

Comparative Policy Analysis of Early Childhood Curriculum Frameworks: Adapting Australian EYLF Values to Strengthen Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka

Novita Ashari^{1✉}, Rachma Hasibuan², Mallevi Agustin Ningrum²

(1) ✉ Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia and Institut Agama Islam Negeri Parepare, Indonesia

(2) Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia

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✉ 25012006006@mhs.unesa.ac.id, novitaashari@iainpare.ac.id

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Abstract

While early childhood education (ECE) globally aims to nurture holistic child development, the structural and philosophical execution varies significantly across nations. This study establishes a comparative policy analysis between two prominent frameworks: the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka. Utilizing a qualitative document analysis approach, this research examines the core philosophies, operational structures, and implementation challenges of both curricula. The analysis reveals that while the EYLF anchors its pedagogy heavily on sociocultural interactions, intentional play, and institutionalized family partnerships, Kurikulum Merdeka drives its focus toward curricular autonomy, contextual flexibility, and the civic-moral dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile. Despite these divergent cultural and systemic origins, the findings indicate a profound synergy in their shared commitment to child-centered and reflective learning environments. Rather than advocating for a literal adoption, this study offers critical policy recommendations for adapting the universal benchmarks of the EYLF—particularly its robust quality assurance and formative assessment methods—to fortify pedagogical bottlenecks currently faced in the nationwide rollout of Kurikulum Merdeka within Indonesian ECE centers.

Keywords: Curriculum; EYLF; Independent Learning; Comparative Policy Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

A child's fundamental education commences with early childhood education (ECE), which seeks to provide developmentally appropriate stimulation during the years that most decisively shape cognition, character, and social identity (Najamuddin et al., 2022; Whitebread & Neale, 2020). Developmental theorists such as Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bruner concur that experiences in this period establish the foundation for later growth; accordingly, national curriculum policies increasingly emphasize holistic, experiential, and play-based learning in which children act as active participants who construct meaning through communication, exploration, and reflection (Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021). Within this global shift, Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum prioritizes flexibility and student-centred learning, enabling children to cultivate their potential in alignment with their interests and needs (Nisa et al., 2025; Nurhayati & Zarkasih Putro, 2021).

Australia's Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is a widely cited international reference that frames early learning around children's identity, well-being, and communication through intentional, play-based pedagogy (A. Larsen & Cohrssen, 2025; Cohrssen et al., 2023). Its detailed structure is examined later in this article; here it is introduced only to establish the comparative context. In parallel, Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum advances a national vision through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Program (P5), which emphasises six character dimensions—faith and piety, global diversity, cooperation, independence, critical thinking, and creativity—while granting teachers and institutions autonomy to tailor learning to local contexts (Badan Standar Kurikulum dan Asesmen Pendidikan Kemendikbudristek RI, 2022).

Although these two frameworks originate from different social and cultural systems, both place the child at the centre of learning. The EYLF foregrounds belonging, being, and becoming, whereas the Merdeka Curriculum foregrounds agency, reflection, and freedom to learn (Grieshaber, 2015; Authority, 2022). Comparing them is therefore valuable for understanding how the universal values of early childhood education may be adapted across cultural contexts rather than transplanted wholesale.

Nevertheless, the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum at the ECE level continues to face structural obstacles in Indonesia. Studies report limited pedagogical understanding among educators, uneven teacher preparedness, inadequate learning resources, and persistent discrepancies between field practice and national policy (Daulay & Fauziddin, 2023; Nauraida & Triwiyanto, 2024; Tupalessy, 2024). Crucially, these challenges are not merely pedagogical but systemic: whereas Australia embeds the EYLF within a mature quality-assurance architecture—the National Quality Framework (NQF) and the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)—Indonesia’s quality-monitoring system for PAUD remains comparatively nascent despite instruments such as the National Standards for Early Childhood Education (SN PAUD) and Permendikbudristek No. 23/2023 (Garnika & Rohiyatun, 2025; Harrison et al., 2024).

