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Integration of Guidance and Counseling in Supporting Early Childhood Mental Health in the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Early Childhood Education (PAUD) units requires a learning approach that is oriented not only towards academic achievement and character building, but also towards children's mental health and psychosocial well-being. In this context, the integration of guidance and counseling services is a strategic element to support holistic child development. This study aims to analyze the form of guidance and counseling integration in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Anak Ceria PAUD and its impact on early childhood mental health. The study used a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were collected through participatory observation of 20 early childhood children, semi-structured interviews with 5 PAUD teachers and 2 school principals, and analysis of learning documents and child development records. Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was maintained through triangulation of sources and techniques. The results show that guidance and counseling services at Anak Ceria PAUD are contextually integrated within play-based learning activities and the Independent Curriculum project. The key findings of this study include: (1) teachers act as developmental counselors through emotional support, positive reinforcement, and empathetic interactions in the learning process; (2) the integration of guidance and counseling supports the improvement of children's emotional regulation, healthy social interactions, and independence in learning activities; (3) the creation of a sense of safety and comfort in the school environment that contributes to children's psychosocial well-being; and (4) although guidance and counseling practices have been running functionally, their implementation has not been supported by a formally structured guidance and counseling program. This study concludes that the integration of guidance and counseling is an effective promotive and preventive effort in supporting the mental health of early childhood and strengthening the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in PAUD units.

INTRODUCTION

From a child health perspective, early childhood education is not only oriented towards academic achievement and character, but also towards maintaining children's mental health and psychosocial well-being. Early childhood mental health encompasses the ability to manage emotions, build healthy social relationships, and feel safe in the learning environment. The Independent Curriculum provides ample space for PAUD units to integrate mental health aspects through child-centered learning that is flexible and responsive to individual developmental needs.

Guidance and counseling services in the PAUD context serve as a promotive and preventative strategy for children's mental health, rather than as a curative service.

Teacher support through empathetic interactions, positive reinforcement, and facilitating emotional expression helps prevent the emergence of psychosocial problems such as anxiety, aggressive behavior, and social withdrawal from an early age.

Early childhood education institutions play a crucial role in shaping the character and potential of students, with the implementation of the Independent Curriculum striving to develop skills in noble character, global diversity, independence, mutual cooperation, critical thinking, and creativity (Sutrisno et al., 2023). In this context, guidance and counseling are essential to facilitate the holistic development of early childhood, support them in facing developmental challenges, and manage academic and interpersonal stress (Sari et al., 2025), (Wahyuni et al., 2024).

Consequently, guidance and counseling services in Early Childhood Education (PAUD) are crucial because quality preschool education must be tailored to students' needs to optimize their potential and help address developmental challenges (Paramitha, 2023). However, the integration of guidance and counseling in PAUD often remains controversial, particularly regarding the assumption that the primary focus of PAUD is "learning through play" rather than formal subjects that burden students (Zamroni, 2018). However, the essence of guidance and counseling in PAUD is more focused on supporting optimal development, rather than a formal curriculum approach (Paramitha, 2023).

This approach focuses on counseling mechanisms tailored to early childhood, often through play activities, which aligns with the pedagogical competency of PAUD educators in analyzing play theory according to children's developmental stages and needs (Mashudi et al., 2023); (Zamroni, 2018). Evaluation of guidance and counseling programs conducted by PAUD teachers also influences the quality and credibility of the educational institution (Mashudi et al., 2023). This demonstrates that guidance and counseling are integral components to achieving early childhood education and sustainable development goals, ensuring children have access to optimal development and adequate preparation for primary education (Amanah et al., 2023). This study aims to analyze in-depth the integration of guidance and counseling in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Anak Ceria PAUD, identify effective strategies implemented, and evaluate their impact on student development (Rasmani et al., 2019). This research will elaborate on how the synergy between guidance and counseling and the Independent Curriculum can create a supportive learning environment, while also identifying challenges and opportunities in its implementation for optimal development of early childhood potential ; (Ayuni & Setiowati, 2022), (Insania & Pasaribu, 2024). The urgency of this research is to comprehensively examine the strategic position and relevance of guidance and counseling services in supporting the achievement of educational goals in the Independent Curriculum era (Lase, 2018). This study aims to analyze the form of guidance and counseling integration

in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Anak Ceria PAUD and its impact on early childhood mental health.

