Negotiating Policies and Practices: A Systematic Review of Curriculum Enactment in Early Childhood Settings

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education curriculum implementation is complex and localized, impacted by teachers' attitudes, cultural backgrounds, and professional judgment. This study fills gaps in our knowledge of how early childhood teachers alter, implement, negotiate, and incorporate hidden meanings into curriculum policies in various educational settings. We used a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine 20 Scopus-listed peer-reviewed articles from 2019 to 2025 on early childhood education curriculum implementation. This study found themes synthesis examined teacher adaptation and operational curriculum (17 studies), enactment of official curriculum (18 studies), hidden curriculum (14 studies), and negotiated curriculum and teacher agency (17 studies). The results reveal that it will not be simple to put the curriculum into action. Instead, local requirements, cultural values, and teachers' teaching ideas shape it in a dynamic and intentional manner. Teachers have influence because they adapt content to students' needs, base learning activities on classroom activity, and include moral, ethical, and social elements in hidden curricula. It provides a complete picture of how early childhood and primary school teachers applied the curriculum in practice, adding to research.

Keywords: *Curriculum Policies; Early Childhood Education; Systematic Literature Review*

INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by rapid educational reform and heightened expectations for quality in early childhood education (ECE), the role of teachers in interpreting and enacting curriculum has become increasingly central. Globally, ECE is recognized as a critical foundation for lifelong learning, social development, and equity (Mantei et al., 2024; Santagata et al., 2023). Yet, the actual implementation of curriculum at the classroom level remains a complex, socially mediated process shaped by multiple interacting forces. Teachers often find themselves navigating the challenging space between top-down policy directives and the nuanced realities of everyday practice, positioning them as essential agents who influence how curriculum is experienced by young learners (Ahmed, 2019; Hyrkkö & Kajamaa, 2025b). Despite widespread curriculum reforms worldwide, there is limited comprehensive understanding of how policies are interpreted, negotiated, and operationalized by early childhood educators especially given the importance of professional autonomy and localized adaptation in this sector (Gutierez, 2019; Santagata et al., 2023). For instance, study in Hongkong (Yang & Li, 2022) describes early childhood educators in Hong Kong blending globally recognized frameworks such as HighScope with local moral and religious values,

resulting in hybridized curriculum enactments that simultaneously reflect global trends and local cultures. Similarly, in Indonesia, lesson study models have been employed as collaborative professional development tools to reconcile national curriculum mandates with classroom constraints, enabling teachers to refine and adapt instructional practices responsively (Ahmed, 2019; Anif et al., 2020).

To conceptually organize the diverse ways curriculum is enacted, this review adopts a four-dimensional framework, capturing how teachers modify formal plans to meet contextual and student needs; enactment of official curriculum, focusing on alignment with national or institutional standards; hidden curriculum, addressing implicit norms, values, and social messages embedded within classroom interactions; and negotiated curriculum and teacher agency. Although these dimensions have been investigated individually in prior studies, no comprehensive synthesis has integrated them within a single, holistic framework focused on early childhood settings (Hyrkkö & Kajamaa, 2025a, 2025b).

Within the dimension of teacher adaptation and operational curriculum, evidence underscores teachers' active, reflective engagement in tailoring curriculum to developmental and cultural needs. One study shows how collaborative lesson planning and scaffolded professional development facilitate inquiry-based pedagogies adapted to learner contexts (Gutierez, 2019). Another study further demonstrates that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated teacher adaptation by necessitating rapid technology integration and pedagogical innovation, transforming traditional classroom boundaries and teacher roles (Santagata et al., 2023). The Indonesian lesson study validation model evidence how structured collaboration supports curriculum operationalization in response to systemic demands (Ahmed, 2019; Anif et al., 2020).

The enactment of the official curriculum dimension reveals that policy enactment is far from linear transmission; rather, it is mediated by teacher interpretation, institutional culture, and external accountability pressures. One of study from Australia illustrate how Australian teachers contextualize national English curriculum standards in diverse classroom environments, shaping teaching spaces and practices accordingly (Mantei et al., 2024). Finnish Change Laboratory research highlights how curriculum reforms emphasizing collaboration and interdisciplinarity require distributed leadership and collective enactment (Hyrkkö & Kajamaa, 2025b). Yet, pressures to prioritize literacy and numeracy often narrow curriculum breadth, demanding teacher innovation to reconcile policy and pedagogical goals (Lynch & Curtner-Smith, 2019; Mantei et al., 2024).

