

# Enhancing Early Childhood Educators' Competence: The Impact of a Structured Book Planner on Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the effectiveness of a structured Book Planner in enhancing early childhood educators' teaching practices and aligning them with the Merdeka Curriculum's goals. Using a pre-experimental one-group pre-test and post-test design, 45 early childhood educators from Indonesia participated in a three-month intervention. The Book Planner was integrated into their daily teaching routines to support lesson planning, thematic integration, and the practical application of curriculum principles. Data were collected using a 30-item questionnaire, field observations, and interviews. The questionnaire measured variables such as lesson planning effectiveness, curriculum alignment, and teaching confidence, and was analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired sample t-tests to assess changes before and after the intervention. Results revealed significant improvements in curriculum comprehension (from 3.87 to 4.20), lesson planning (from 3.33 to 4.28), thematic integration (from 3.71 to 4.08), and practical application (from 3.78 to 4.15). These findings highlight the Book Planner's practical impact in enhancing educators' competencies and standardizing teaching practices, thus supporting the Merdeka Curriculum implementation. The study underscores the planner's potential to foster consistency in early childhood education, offering valuable insights for future curriculum reforms.

**Keywords:** Book Planner; Early Childhood Educators; Merdeka Curriculum Implementation; Lesson Planning; Reflective Teaching Practices.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in early childhood education in Indonesia represents a significant shift in pedagogical approaches, emphasizing student autonomy and creativity. As a child-centered framework, the Merdeka Curriculum seeks to move away from rigid, teacher-directed instruction, allowing educators to facilitate experiential learning. However, ensuring its successful implementation requires robust instructional support mechanisms that help educators transition from traditional methods to this new approach (Gondiwati & Nurhayati, 2024; Nurhayati et al., 2024). However, the transition from traditional, teacher-centered methodologies to more child-centered approaches presents substantial challenges for educators. Research indicates that many early childhood educators struggle to adapt to the curriculum due

to a lack of structured guidance in designing lesson plans and aligning them with the curriculum's objectives (Wang, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these challenges by disrupting traditional learning environments and necessitating a rapid shift to online teaching. Many educators found this transition difficult to navigate, raising concerns about maintaining educational quality and ensuring that children receive the necessary support for their development (Alghufali, 2023; Kobasah & Nurhayati, 2024; Winarti et al., 2022). The pandemic's impact has highlighted the need for effective professional development tools that can support educators in adapting to new teaching paradigms and maintaining high standards of education (Marsegi et al., 2023; Plotka & Guirguis, 2023; Timmons et al., 2021). As a result, inconsistencies in curriculum implementation persist, with some educators reverting to familiar pedagogical techniques that do not fully support the intended learning outcomes of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The challenges associated with implementing the Merdeka Curriculum have profound implications for teaching practices. Educators often struggle to effectively deliver the curriculum, leading to inconsistencies in its implementation across different settings (Crawford et al., 2021; Musa et al., 2022; Nuraeni & Nurhayati, 2023). A lack of confidence in facilitating a more autonomous learning environment can result in a reliance on familiar, traditional teaching methods, which may not align with the curriculum's goals (Nuryanti et al., 2024; Xu & Jack, 2022). Additionally, the pressures of adapting to new pedagogical frameworks while managing the ongoing effects of the pandemic can lead to burnout among educators, further hindering their ability to innovate in their teaching practices (Grageda & Diokno, 2023; Musa & Nurhayati, 2024). To address these challenges, professional development tools, such as structured planners, play a crucial role in enhancing educators' understanding and implementation of curriculum frameworks. A well-structured planner provides a systematic approach to lesson planning, ensuring that instructional activities align with the curriculum's learning objectives while fostering creativity and autonomy among students (Aisah et al., 2024; Kurniawati et al., 2024). Structured planners can facilitate the integration of creative and autonomous learning experiences into lesson plans, thereby supporting educators in fostering a more engaging learning environment (Wang, 2023). Moreover, professional development programs that emphasize collaborative learning and the sharing of best practices among educators can enhance their confidence and competence in implementing new curriculum frameworks (Masri & Nurhayati, 2024; Musa et al., 2024; Nurhayati & Novianti, 2024; Sylvania et al., 2024; Somantri et al., 2024).