METHOD

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach, collecting data through semi-structured interviews with classroom teachers and guidance and counseling teachers, participant observation, and document analysis related to the guidance and counseling program implemented at Anak Ceria Early Childhood Education PAUD (Sabrina et al., 2024). The primary focus was to deeply understand the realities, constraints, and expectations of PAUD teachers in implementing guidance and counseling services, which are often not comprehensively described in previous research (Paramitha, 2023). This study seeks to fill this gap by presenting a holistic perspective on the implementation of guidance and counseling within the context of the Independent Curriculum in PAUD, thereby significantly contributing to the development of an adaptive and effective guidance and counseling model for early childhood (Nasution et al., 2023).

Research Location

This research was conducted at the Ceria Children's Kindergarten, Jl. Srikana no.51 Surabaya .

Research Participants

Participants in this study included 20 early childhood education (ECE) children aged 4 to 6 years who were participating in a guidance and counseling program at a childcare institution, selected based on their involvement in the program to gain relevant insights into their experiences (Nasution et al., 2023). In addition, this study also involved 5 early childhood education (ECE) teachers directly involved in providing guidance and counseling services and 2 school principals as key informants to provide administrative and strategic perspectives on the program's implementation (Paramitha, 2023), (Rachmasari et al., 2023). This approach allows for rich, multidimensional data collection, providing a comprehensive picture of the dynamics of interactions between students, teachers, and the school environment in the context of guidance and counseling.

Research Instruments

The research instruments used included interview guidelines for teachers and principals, participatory observation sheets to observe children's interactions, and document analysis, including lesson plans and child development records. The observation sheets also included indicators of early childhood mental health, including emotional regulation skills, a sense of safety in the school environment, positive social interactions, and independence as aspects of children's psychosocial well-being.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis used the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data from interviews and observations were transcribed, coded, and categorized into key themes related to the form of integration, implementation strategies, and the impact of guidance and counseling services on child development. Data validity was maintained through source and technique triangulation techniques, as well as member checking with key informants to ensure the validity of the research findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In general, the research results indicate that the integration of guidance and counseling within the Independent Curriculum contributes positively to the mental health and psychosocial well-being of early childhood. The results were obtained through participant observation of 20 early childhood children and in-depth interviews with five early childhood education (PAUD) teachers and two school principals. The presentation of the results focuses on the integration of guidance and counseling within the Independent Curriculum and its impact on child development.

Observation Results on Early Childhood (n = 20)

This improvement in emotional regulation skills is an important indicator of early childhood mental health, as it demonstrates a child's ability to cope adaptively with mild stress and social conflict. Observations were conducted over six weeks during daily learning activities, free play, and thematic projects within the Independent Curriculum. The observations revealed the following changes in children's social-emotional behavior:

Children's Emotional Regulation Skills

Of the 20 children observed:

- 1) 15 children (75%) showed improved self-calming abilities when experiencing minor conflicts, such as fighting over toys or not being chosen for a group.
- 2) 3 children (15%) still needed intensive teacher support in managing anger and disappointment.
- 3) 2 children (10%) demonstrated unstable emotional regulation, especially during activity transitions.

Teachers consistently use simple dialogue approaches, empathetic touch, and role-playing techniques as forms of developmental guidance and counseling interventions.

Social Interaction and Cooperation

The results of the observations show:

- 1) 16 children (80%) were able to work collaboratively in small group project activities, such as collage making or role-playing.

- 2) 4 children (20%) tended to be passive or withdrawn, but showed improvement after the teacher provided one-on-one support.

This suggests that integrated guidance and counseling services help children develop social skills gradually.

Independence and Self-Confidence

As many as:

- 1) Fourteen children (70%) were able to complete simple tasks without direct teacher assistance.
- 2) Six children (30%) still needed verbal reinforcement and concrete examples.

The counseling approach used by the teacher included positive reinforcement and simple reflection on the child's behavior.

Results of Interviews with Early Childhood Education Teachers (n = 5)

Teachers view changes in children's behavior as a sign of improving mental health, characterized by a decrease in tantrums, increased emotional communication, and a sense of security in interactions. Interviews with teachers revealed three main themes related to the integration of guidance and counseling into the Independent Curriculum.

Teachers' Understanding of Guidance and Counseling in Early Childhood Education

All teachers (5 out of 5) stated that they do not implement guidance and counseling as a formal service, but integrate it into daily learning.

One teacher stated:

"We don't specifically call it counseling, but accompanying children when they are experiencing emotions, conflict, or fear is already part of our job." (Teacher A)

This demonstrates that guidance and counseling practices are implicit yet contextual.

Guidance and Counseling Integration Strategies in the Independent Curriculum

Teachers mentioned several key strategies:

- 1) A play-based approach to social problems (5 teachers)
- 2) Individual support when children experience emotional difficulties (4 teachers)
- 3) Using anecdotal developmental notes as a basis for intervention (3 teachers)

Teachers assessed that the Independent Curriculum provides flexibility to incorporate social-emotional values without academic pressure.