The hidden curriculum is the implicit socialization of learners through classroom values and norms that emerged as a powerful and sometimes contested dimension. Lynch and Curtner-Smith (2019) describe how transformative pedagogy in physical education utilizes restorative practices and social justice education to address inequities conveyed through hidden curricula. Mantei et al. (2025) apply reflexivity theory to reveal teachers' ongoing negotiations of implicit curricular messages, influenced by their beliefs and institutional culture. Ethnodramatic approaches to challenge heteronormativity (Yanko & Lee, 2023) highlight teachers' roles in exposing and reshaping hidden curricula to foster inclusion and equity. These findings emphasize that early childhood classrooms are sites of both reproduction and contestation of social values, with teachers positioned as key mediators (Lynch & Curtner-Smith, 2019; Mantei et al., 2024).

The negotiated curriculum and teacher agency dimension foregrounds teachers as active curriculum negotiators and innovators. Finnish Change Laboratory studies show how teachers engage in expansive learning cycles to critique, envision, and implement new curriculum and leadership practices, demonstrating collective transformative agency (Hyrkkö & Kajamaa, 2025a, 2025b). The pandemic context further extended teacher agency into digital pedagogies, with educators balancing technology integration, policy mandates, and learner engagement (Mantei et al., 2024; Santagata et al., 2023). Collaborative professional development models such as lesson study foster teacher agency by promoting reflective dialogue and shared decision-making (Ahmed, 2019; Gutierez, 2019). Transformative pedagogy in diverse settings underscores agency's role in co-constructing curricula responsive to social justice and learner needs (Lynch & Curtner-Smith, 2019; Yanko & Lee, 2023).

This study aims to further examine how the execution and implementation of a curriculum, particularly in early childhood education, takes place. This study also explores the beliefs and values that orient early childhood teachers' curricular practices, how do early childhood teachers make curricular decisions, and culture(s) of curriculum are teachers enacting through four dimension which are, teacher adaptation &

operational curriculum, enactment of official curriculum, hidden curriculum, and negotiated curriculum & teacher agency. In sum, while these four curriculum dimensions have traditionally been explored separately, this review highlights their interdependence and collective shaping of curriculum enactment in early childhood education. Teachers negotiate and enact curriculum as a socially constructed, culturally embedded, and deeply teacher-driven process that is one shaped as much by policy and programs as by the beliefs, values, and professional judgments that teachers bring into their classrooms.

METHODS

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine how early childhood teachers enact curriculum across four key dimensions: operational adaptation, official enactment, hidden curriculum, and negotiated curriculum through teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2013). The approach was chosen for its transparency and replicability in synthesizing peer-reviewed evidence (Sauer & Seuring, 2023). The central research question asked how teachers enact curriculum reflecting these four dimensions, supported by sub- questions on adaptation, policy compliance, implicit values, and teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2013).

A comprehensive search conducted in April– May 2025 combined manual selection with keyword searches across Scopus- indexed journals. The methodological process adhered to PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) standards to ensure transparency and accountability in article selection and analysis (Sauer & Seuring, 2023). A total of 209 records were identified from Scopus for the period 2019–2025 using four keyword clusters aligned with the study's analytic lens: teacher adaptation and operational curriculum, enactment of official curriculum, hidden curriculum, and negotiated curriculum/teacher agency. After screening titles and abstracts for relevance to early childhood education and elementary/primary contexts, and applying the inclusion criteria (English-language journal articles published 2019–2025 and focused on the target field), the pool was narrowed to 68 records distributed across the four keyword sets (17, 18, 14, and 17 respectively; noting that a paper could appear in more than one set). Full texts of these potentially relevant papers were then retrieved and assessed for eligibility against the same criteria and overlapping records across keyword sets were consolidated; finally, 20 studies met all inclusion requirements and were retained for synthesis in the review. The flow of literature screening and selection was visualized in a PRISMA diagram.
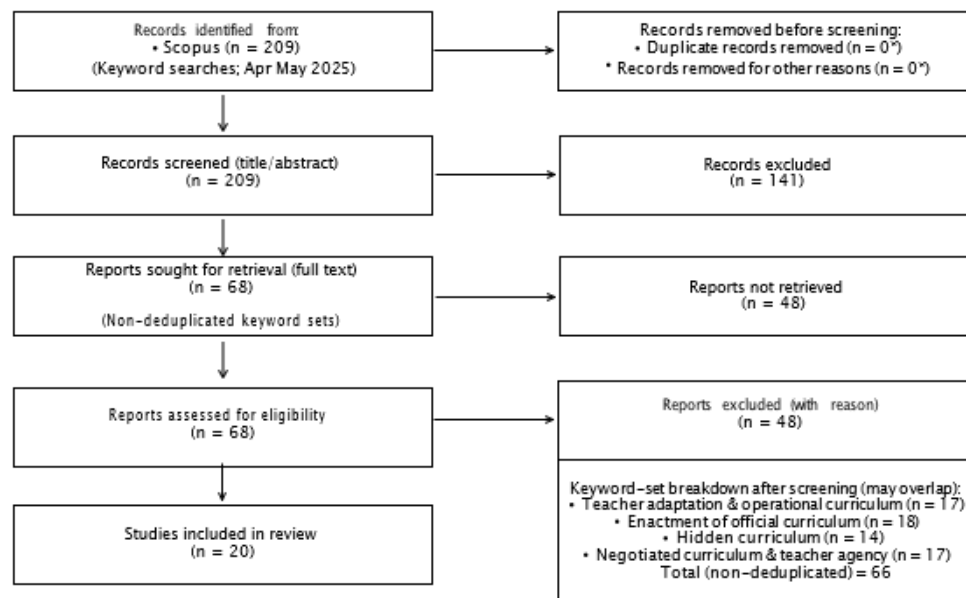