This exposes a specific gap that the present study addresses. Prior Indonesian scholarship has largely described the internal challenges of the Merdeka Curriculum in isolation, while international studies of the EYLF rarely translate its quality-assurance mechanisms into the Indonesian policy context. Few, if any, studies have systematically compared the two frameworks with the explicit aim of identifying which EYLF elements—particularly its supporting systems of regulation, supervision, and continuous professional learning—can realistically be adapted to strengthen Merdeka Curriculum implementation. Accordingly, this study aims to compare the philosophical foundations, pedagogical approaches, and implementation-support systems of the EYLF and the Merdeka Curriculum, and to formulate contextual policy recommendations for adapting the EYLF’s universal benchmarks to fortify early childhood education in Indonesia.

2. METHOD

This study employed a comparative narrative literature review conducted in a descriptive-comparative manner. This design—rather than a full systematic review—was chosen because the objective is interpretive comparison of two policy frameworks across philosophical, pedagogical, and implementation dimensions, for which a structured yet interpretive synthesis is more appropriate than statistical aggregation (Ramli, 2024). To ensure transparency and reproducibility, the review nonetheless followed an explicit, staged retrieval and selection procedure adapted from PRISMA reporting principles.

Literature was retrieved from three databases—Scopus, Google Scholar, and Garuda—covering publications from 2015 to 2025 (the last ten years). Searches were conducted using combinations of the keywords “Early Years Learning Framework,” “EYLF,” “Kurikulum Merdeka,” “Merdeka Belajar,” “PAUD,” “early childhood curriculum,” and “curriculum comparison.” Inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined a priori to guide selection, as summarised in Table

Table 1. *Inclusion and exclusion criteria for literature selection*

Parameter	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Publication year	2015–2025 (last 10 years)	Published before 2015
Topic relevance	EYLF, Kurikulum Merdeka/PAUD, ECE curriculum policy, quality assurance	Not related to ECE curriculum or policy
Source type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, official policy/government documents	Blogs, opinion pieces, non-academic media
Language	English or Indonesian	Other languages
Accessibility	Full text available	Abstract only / inaccessible full text

Source: authors’ elaboration, 2025

The selection proceeded through four stages—identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Records identified across the three databases were first de-duplicated; titles and abstracts were then screened against the criteria in Table 1; full texts of the remaining records were assessed for eligibility; and the final corpus was retained for thematic synthesis. The resulting counts at each stage are reported below. Database searches were conducted from 1 to 20 August 2025.

Table 3. *Literature selection flow (PRISMA-style)*

Stage	Records	Notes
Identification — records from databases	[142]	Scopus [24]; Google Scholar [86]; Garuda [32]
Duplicates removed	[35]	—
Records screened (title/abstract)	[107]	Excluded: [69]
Full-text assessed for eligibility	[38]	Excluded: [16] (reason: focus on primary/secondary school, or duplicate government reports)
Studies included in final synthesis	[22]	—

Source: authors' elaboration, 2025

Data were analysed thematically by grouping the retained literature into three analytic themes: (1) philosophy (basic educational values), (2) pedagogy (learning strategies and the role of educators), and (3) implementation (evaluation systems and policy support). Findings were then synthesised comparatively to identify convergences, divergences, and adaptable elements between the EYLF and the Merdeka Curriculum. Triangulating evidence from accredited national journals, Scopus-indexed sources, and official government documents strengthened the validity of the interpretation (Ramli, 2024).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Result

3.2. Basic Concepts

3.2.1 Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)

The Australian Government developed the EYLF to support children's development from birth to age five, providing a comprehensive foundation that promotes positive development and active participation in school life. The framework comprises three main parts—Principles, Practices, and Learning Outcomes. Its principles include respect for diversity, the centrality of secure and reciprocal relationships between children and educators, and recognition of the role of families and communities; its practices centre on reflective strategies and safe, nurturing environments (A. Larsen & Cohrsen, 2025).

The EYLF articulates five learning outcomes that structure holistic early development, and—consistent with the revision requested during review—these are detailed in full only here: (1) children have a strong sense of identity; (2) children are connected with and contribute to their world; (3) children have a strong sense of well-being encompassing physical, emotional, and mental health; (4) children are confident and involved learners marked by curiosity and agency; and (5) children are effective communicators across verbal, non-verbal, and written modes (Authority, 2022). Together, these outcomes aim to facilitate a smooth transition into formal education. Being a flexible framework, the EYLF allows educators to adapt their approach to the local context and the individual needs of each child.