Impact on Children According to Teachers' Perceptions

All teachers stated that children:

- 1) Are more confident in expressing their feelings
- 2) Are more easily guided without punishment

3) Demonstrate a sense of security in the school environment

One teacher stated:

"Children are more open now. If they're sad or angry, they're willing to talk about it, rather than throwing a tantrum." (Teacher C)

Principal's Perspective (n = 2)

The principal emphasized that the integration of guidance and counseling is part of the school's vision, although it has not yet been written as a separate program.

"We don't have a specific guidance and counseling program yet, but we direct teachers to focus on character and emotional development in accordance with the Independent Curriculum." (Principal 1)

The principal also acknowledged the need for more systematic guidelines to ensure a more structured guidance and counseling service at the Early Childhood Education Center (PAUD).

Synthesis of Findings

Based on observations and interviews, it can be concluded that:

- a. Guidance and counseling at Anak Ceria Early Childhood Education (PAUD) are naturally integrated into play-based and project-based learning.
- b. Teachers act as developmental counselors, even without a formal counseling background.
- c. This integration has a positive impact on children's social-emotional development, independence, and sense of security.

These findings indicate that guidance and counseling services are a crucial element in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum (Curriculum Merdeka) in PAUD.

From an early childhood mental health perspective, the findings of this study reinforce the strategic role of guidance and counseling as a promotive and preventive approach in early childhood education (PAUD) settings. The integration of guidance and counseling services into the Independent Curriculum contributes to the creation of school well-being, namely a safe, supportive learning environment that supports children's psychosocial well-being. This aligns with the school-based mental health promotion approach, which emphasizes the role of educators as the frontline in maintaining children's mental health.

The findings of this study confirm that guidance and counseling in PAUD does not have to be implemented as a separate formal service but can be integrated naturally into the daily learning process. This aligns with the view of (Paramitha, 2023), who stated that guidance and counseling services for early childhood are oriented toward developmental support, rather than clinical problem resolution.

The integration of guidance and counseling services into the Independent Curriculum at Anak Ceria PAUD strengthens the achievement of the Pancasila Student profile, particularly in the dimensions of faith and noble character, mutual cooperation, and independence. Teachers play a key role in internalizing these

values through responsive and empathetic interactions (Ayuni & Setiowati, 2022), (Fitriyah et al., 2022), (Fitriyah et al., 2021), (Fitriyah et al., 2020).

However, this study also identified challenges in the form of teachers' limited understanding of the concept of systematic guidance and counseling, as well as the absence of specific operational guidelines for counseling services in early childhood education (PAUD) based on the Independent Curriculum. This situation highlights the need to strengthen teacher competency through training and institutional policies that support the ongoing integration of guidance and counseling services (Lase, 2018).

Therefore, the integration of guidance and counseling in the Independent Curriculum is not only relevant but also a strategic necessity for creating a safe, inclusive, and well-oriented learning environment for early childhood development.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the integration of guidance and counseling in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at Anak Ceria Early Childhood Education (PAUD) plays a significant role in supporting the mental health and psychosocial well-being of early childhood children. Guidance and counseling services are not implemented as a separate formal program, but rather are contextually integrated into play- and project-based learning processes, aligned with the developmental characteristics of early childhood. This approach enables teachers to provide emotional, social, and behavioral support in a natural and ongoing manner. Observations and interviews indicate that the integration of guidance and counseling has a positive impact on children's emotional regulation, healthy social interactions, independence, and sense of security in the school environment. These aspects are important indicators of early childhood mental health, reflecting a child's ability to face social challenges, express feelings adaptively, and build positive interpersonal relationships. The role of teachers as developmental counselors is a key factor in creating a supportive learning environment that is responsive to children's mental health needs.

However, this study also identified limitations, including the lack of systematic operational guidelines for mental health-based guidance and counseling services in PAUD units and teachers' limited understanding of the concept of guidance and counseling as a health promotion and prevention effort. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen teacher capacity through ongoing training and institutional policy support to develop a structured, sustainable, and mental health-oriented guidance and counseling model for early childhood. Overall, this study confirms that guidance and counseling are strategic components in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Early Childhood Education (PAUD), not only as a support for learning and character building, but also as a crucial instrument in maintaining and improving

early childhood mental health. Effective integration between learning and guidance and counseling services contributes to the creation of a safe, inclusive learning environment that supports children's holistic growth and development.

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