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

Overall, this methodology enabled a rich and multi-layered analysis of how early childhood teachers around the world brought curriculum to life not only as policy but as lived experience.

Table 1. *Article selection process*

Criterion	Acceptance	Rejection
Year of publication	Publication of journal article within the last seven years (2019 to 2025)	Publication before 2019
Language	English	Malay, Indonesia, Chinese, and other languages
Type of reference material	Journal articles	Theses, proceedings, conference papers, and books
Field of journal article study	The field of early childhood education and elementary school	The field of without early childhood education and elementary school context

Table 2. Data collection

No	Author and year of publication	Country	Study title	Journal name	Study purpose
1	Moon & Lee (2022)	South Korea	The theory and practice of modifying soccer: Maximizing learning outcomes in elementary school physical education	*Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*	The study showed teachers how to adapt soccer classes to student needs and curriculum goals
2	Yanko & Lee (2023)	Canada	Resisting Heteronormative Traditions to Stage the Possible: An Ethnodrama	*Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*	Elementary musicals explore heteronormativity. Queer curriculum and pedagogy can destabilize gender binaries, promote LGBTQ+ inclusivity, and challenge heteronormative school attitudes, the authors state.
3	Sutopo et al. (2020)	Indonesia	Lesson Study Validation: Model for Social and Natural Sciences Teacher Development in the Implementation of National Curriculum in Muhammadiyah Schools, Indonesia	*Universal Journal of Educational Research*	The study aimed to address the internal and external problems faced by social and natural science teachers in implementing the Indonesian National Curriculum, the lack of a validated professional development model tailored to these teachers, the need to evaluate the lesson study approach as a viable model to enhance teacher quality and curriculum implementation.
4	Yang & Li (2022)	Hong Kong	The Role of Culture in Early Childhood Curriculum Development: A Case Study of Curriculum Innovations in Hong Kong Kindergartens	*Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*	The study explores how local culture influences early childhood curriculum (ECC) development in Hong Kong, particularly through School-Based Curriculum Development (SBCD) in two kindergartens.
5	Ahmed (2019)	USA	Being a 'Bridge Builder: A Literacy Teacher Educator Negotiates the Divide between University-promoted Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and District- mandated Curriculum	*Literacy Research and Instruction*	The study investigates how a literacy teacher educator helps preservice teachers (PSTs) navigate the disconnect between university-promoted culturally responsive, sociocultural literacy pedagogy, and district-mandated scripted curricula (specifically, Treasures, a literacy program), particularly in high-poverty urban schools.
6	Ebabuye & Asgedom (2023)	Ethiopia	A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of Minority Students: The Paradox of Equitable Education and School Practices	*Social Sciences and Humanities Open*	investigate how the hidden curriculum manifests in Ethiopian public primary schools and how it shapes the lived experiences of ethno-cultural minority students, particularly in terms of equity, cultural representation, and social justice.
7	Baji & Haeusler (2022)	Iran	Introducing Iranian Primary Children to Atoms and Molecules	*Research in Science Education*	The study investigates whether Iranian primary-aged children (ages 9–12) can develop conceptual understanding of atomic-molecular theory, despite these topics traditionally being taught only at high school.
8	Bamkin (2020)	Japan	The Taught Curriculum of Moral Education at Japanese	*Contemporary Japan*	The study investigates how moral education is planned, delivered, and experienced in Japanese