Creativity and autonomy are fundamental elements in early childhood education, and the Merdeka Curriculum explicitly incorporates these aspects to foster holistic development in young learners. By allowing children to take an active role in their learning, the curriculum aims to cultivate a sense of agency and self-efficacy (Veryawan, 2023). This approach aligns with contemporary educational theories that emphasize the importance of play-based learning and experiential education in early childhood settings (Anugrahwanto & Nurhayati, 2020; Nurhayati & Millenia, 2024; Nurinayah et al., 2021; Soleh et al., 2024; Sydon & Phuntsho, 2022). Fostering creativity and autonomy not only enhances children's engagement and motivation but also supports their social-emotional development, which is crucial for their overall well-being (Mondi et al., 2021; Nurhayati & Rumsari, 2020; Rumsari & Nurhayati, 2020). The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in early childhood education is fraught with challenges that significantly impact teaching practices. However, by leveraging professional development tools and emphasizing creativity and autonomy, educators can navigate these challenges more effectively and create enriching learning experiences for young children.

Recent studies on the implementation of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum highlight both opportunities and challenges. The curriculum aims to create a more flexible, active, and adaptable learning environment (Pratiwi et al., 2024). However, teachers face difficulties in understanding the concept, developing interactive methods, and accessing adequate resources (Bahroni & Zulkarnain, 2024). The Platform Merdeka Mengajar (PMM) is utilized to support implementation and teacher development (Pratiwi et al., 2024). While the curriculum provides freedom in the learning process, obstacles persist in developing appropriate learning plan and assessment tools (Isnaningru et al., 2024).

Previous studies have evaluated the effectiveness of structured educational tools in improving lesson planning and curriculum alignment through various methodologies. Research has shown that structured lesson planning tools enhance teachers' ability to align their instructional strategies with curriculum standards, thereby improving educational outcomes. One study highlighted that teachers using structured lesson plans reported a clearer understanding of curriculum objectives and increased confidence in delivering lessons effectively (Hashem et al., 2023). Additionally, tools that facilitate lesson plan development, such as templates and digital platforms, have been found to streamline the planning process, allowing educators to focus more on pedagogical strategies rather than administrative tasks (Baytak, 2024). These findings suggest that structured tools not only improve the quality of lesson plans but also contribute to better student engagement and learning outcomes. The theoretical underpinnings of using structured tools to enhance teaching practices in early childhood education are grounded in several educational theories. Constructivist theory posits that learners construct knowledge through experiences and interactions, emphasizing the importance of well-structured lesson plans that facilitate active learning (Miechie et al., 2019; Noor & Nurhayati, 2024; Subakti et al., 2022). Furthermore, the use of structured tools aligns with the principles of backward design, which advocates for planning educational experiences by starting with desired learning outcomes and working backward to develop instructional activities (Abdulayeva, 2024). This approach ensures that lesson plans are purposefully designed to meet specific educational goals, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of teaching practices (Yu et al., 2022). Moreover, the integration of technology in lesson planning, as supported by the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework, enables educators to effectively combine content knowledge with pedagogical strategies and technological tools, fostering a more dynamic learning environment (Gonzales & Gonzales, 2021; Iskandar et al., 2023; Milyane et al., 2023; Sulkipani et al., 2024).

Variability in educators' backgrounds and training significantly affects their ability to implement new curriculum frameworks effectively. Research indicates that teachers with diverse educational experiences and training levels exhibit varying degrees of confidence and competence in adopting new pedagogical approaches (Aisah et al., 2024; Backfisch et al., 2020; Nurhayati & Novianti, 2024). For example, pre-service teachers often struggle with lesson planning due to a lack of practical experience and exposure to diverse teaching methods during their training (Hejji Alanazi, 2019). Additionally, experienced educators may face challenges in adapting to new frameworks if they have not received adequate professional development or support (Mohamedi et al., 2022). This variability can lead to inconsistencies in curriculum implementation, as some educators may embrace innovative practices while others may revert to traditional methods due to uncertainty or lack of resources (Halala & Jacob, 2022). Consequently, targeted professional development and support systems are essential to bridge these gaps and ensure that all educators can effectively implement new curriculum frameworks. Structured educational tools have been shown to enhance lesson planning and curriculum alignment, supported by theoretical

frameworks that emphasize active learning and purposeful design. However, the effectiveness of these tools can be significantly influenced by the variability in educators' backgrounds and training, highlighting the need for comprehensive professional development initiatives.