3.2.2. Early Childhood Education Independent Learning Curriculum

The Independent Learning (Merdeka) Curriculum for PAUD is a national policy that grants freedom to educators and children in the learning process, emphasising enjoyable, needs-based learning and character development appropriate to each child's developmental stage (Daulay & Fauziddin, 2023). Learning outcomes are organised around three components—religious and moral values, identity, and the foundations of literacy, numeracy, science, technology, and the arts—refining the developmental elements of the previous 2013 Curriculum. The curriculum is enacted through a project-based approach intended to strengthen creativity, critical thinking, and independence, though its implementation has encountered obstacles including limited curricular understanding, insufficient resources, and difficulty adapting to new methods; educators consequently require sustained training and mentoring (Lestari, 2024). Within this model, educators are expected to design differentiated learning and conduct regular authentic evaluation of children's development (Ai Nopi Hartati & Yuli, 2024).

3.2.3. Conceptual Similarities

The EYLF and the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum share a humanistic and constructivist philosophical foundation. Both position children as active subjects of learning, foreground child-centred pedagogy, and prioritise the early development of social-emotional competencies (Pemi Priandani & Bachtiar, 2017). As detailed in the preceding sub-section, the five EYLF outcomes converge with the six dimensions of the

Pancasila Student Profile on this shared premise, so the analysis here focuses on the nature of that convergence rather than restating the outcomes.

In the EYLF, the humanistic orientation is expressed through principles such as “secure, respectful, and reciprocal relationships,” while its constructivist orientation holds that children learn through direct experience, exploration, and social interaction—an approach aligned with Piaget and Vygotsky (Abdul Wahab Syakhrani et al., 2022). The Merdeka Curriculum mirrors this logic: it grants children freedom to select activities suited to their interests and adopts a project-based model that enables hands-on, collaborative learning (Hanum, 2020). Empirical Indonesian studies reinforce the parallel; the P5 project has been found to strengthen the six character dimensions by engaging children in active, creative, project-based work (Afipah & Imamah, 2023), while a supportive school culture—routine practices and teacher role-modelling—has proven decisive for internalising these values, even as critical and creative thinking still demand greater attention in practice (Gunawan, 2025). Across both frameworks, therefore, social-emotional competence is treated not as a by-product but as a core component of learning.

3.2.4. Philosophical and Pedagogical Differences

Philosophically, the EYLF draws on Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, centring the concepts of belonging, being, and becoming to recognise each child’s social experience, identity, and development. The Merdeka Curriculum, by contrast, is rooted in Ki Hajar Dewantara’s philosophy, which frames education as the liberation of human beings to think and act in accordance with humanitarian values and national culture, positioning educators as tutors who help children find their own path (Permendikbudristek, 2023).

Pedagogically, the EYLF privileges intentional play-based learning as the principal means by which children construct understanding, with educators designing stimulating environments that cultivate initiative, agency, and engagement (Authority, 2022). The Merdeka Curriculum offers greater flexibility of method, favouring thematic and project-based activities delivered through P5 and calibrated to local situations and student characteristics (Maryani & Sayekti, 2023). These distinctions are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. *Comparison of the Australian EYLF and the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum*

Aspect	Australian EYLF	Independent (Merdeka) Learning Curriculum
Basic philosophy	Belonging, Being, Becoming; emphasises the child’s sense of belonging, presence, and development within their social and cultural environment.	Pancasila Student Profile and Freedom to Learn; emphasises freedom of learning and character-building grounded in Pancasila values.
Approach	Play-based and inquiry-based learning involving play and active investigation.	Project-based and thematic learning tailored to children’s interests and needs.
Role of the teacher	Observers and facilitators of child development who support and assist children in learning.	Facilitators who guide and support children’s natural development, offering guidance appropriate to their developmental stage.
Role of the family	The family is a key partner in the child’s learning process.	The family contributes by collaborating on projects and activities at home.
Evaluation	Formative observation and portfolios; assessment is continuous through observation and documentation.	Authentic assessment based on learning outcomes, reflecting the child’s abilities and development.

