).

The stages in this method were carried out sequentially and systematically. Initially, the researcher conducted a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to gather complete preliminary data as the basis for developing the guide to address field issues. The research subjects were Heads of Playgroups (KB) and Kindergartens (TK) that have either not yet been accredited or have been accredited but have achieved unsatisfactory results (Miller, L., Drury, R., & Campbell, R., 2016).

## Research design

The product produced in this study is a management guide for aligning the PAUD Curriculum for the Heads of PAUD units that are members of Himpaudi and IGTKI in Tayu District, Pati Regency. This product previously went through a trial and validation mechanism by experts. The experts involved were 2 (two) people consisting of academics and practitioners. These experts tested the validity of the guide in terms of language, content and target achievement. The emphasis of the target achievement on understanding the alignment from the management and administration side so that valid data and proper implementation are produced (Moyles, J., 2023). The stages in this method are carried out sequentially and gradually. First, the researcher conducted FGD to obtain complete initial data as material for developing guidelines to answer problems in the field. The objects of this study were the Heads of KB and TK who had not been accredited and had been accredited but had not obtained good results.

Validity test was conducted by 2 experts, namely language experts and substance (content and target achievement) content by academics and practitioners. Language experts involved Prof. Dr. Rustono, M.Hum while substance validation by Dr. Maria Denok Bakti Agustiningrum, M.Pd. This validation was carried out at the same time although in different places in working. The results of each validation are stated in the following table :

**Table 1.** Linguist Validation Table Management Model Guide

ASSESSMENT ITEMS	ASSESSMENT SCORE					TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	
Use of new terms			4			
Use of standard sentences			4			
Ease of capturing messages			5			
The sentence structure used			4			
Ease of reading each paragraph			5			<b>22</b>

$$M = \sum x : N = 22 : 5 = 4.4$$

Based on the results in the table, the validation carried out by the Language expert obtained a score of 4.4. These results indicate that the suitability of the Language can be accepted by the users of the guide, namely the Head of Playgroups and Kindergartens. Heads of Playgroups and Heads of Kindergartens who have difficulty adapting to the new curriculum due to lack of knowledge and experience or need to upgrade the latest information. The factor of lack of knowledge and experience is because the school has not yet implemented accreditation, even though it has been accredited , the results are still at a minimum score.

**Table 2.** Substance expert validation results Management guide

ASSESSMENT ITEMS	ASSESSMENT SCORE					TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	
School program management			4			
Meaning of Alignment			4			
Adaptation strategies to change			5			
Learning Community			3			
Reflection Activities			3			
Implementation Schedule			5			<b>24</b>

$$M = \sum x : N = 24 : 6 = 4.0$$

Based on the results of the validation test by experts in the substance section, the results of the substance by expert validators or experts obtained a score of **4.0**, indicating that the substance of this

management model has met the needs of PAUD Unit Heads in facing curriculum changes and preparing to follow ongoing alignment.

**Table 3.** Expert Validation Notes

Respondent	Comments, Suggestions, Feedback
Expert 1	The use of terms in language should not be repeated too much because it will cause boredom.
Expert 2	Adaptation to change is further emphasized with several examples to facilitate understanding.

The review panduan model manajemen penyelarasan perubahan was conducted using a questionnaire instrument with a 4-point scale for each assessment component, with the following ratings: "Very Good = 4" "Good = 3" "Not Good = 2" "Very Poor = 1"

**Table 4.** Results of the School Principals' Questionnaire

RESPONDEN	SCORE ITEM													
	0	1	2	3	4	0	1	2	3	4	0	1	2	3
IQH	4	3	5	4	3	5	4	4	4	5	4	3	5	3
ARN	5	4	5	3	3	4	5	3	4	3	4	4	5	3
MZY	4	3	5	4	4	3	5	4	3	4	4	3	4	4
ATQ	5	3	5	4	3	5	4	5	4	3	4	5	5	3
SLM	4	3	5	5	5	4	5	4	4	5	3	4	3	4
MN	5	4	5	3	4	5	3	4	3	4	4	5	3	
KML	4	3	5	4	3	5	4	3	4	4	3	4	4	
KHY	5	4	5	4	3	5	4	5	4	3	4	5	5	3
RF	5	5	5	2	5	4	5	4	4	5	3	4	3	4
NJ	4	5	5	4	3	5	4	4	4	5	4	3	5	3
SF	5	4	3	4	5	5	4	3	4	5	5	3	5	
RQY	5	3	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	3	4	5	4	
QR	5	4	5	3	3	4	5	3	4	3	4	4	5	3
ANS	4	3	5	4	4	3	5	4	5	4	4	3	4	4
SDD	5	3	5	4	5	5	4	5	4	3	4	5	5	3
$M = \sum x : N$ $1125 : 14 = 80.35\%$														