The present study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the Book Planner as a professional development tool for early childhood educators implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. This study seeks to address the current gaps in understanding and application by providing empirical evidence of the Book Planner's impact on teaching practices. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on a structured tool designed specifically for the unique challenges posed by the Merdeka Curriculum, offering insights into its potential to standardize competencies and enhance educational quality. The scope of the study encompasses a comprehensive analysis of the Book Planner's effects on lesson planning, curriculum alignment, and educators' confidence, contributing valuable knowledge to the field of early childhood education. By focusing on a structured tool specifically designed for the challenges of the Merdeka Curriculum, this research contributes to the growing discourse on effective curriculum implementation strategies in early childhood education.

## 2. METHODS

This study employs a quantitative research approach to assess the effectiveness of the Book Planner in enhancing early childhood educators' teaching practices and aligning them with the Merdeka Curriculum. The quantitative method facilitates systematic data collection and analysis, providing measurable evidence of changes in teacher performance and planning efficiency (Iswahyudi et al., 2023; Nurhayati et al., 2024). The study utilizes a pre-experimental one-group pre-test and post-test design. By comparing results before and after the intervention, the design allows for an assessment of the Book Planner's impact on a single group of educators. Although this design provides valuable insights, the absence of a control group presents a limitation, as changes observed may also be influenced by external factors or natural maturation over time. Future studies would benefit from incorporating a comparative group to strengthen causal interpretations.

The study was conducted in early childhood education institutions located in Kecamatan Batujajar, Kabupaten Bandung Barat, Indonesia. The focus was on schools implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, where challenges related to lesson planning and reflective practices are prevalent. The intervention spanned three months, during which participants integrated the Book Planner into their daily teaching routines. To ensure consistency in its implementation, all participants received prior training on the structured use of the Book Planner. A purposive sampling method was employed to select 45 early childhood educators based on their roles and active participation in curriculum implementation. This selection criterion ensures that participants have relevant experience and insights into the curriculum's challenges. The inclusion of educators from diverse institutions enhances the generalizability of the findings, offering a broader perspective on the planner's applicability across different school settings.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered in two stages: before and after the implementation of the Book Planner. The instrument consisted of 30 items designed to evaluate variables such as lesson planning effectiveness, alignment with the Merdeka Curriculum, teaching confidence, and reflective practices. Each item was measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was carefully designed to ensure clarity and relevance to the study's objectives. A mix of closed and open-ended questions was employed to capture both quantitative data and qualitative insights, enriching the analysis.

Prior to full implementation, the questionnaire was piloted with a small group of educators to assess clarity and reliability. Content validity was established through expert reviews from specialists in early childhood education and curriculum development, while construct validity was examined using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to confirm that the questionnaire accurately measured the intended variables. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha, with a threshold of  $\geq 0.7$ , indicating strong internal consistency across the instrument. Piloting the questionnaire with a small group helped identify potential issues and refine questions based on feedback. The pre-survey was conducted to capture baseline data on teachers' planning practices and challenges. After the implementation of the Book Planner, the post-survey assessed improvements in the measured variables. To enhance the validity of the data, triangulation methods were employed, including field observations and brief interviews. Triangulation allows for cross-verification of findings, increasing the credibility of the results. Field observations provided contextual insights into the educational interventions, while interviews captured participants' perspectives and experiences, offering depth to the quantitative findings.

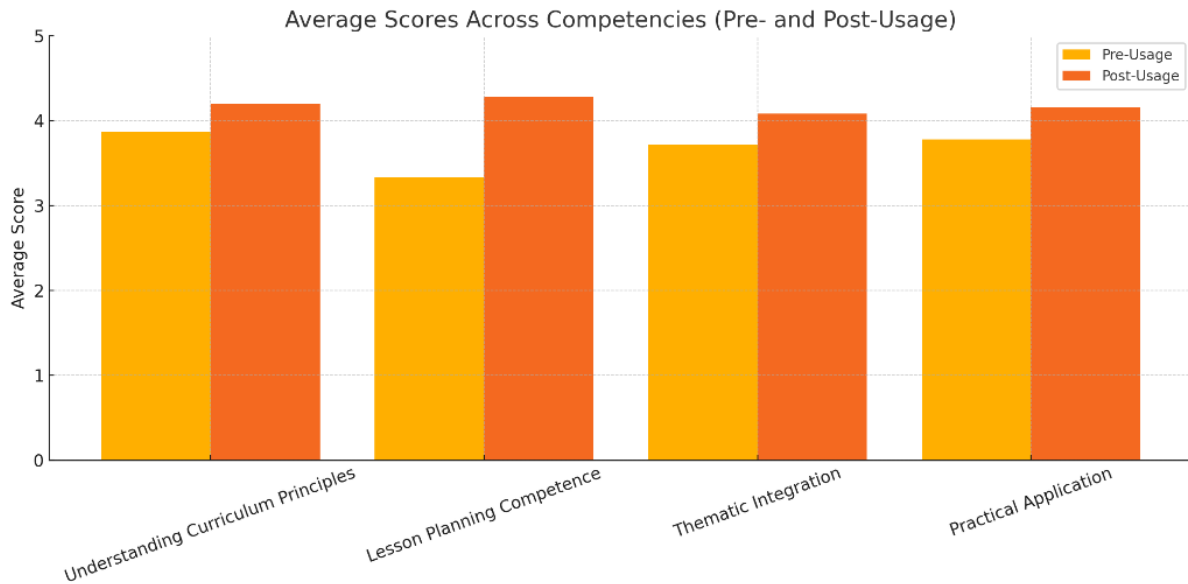
### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings from this study reveal that the Book Planner serves as an effective professional development tool for early childhood educators, facilitating enhanced teaching practices and improved implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This section critically evaluates the observed improvements in educators' understanding, lesson planning competence, and thematic integration, while aligning these outcomes with prior research.