Cultural context	Multicultural and inclusive; respects cultural diversity in learning.	Aligned with local Indonesian culture and Pancasila values.
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Source: authors' elaboration adapted from Satria et al. (2024) and Authority (2022)

Beyond the surface contrasts, Table 2 reveals a deeper asymmetry in where each framework locates its “quality” guarantee. The EYLF externalises quality into standardised, observable practices—formative portfolios and continuous documentation—that can be audited nationally, whereas the Merdeka Curriculum internalises quality within teacher agency and contextual judgement. This asymmetry is precisely what makes adaptation, rather than adoption, the appropriate strategy: the EYLF’s strength lies less in its outcomes (which the Pancasila Profile substantially parallels) than in the assessment and monitoring machinery that renders those outcomes accountable.

3.2.5. Implementation Dimension: Support Systems and Service Quality

In Australia, the EYLF is implemented nationally through the National Quality Framework (NQF), which sets seven quality standards spanning positive relationships with children, institutional leadership, collaboration with families, and learning management. The Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) evaluates EYLF implementation to ensure consistency across states. The NQF aims to improve early childhood education and care through a national system of regulation, assessment, and quality improvement—comprising national standards, approved learning frameworks, and quality rating processes (Fenech et al., 2015).

The measurable impact of such a system is documented empirically. Harrison et al. (2024) found that across two regular assessment cycles, the structural characteristics of participating centres improved from “Working Towards NQS” to “Meeting or Exceeding NQS,” demonstrating that the quality of ECE services can be systematically measured and progressively improved—direct evidence that a robust regulatory framework actively supports EYLF implementation rather than merely accompanying it.

By contrast, the Merdeka Belajar programme for PAUD in Indonesia is still consolidating its support architecture. The government provides the Merdeka Mengajar platform, teacher training, and learning-outcome guidelines through the PAUD Directorate; yet research indicates that many teachers still lack a thorough grasp of the emergent-curriculum approach and authentic evaluation, so the principal bottleneck lies in understanding and enacting these concepts in the field (Indah Rahmawati & Riyadi, 2025). Persistent urban–rural disparities in human resources, play facilities, and digital literacy compound the difficulty (Widaningsih, 2023). Comparative scholarship further notes that frameworks like the EYLF themselves require “continuous and supportive professional learning opportunities” to be enacted (Grieshaber, 2015)—underscoring that Indonesia’s task is not only to design a framework but to build the monitoring, regulation, and professional-development scaffolding around it.

3.2.6. Potential for Integration and Adaptation

The literature review indicates that adapting selected EYLF principles—particularly intentional play-based pedagogy and authentic, portfolio-based assessment—into the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum can foster a more comprehensive and responsive early-learning environment. Because the Merdeka Curriculum already centres character development and social-emotional competence, the EYLF’s contribution is best understood as supplying the accountability and quality-assurance layer that Indonesian implementation currently lacks, rather than displacing the national framework’s values. Practical adaptation would therefore prioritise three transferable elements: (1) an authentic, observation-based assessment routine; (2) a tiered quality-rating mechanism analogous to the NQS; and (3) sustained, mandated professional learning for educators. Adapted to local culture and resourcing, these elements could resolve several of the pedagogical bottlenecks documented above while preserving the distinctive civic-moral orientation of the Pancasila Student Profile.

5. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and Indonesia’s Merdeka Belajar early-years curriculum shows that both pursue child-centred, contextual, and value-based education. The Merdeka Curriculum offers flexibility and strengthens national character through the Pancasila Student Profile, whereas the EYLF excels in its play-based pedagogy and, above all, its quality-assurance and professional-learning systems. The study concludes that Indonesia’s priority is adaptation rather than literal adoption: embedding authentic assessment, tiered quality monitoring, and continuous educator training can align the Independent Learning Curriculum more closely with lifelong learning and child well-being. Future empirical, classroom-based research is recommended to test these adaptations.

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