				Elementary School: The Role of Class Time in the Broad Curriculum		elementary schools specifically, how teachers structure and enact moral education through both formal classtime and informal practices (e.g., cleaning, lunch duties).
9	Muller et al. (2022)	USA	Another 100 Years? Du Bois' Brownies' Book Goals, Just as Vital Today in the Education of Young Children and Their Teachers	*The Journal of Negro Education*	The study examines how W.E.B. Du Bois' The Brownies' Book a 1920s magazine for Black children—offers educational goals that remain urgent and vital in confronting racism and promoting equity in early childhood education today. It explores how anti-Black racism persists in education, How Du Bois' goals align with modern frameworks like critical race theory (CRT), Afrocentrism, and culturally relevant pedagogy, and how teacher education must evolve to support culturally sustaining practices.
10	Gutierez (2019)	Philippines	Teacher-practitioner research inquiry and sense making of their reflections on scaffolded collaborative lesson planning experience	*Asia-Pacific Science Education*	This study investigates how elementary science teachers, as practitioner researchers, make sense of their reflections on collaborative lesson planning that is scaffolded as part of a professional development (PD) program.
11	Simms & Shanahan (2024	Canada	Qualitatively recognizing the dimensions of student environmental identity development within the classroom context	*Journal of Research in Science Teaching*	The study investigates how environmental identity development occurs within classroom-based science education through the Trash to Treasure (T2T) program a curriculum embedded initiative for grade six students
12	Lynch & Curtner Smith (2019)	USA	You have to find your slant, your groove:' One physical education teacher's effort to employ transformative pedagogy	*Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*	The study explores how an elementary physical education teacher implemented transformative pedagogy (TP) to promote social justice, including the methods used, the content delivered, and the barriers and facilitators to this work.
13	Santagata et al. (2024)	USA	I have been pushed outside of my comfort zone and have grown as a result': Teacher professional learning and innovation during the pandemic	*Journal of Educational Change*	The study explores how elementary teachers in California perceived and experienced professional growth and innovation during the shift to remote teaching during COVID-19, and what factors influenced these perceptions.
14	Fazio et al. (2025)	Canada	Viewing Science Teacher Learning and Curriculum Enactment Through the Lens of Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA)	*Science Education*	The study investigates how science teachers learn and enact curriculum in relation to their local school environments, using the Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA) to analyze the discursive, material, and social conditions that shape teaching practices.
15	Mantei et al. (2024)	Australia	The teacher produced video tours of classrooms: what matters for their teaching of writing?	*Australian Educational Researcher*	The study explores how teachers' beliefs, context, and policy pressures shape their classroom spaces and pedagogies for teaching writing. Through teacher-produced classroom video tours, the study examines how writing is taught across Grades 3–6 in New South Wales (NSW) primary schools, using reflexivity theory and materiality to understand how structural, cultural, and personal factors manifest in classroom practices.
16	Hyrkkö & Kajamaa (2025)	Finland	Expansive learning actions for leadership in a teacher training school's Change Laboratory	*Mind, Culture, and Activity*	The study explores how expansive learning and distributed leadership emerged through a Change Laboratory (CL) intervention in a Finnish teacher training elementary school undergoing a national curriculum reform.
17	Hyrkkö & Kajamaa (2025)	Finland	Teachers' transformative agency in a Change Laboratory in a Finnish elementary school	*Teaching and Teacher Education*	The study investigates how teachers' transformative agency develops during a Change Laboratory (CL) intervention, and how this agency helps address systemic contradictions in their work, particularly amid curriculum reform in Finland.
18	Herro et al. (2025	USA	Teachers Co-Designing and Enacting Elementary Data Science Curriculum through Connected Learning	*Journal of Statistics and Data Science Education*	The study investigates how connected learning principles can guide elementary teachers in co-designing and enacting a data science curriculum

No	Author and year of publication		Country	Title	Journal	Description
						that is interest-driven, academically grounded, and locally relevant to rural learners.
19	Holstein & Cohen (2025)		Israel	Scratch Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Computational Thinking with School Subjects in a Constructionist Approach	*Thinking Skills and Creativity*	This study investigates how elementary school teachers perceive and implement Resnick's Lifelong Kindergarten constructionist model when teaching computational thinking (CT) through Scratch in conjunction with school subjects.
20	Alcántara-Porcuna et al. (2021)		Spain	Parents' Perceptions on Barriers and Facilitators of Physical Activity among Schoolchildren: A Qualitative Study	*International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*	To explore parents' perceptions of the barriers and facilitators of physical activity (PA) in their children aged 4 to 7 years, specifically during the adiposity rebound period, using focus groups and analysis through the socio-ecological model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hypotheses Testing