#### 3.1 Understanding Curriculum Principles

The data reveal a significant improvement in educators' comprehension of the Merdeka Curriculum principles. Prior to using the Book Planner, the average score for understanding curriculum principles was 3.87 (SD = 0.45), indicating moderate familiarity. Post-usage, this score increased to 4.20 (SD = 0.49), demonstrating a clear enhancement in understanding. This finding aligns with prior research by [Williams \(2022\)](#), who highlighted that structured tools can bridge knowledge gaps, particularly in curriculum frameworks requiring conceptual depth. The consistency of post-usage responses further reinforces the reliability of the Book Planner as a facilitator of curriculum understanding. Figure 1 illustrates the pre- and post-usage scores for understanding curriculum principles and lesson planning competence. The visual representation clearly demonstrates an upward trend, reinforcing the statistical findings that the Book Planner contributes to improved comprehension of curriculum principles. The reduction in variability post-intervention, indicated by a narrower spread of data points, suggests that educators with varying initial levels of familiarity benefited from a more standardized understanding after using the planner, as shown in Figure 1.





**Figure 1.** Pre- and Post-Usage Scores for Understanding Curriculum Principles and Lesson Planning Competence

The Merdeka Curriculum, with its emphasis on creativity and autonomy, demands educators to engage deeply with its principles (Amaruddin et al., 2024). The pre-usage data revealed variability in educators' familiarity with these principles, possibly stemming from diverse professional backgrounds and training levels. The observed improvement post-usage suggests that the Book Planner effectively standardizes understanding, a trend emphasized by Nesje & Lejonberg (2022) in studies on professional development tools. The reduction in variability reflects the planner's ability to cater to educators with varying levels of prior exposure, enabling a more uniform understanding across the cohort. Figure 1 illustrates the improvement in understanding curriculum principles, highlighting the effectiveness of the planner in bridging conceptual gaps. The bar chart clearly demonstrates significant improvements in two areas, with post-usage scores consistently surpassing pre-usage levels. For understanding curriculum principles, the increase from a mean score of 3.87 to 4.20 reflects the educators' enhanced ability to grasp the foundational elements of the Merdeka Curriculum. Similarly, lesson planning competence saw a dramatic rise from 3.33 to 4.28, indicating a notable reduction in gaps related to aligning lesson objectives with curricular goals. The chart also emphasizes the reduction in variability post-intervention, suggesting that the Book Planner successfully mitigated disparities in prior knowledge and experience among participants. These visual data reinforce the quantitative findings, providing a tangible representation of the tool's efficacy in standardizing educator competencies. However, while these results are promising, further exploration is required to ascertain whether these improvements persist over time and to understand the specific factors contributing to the observed gains. While the overall trend shows improvement, further research is needed to determine whether this knowledge retention is sustained over time and how periodic reinforcement through continued professional development might enhance long-term comprehension.