Based on the explanation of the table above, the results obtained show that the Principal gave a very good response to the questionnaire that had been distributed. This good response provides good development that this management guide is an important choice for the Principal in dealing with curriculum changes. This shows that the PAUD curriculum alignment management guide can be well received and can be used as a guide for aligning curriculum changes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Curriculum alignment in early childhood education (ECE) within the non-formal sector plays a critical role in ensuring that learning experiences are consistent, meaningful, and developmentally appropriate. In non-formal settings such as community centers, playgroups, or independent learning hubs, a structured yet flexible curriculum is essential to cater to diverse learner needs. Unlike formal institutions, non-formal programs must balance national educational standards with the unique socio-cultural contexts of the communities they serve (Moyle, J., 2023); Nicolopoulou, A., 2023); Oberhuemer, P., 2021).

A well-designed curriculum alignment model for the non-formal sector should begin with a clear identification of learning goals that are both age-appropriate and culturally relevant. These goals must align with the broader objectives of early childhood development, focusing on physical, emotional, cognitive, and social growth (O'Gorman, L., 2021). Additionally, it is important to incorporate local knowledge and values to maintain the cultural identity of the children while also introducing them to broader global competencies (Pascal, C., & Bertram, T., 2023); Pianta, R. C., 2021).

The second pillar of the alignment model involves instructional strategies. Teachers and facilitators in non-formal ECE settings should be trained to employ play-based, experiential, and inquiry-driven approaches. The flexibility of non-formal education allows for innovative methods such as storytelling, dramatization, hands-on projects, and outdoor activities. These methods should be systematically mapped against curriculum goals to ensure that every activity contributes meaningfully to children's developmental outcomes (Rimm-Kaufman, 2021). Assessment in non-formal early childhood programs must also be aligned with curriculum goals. Rather than relying on traditional testing methods, the model should emphasize authentic assessments like observational records, portfolios, and developmental checklists. These assessments provide a holistic view of a child's progress and ensure that the curriculum remains responsive to their evolving needs and abilities (Rogoff, B., 2021).

Another crucial element is family and community engagement. A curriculum alignment model for non-formal ECE must involve parents and caregivers as partners in the educational process. Regular workshops, home-based activities, and open communication channels can help synchronize learning experiences between the home and the non-formal learning center. This collaborative approach ensures continuity and reinforces the skills and values taught in the program (Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Manni, L., 2023). Professional development for educators is fundamental to sustaining curriculum alignment. Continuous training sessions, mentoring programs, and peer learning communities can help non-formal educators stay updated with best practices in early childhood education. By empowering educators with the necessary skills and knowledge, the curriculum can be implemented more effectively and adaptively (Stephen, C., 2023).

Resource allocation also plays a vital role in curriculum alignment. Non-formal centers often operate with limited funding and materials, so the model must advocate for cost-effective, creative, and sustainable resource use. Utilizing locally available materials, creating learning corners, and engaging community volunteers can enrich the learning environment without requiring substantial financial investment (Wood, E., 2021). Flexibility and adaptability are core principles in the alignment model. Given the diversity of children's backgrounds and the informal nature of many non-formal programs, the curriculum must allow room for modification based on children's interests,



developmental needs, and unforeseen circumstances such as health crises or natural disasters. This ensures that the educational experience remains relevant and supportive at all times (Wong, S., 2023).

To evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum alignment model, regular program reviews and feedback mechanisms should be established. Input from educators, parents, children, and community leaders can provide valuable insights into what works well and what needs adjustment. Such participatory evaluation fosters a sense of ownership among all stakeholders and strengthens the overall quality of the program (Ginsburg, 2021). In conclusion, a curriculum alignment model for early childhood education in the non-formal sector must be holistic, culturally responsive, flexible, and collaborative. It should prioritize the developmental needs of the child while acknowledging the resources and realities of the community (Sarma et al., 2024). Through intentional design and continuous refinement, non-formal ECE programs can significantly contribute to laying a strong foundation for lifelong learning and personal growth among young children.