20 selected articles were mapped based on four curriculum enactment dimensions, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. *Data analysis*

No	Author and year of publication	Teacher adaptation & operational curriculum	Enactment of official curriculum	Hidden curriculum	Negotiated curriculum & teacher agency
1	Moon & Lee (2022	x		x	
2	Yanko & Lee (2023)	x	x	x	x
3	Sutopo et al. (2020)		x		x
4	Yang & Li (2022)	x	x		x
5	Ahmed (2019)	x	x		x
6	Ebabuye & Asgedom (2023)		x		
7	Baji & Haeusler (2022)	x	x		x
8	Bamkin (2020)	x	x	x	x
9	Muller et al. (2022)	x	x	x	x
10	Gutierez (2019)	x	x		x
11	Simms & Shanahan (2024	x	x	x	x
12	Lynch & Curtner Smith (2019)	x	x	x	x
13	Santagata et al. (2024)	x	x	x	x
14	Fazio et al. (2025)	x	x	x	x
15	Mantei et al. (2024)	x	x	x	x
16	Hyrkkö & Kajamaa (2025)	x	x	x	x
17	Hyrkkö & Kajamaa (2025)	x	x	x	x
18	Herro et al. (2025	x	x	x	x
19	Holstein & Cohen (2025)	x	x	x	x
20	Alcántara-Porcuna et al. (2021)			x	
Total		17	18	14	17

The analysis in Table 3 reveals that most reviewed studies address multiple dimensions of curriculum implementation, with teacher adaptation and operational curriculum discussed in 17 out of 20 studies, indicating strong recognition of teacher agency in contextualizing content. Enactment of the official curriculum appears in 18 studies, while both hidden curriculum and negotiated curriculum with teacher

agency are explored in 14 and 17 studies each, reflecting growing scholarly attention to the implicit and flexible aspects of teaching practice. These findings highlight the complex and dynamic nature of curriculum implementation, particularly the interplay between policy, practice, and professional judgment. This distribution shows that much of the literature focuses on how teachers use and respond to curriculum frameworks in practical situations. The issue of "teacher adaptation and operational curriculum" stands out as an important one. In the Indonesian context, where Merdeka Curriculum promotes teacher autonomy, these insights underscore the need for supportive policies and professional development that address both the explicit and implicit dimensions of curriculum work. The next part goes into more detail about this aspect, focusing on how teacher adaptability affects the real, lived curriculum in early childhood education settings (Nalbantoğlu & Bümen, 2024; Priestley et al., 2013),

Teacher Adaptation and Operational Curriculum

We have dived deeper on teacher adaptation and operational curriculum across six sub-dimensions (Nalbantoğlu & Bümen, 2024), as presented in Table 4, to assess their representation in the reviewed articles.

Table 4. *List of reviewed articles according to Teacher adaptation & Operational Curriculum key of dimensions*

Reviewed Study	Productive adaptation of curriculum content	Increased pedagogical design capacity	Systematic and reflective decision-making	Context-specific curriculum enactment	Sustained engagement in professional learning	Strategic use of adaptation
Moon & Lee (2022)	x	x	x	x		
Yanko & Lee (2023)	x		x			
Yang & Li (2022)	x		x			
Ahmed (2019)						
Baji & Haeusler (2022)	x	x		x	x	
Bamkin (2020)	x		x	x	x	
Muller et al. (2022)	x		x			
Gutierez (2019)					x	
Simms & Shanahan (2024)	x	x	x	x		
Lynch & Curtner Smith (2019)	x	x	x	x	x	
Santagata et al. (2024)	x	x	x	x	x	
Fazio et al. (2025)		x	x	x	x	
Mantei et al. (2024)		x	x	x		
Hyrkkö & Kajamaa (2025)		x	x			
Hyrkkö & Kajamaa (2025)		x	x			
Herro et al. (2025)	x	x		x	x	x
Holstein & Cohen (2025)		x	x			
Frequency (f)	9	11	13	9	8	8
Frequency (f)	53%	65%	76%	53%	47%	47%

Based on the SLR findings presented in Table 4, the most frequently identified sub-dimension within the theme of teacher adaptation and operational curriculum is "systematic and reflective decision-making," appearing in 13 of the reviewed articles (76%). This suggests that many researchers emphasize the importance of teachers making thoughtful, evidence-based adjustments during curriculum implementation. Closely following are the dimensions "productive adaptation of curriculum content" (53%), "context-specific curriculum enactment" (65%), and "increased pedagogical design capacity"

(59%), which indicate an ongoing focus on how teachers modify content to meet learner needs and enhance their instructional strategies.