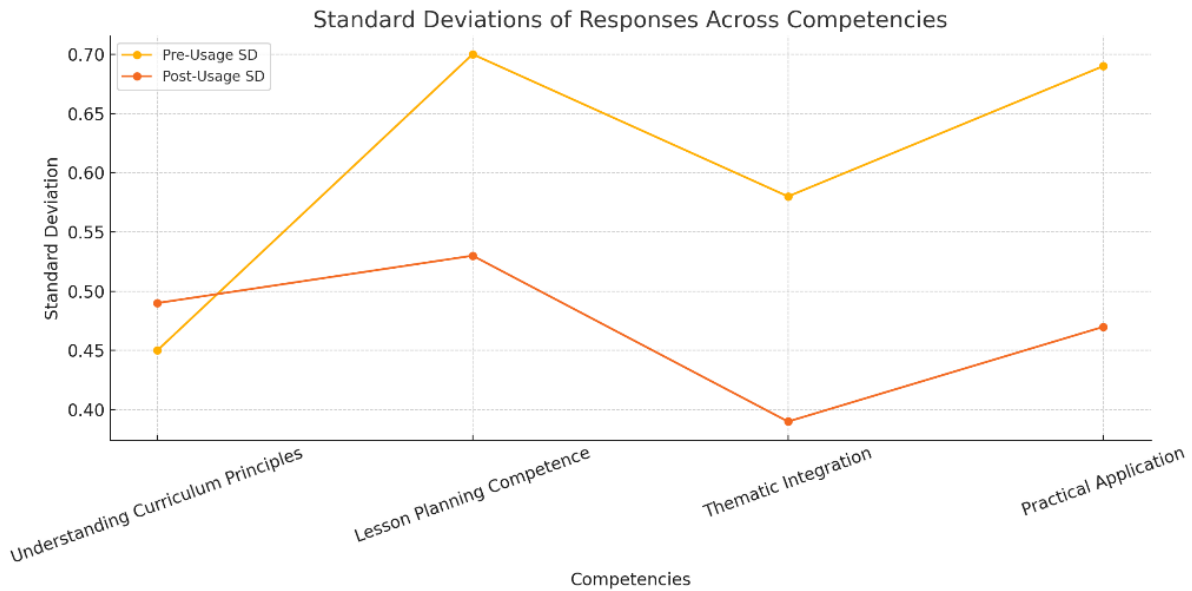
### 3.2 Lesson Planning Competence

Lesson planning emerged as the area with the most pronounced improvement. The pre-usage score of 3.33 (SD = 0.70) highlighted a significant gap in educators' confidence and ability to design lessons aligned with curriculum goals. Post-usage, this score surged to 4.28 (SD = 0.53), representing an improvement of nearly 1.0 point, the highest gain observed in this study. This finding is consistent with research by [Schutz et al. \(2019\)](#), which emphasized the importance of scaffolding tools in enhancing educators' planning competencies. The Book Planner's structured framework provided clear guidelines for aligning lessons with the Merdeka Curriculum, addressing challenges previously noted in studies by [Braak et al. \(2021\)](#), who found that educators often struggle to translate theoretical curriculum goals into actionable teaching strategies. The visual representation of lesson planning competence improvements further validates these findings. Figure 1 shows a marked increase in post-usage scores, with a tighter distribution of responses, signifying that the planner effectively mitigated disparities in prior lesson planning abilities. The significant increase in mean scores demonstrates that the intervention played a substantial role in improving planning competence, likely by offering educators a structured yet flexible framework for developing lesson plans that align with curricular goals. Moreover, the reduced variability in post-usage responses indicates that educators across diverse professional experiences benefited similarly, a finding echoed in the work of [Kademian & Davis \(2018\)](#), who argued that standardized tools mitigate disparities in teaching practices. The improvement in lesson planning competence is particularly significant given the centrality of lesson design in ensuring effective teaching and learning outcomes.

### 3.3 Advancing Thematic Integration and Practical Application

Thematic integration, a cornerstone of the Merdeka Curriculum, also showed significant improvements following the use of the Book Planner. The average score increased from 3.71 (SD = 0.58) pre-usage to 4.08 (SD = 0.39) post-usage. Similarly, scores for practical application rose from 3.78 (SD = 0.69) to 4.15 (SD = 0.47). These findings underscore the planner's ability to facilitate interdisciplinary teaching and practical implementation of curriculum principles. Figure 2 presents a boxplot of pre- and post-usage response distributions, visually confirming that thematic integration and practical application scores improved while variability decreased. The reduction in response spread indicates a more consistent application of thematic integration principles across educators.