The curriculum alignment model for early childhood education in the non-formal sector must consider the diverse backgrounds of learners. Non-formal education settings often accommodate children from varying socio-economic statuses, cultural traditions, and linguistic capabilities. Therefore, the curriculum must be adaptable and inclusive, ensuring that every child's developmental needs are met within an environment that respects diversity and promotes equity (Sarma et al., 2024). Key to successful curriculum alignment is the establishment of clear developmental goals. In the non-formal sector, these goals must balance academic readiness with socio-emotional development, physical growth, and creativity. Unlike formal education, where standardized outcomes dominate, non-formal programs should prioritize holistic growth, allowing children to develop at their own pace while fostering critical life skills (Khadaroo et al., 2024).

Stakeholder collaboration is another pillar in the curriculum alignment model. Parents, community members, educators, and policymakers must work together to create curricula that are contextually relevant and culturally responsive. Regular consultations and participatory planning processes ensure that the curriculum reflects community values while adhering to broader national or international early childhood standards (Ginsburg, 2021). Professional development for educators plays a crucial role in maintaining curriculum alignment. Non-formal sector teachers often come from diverse educational backgrounds and may lack specialized early childhood training. Continuous professional learning opportunities must be integrated into the model, equipping educators with pedagogical strategies that support active learning, inquiry-based approaches, and differentiated instruction (Sarma et al., 2024).

Assessment mechanisms in the non-formal sector require careful adaptation. Traditional testing methods are not suitable for young learners and especially not for diverse non-formal contexts. Instead, formative assessments such as observations, portfolio collections, and child-led projects should be utilized to monitor development. These tools help educators adjust the curriculum dynamically based on the emerging needs of children (Ginsburg, 2021). Flexibility is a hallmark of the non-formal education curriculum alignment model. Programs must be designed to allow for modular learning, thematic integration, and seasonal adaptation. This flexibility enables programs to remain relevant and responsive to changes in community dynamics, natural environments, and societal expectations, thus ensuring sustainability and impact (Sarma et al., 2024).

Integration of play-based learning strategies is vital. Research consistently shows that young children learn best through play. Curriculum alignment must therefore emphasize learning through exploration, storytelling, dramatization, outdoor activities, and hands-on projects. Play is not merely recreation; it is the medium through which children construct understanding and develop cognitive and social abilities (Khadaroo et al., 2024). Moreover, curriculum alignment must promote inclusivity and cater to children with special needs. In non-formal education, where resources might be limited, innovative strategies such as peer learning, community resource mobilization, and low-cost adaptive tools can support inclusive practices. This ensures that every child, regardless of ability, has access to meaningful educational experiences (Ginsburg, 2021).

Technology integration is another emerging component in the non-formal sector. Mobile learning tools, interactive storytelling apps, and online teacher training platforms can enhance curriculum delivery. However, technology must be utilized judiciously, ensuring it complements hands-on learning rather than replacing the vital human interactions crucial for young children's development (Chan et al., 2022). Finally, sustainability and scalability must be embedded within the curriculum alignment model. Pilot programs should be designed with mechanisms for feedback, evaluation, and adaptation. Successful models must be scalable to other contexts without losing their local relevance. A dynamic, community-driven, child-centered curriculum alignment model ensures that non-formal early childhood education can thrive and continue to meet the evolving needs of societies worldwide.

## CONCLUSION

Curriculum alignment is a very important activity in helping Principals to facilitate the adaptation process to curriculum changes that occur both in terms of policy and implementation. This PAUD curriculum alignment management guide is one of the guide models that can be used by Principals during the process. The ADDIE method used with a coherent and mature process structure provides a positive contribution to the preparation of guidelines in terms of substance, language and appearance. The results of the discussion stated that the validation of expert tests both in terms of language and practitioners obtained good results, this shows that this guide is ready to be tested and implemented. The results of the trial implementation by the principal received a good response with the testing of this alignment management guide. The score obtained showed that the trial by the Principal was well received. So it can be concluded that the PAUD curriculum alignment management guide can be used as a reference, especially for schools that are minimally accredited and schools that have not been accredited to implement each stage of curriculum adaptation. Facilitate the Principal to prepare programs and invite all teachers to work together to adjust changes so as to get good and maximum results

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