Thematic integration requires a nuanced understanding of how to connect concepts across disciplines while maintaining curriculum alignment. The observed improvements suggest that the Book Planner provided educators with a clear structure for this complex process. However, the slight variability in post-usage responses for thematic integration indicates that some educators may still face challenges in implementing these strategies. These challenges may arise from differing levels of comfort with creative autonomy, a key focus of the Merdeka Curriculum ([Amaruddin et al., 2024](#); [Veryawan, 2023](#)). To address these challenges, additional targeted training sessions and collaborative planning workshops could be integrated into professional development programs. Providing exemplars of successful thematic integration strategies and opportunities for peer mentoring may further enhance educators' ability to implement interdisciplinary approaches with greater confidence and consistency, as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Boxplot of Pre- and Post-Usage Response Distributions for Thematic Integration and Practical Application

### 3.4 Consistency Across Educators

A critical outcome of this study is the reduced variability in responses across all competencies post-usage. Pre-usage, the average standard deviation was 0.60, indicating significant disparities in educators' competencies. Post-usage, this value dropped to 0.47, reflecting greater consistency in teaching practices. This finding is consistent with the work of [Kademian & Davis \(Kademian & Davis, 2018\)](#), who emphasized that standardized tools can level the playing field among educators with varied levels of training and experience. By providing a common framework, the Book Planner mitigates individual differences, ensuring more uniform implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This consistency is particularly important in early childhood education, where disparities in teacher preparedness can have profound effects on learning outcomes ([Manning et al., 2019](#)). Despite these promising results, the study's findings should be interpreted with caution due to limitations in generalizability. The sample was drawn from a specific region and focused on educators actively implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Future research should explore the effectiveness of the Book Planner in more diverse educational settings, including institutions with varying levels of curriculum integration and teacher training programs. Expanding the sample to include a wider geographical representation would provide stronger external validity and offer insights into how the planner functions across different contexts. The results presented here align with a growing body of literature emphasizing the transformative potential of structured planning tools in professional development. Such tools reduce cognitive load, enabling educators to focus on creative and effective teaching practices. The observed improvements in thematic integration and lesson planning competence align with the findings of [Schutz et al. \(Schutz et al., 2019\)](#), who argued that scaffolding tools are essential for translating curriculum principles into actionable strategies. However, certain limitations warrant further exploration. While the Book Planner improved consistency and understanding across most educators, the slight variability in thematic integration responses suggests that additional support may be required in this area. This finding is consistent with [Hayes & Cejnar \(2021\)](#) studies noted that interdisciplinary teaching often requires targeted training and exemplars to overcome initial challenges. Another consideration is the planner's potential to address disparities in educators' prior experiences.



The findings of this study have significant implications for the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. By addressing critical gaps in understanding, planning, and application, the Book Planner emerges as a valuable resource for aligning teaching practices with curriculum goals. To facilitate broader implementation, integration into structured professional development programs at the regional or national level should be explored. Partnerships with educational institutions, curriculum designers, and teacher training centers could enhance accessibility and scalability, ensuring that educators across various settings benefit from its structured approach. The observed improvements underscore its potential to standardize competencies across diverse educators, ultimately enhancing the quality of early childhood education. These findings also highlight the importance of integrating professional development tools with ongoing training programs. The success of curriculum reforms depends on the availability of resources that support both theoretical understanding and practical application (Moslimany et al., 2024). The Book Planner's structured approach aligns well with this dual focus, providing educators with a clear roadmap for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The study highlights the effectiveness of the Book Planner as a professional development tool that enhances early childhood educators' teaching practices and alignment with the Merdeka Curriculum. Improvements in curriculum comprehension, lesson planning competence, and thematic integration demonstrate its ability to address key instructional challenges. By providing a structured framework, the planner fosters consistency in curriculum implementation and reduces disparities in teaching practices. The observed reduction in variability among educators suggests that structured tools help standardize instructional approaches, ensuring more equitable learning experiences for students. While the planner proved effective, some variations in thematic integration remain. These differences may stem from educators' varying levels of experience with interdisciplinary teaching and institutional support. Future training should focus on collaborative lesson planning, peer mentoring, and providing concrete examples to improve educators' confidence in integrating themes across subjects. This study contributes to professional development research by demonstrating how structured planning tools improve not only curriculum alignment but also overall teaching confidence. Future research should explore long-term impacts through longitudinal studies to determine whether these improvements persist over time. Expanding the sample to include educators from different regions would enhance the generalizability of findings. Implementing the Book Planner on a broader scale requires integration into teacher training programs, digital adaptation for flexible access, and professional learning communities to support continuous improvement. By addressing lesson planning challenges and promoting structured yet adaptable teaching strategies, the Book Planner offers a scalable model for enhancing instructional quality and strengthening curriculum implementation in early childhood education.

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