Meanwhile, dimensions such as "sustained engagement in professional learning," and "strategic use of adaptation types" appeared slightly less frequently, each at 47%. This lower representation may imply that while these areas are recognized, they are less explicitly addressed or documented in the literature. Overall, the findings demonstrate that while all six sub-dimensions are present to varying degrees, there is an uneven emphasis, with some aspects of teacher adaptation and operational curriculum receiving more scholarly attention than others.

Enactment of Official Curriculum

The next part goes into more detail about this aspect, focusing on how teacher adaptability affects the real, lived curriculum in early childhood education settings (Nalbantoğlu & Bümen, 2024; Priestley et al., 2013). Table 5 shows 18 official curriculum implementation articles. Many studies have explored how schools use formal curriculum frameworks, but this is just the beginning. We need to study real-world curriculum implementation. We must know how teachers follow the curriculum, their judgments, and why they matter. Do they assess teachers' curricular document reading, comprehension, and prioritization? Do teachers' strategies for those results get discussed? How do computers, books, and other tools impact teaching? (Baji & Haeusler, 2022; Curriculum Flexibility and Autonomy, 2024; Fazio et al., 2024). A narrative lens lets us perceive classrooms in diverse school systems beyond what legislators say they desire.

Table 5. *List of reviewed articles according to enactment of official curriculum key of dimensions*

Reviewed Study	Curriculum interpretation	Pedagogical approach	Resource ulitization	Assessment practices	Profesional autonomy and agency	Contextual adaptation
Yanko & Lee (2023)	x	x			x	x
Sutopo et al. (2020)	x	x	x		x	x
Yang & Li (2022)	x	x			x	x
Ahmed (2019)	x	x			x	x
Ebabuye & Asgedom (2023)	x	x				x
Baji & Haeusler (2022)	x	x				x
Bamkin (2020)	x	x	x		x	x
Muller et al. (2022)	x	x			x	x
Gutierez (2019)	x	x			x	x
Simms & Shanahan (2024)	x	x			x	x
Lynch & Curtner Smith (2019)	x	x			x	x
Santagata et al. (2024)		x	x		x	
Fazio et al. (2025)		x				x
Mantei et al. (2024)	x	x		x		
Hyrkkö & Kajamaa (2025)	x			x	x	x
Hyrkkö & Kajamaa (2025)	x	x			x	x
Herro et al. (2025)	x	x			x	x
Holstein & Cohen (2025)	x	x			x	x
Frequency (f)	9	11	13	9	8	8
Frequency (f)	53%	65%	76%	53%	47%	47%

The SLR results in Table 5 show that the most common sub-dimensions within the topic of "enactment of official curriculum" are "curriculum interpretation" and "pedagogical approaches," which were found in 94% of the articles that were reviewed. This shows that a lot of writing talks about how

teachers understand curricular papers and use them to plan lessons. This indicates strong scholarly focus on curriculum interpretation and pedagogy.

The next sub-dimension is "contextual adaptation" (83%), which shows how teachers change how they teach the material to fit certain cultural, environmental, or institutional situations. "Professional autonomy and agency" were mentioned in 78% of the studies, which means that teachers' ability to make decisions and work independently within the limits of formal curricular requirements was only somewhat recognized. On the other hand, "resource utilization" (17%) and "assessment practices" (11%) were mentioned less often, which suggests that these topics are not as well studied or clearly stressed in the literature. Overall, all six sub-dimensions are present in the research, but the results show that the focus is not evenly distributed. Researchers seem to be especially interested in the practical and cognitive processes that go into turning the official curriculum into real-life classroom experience, as shown by the focus on interpretation and pedagogy. However, other areas, such as assessment and resource use, may need more research in the future.

The data suggest that curriculum enactment goes beyond teaching the assigned topic. It's also about teachers understand, change, and work inside and sometimes around formal frameworks (Curriculum Flexibility and Autonomy, 2024; Fazio et al., 2024; Saparuddin et al., 2024). We focus on planned and taught curriculum, yet hidden lessons change students' experiences. This leads to the "hidden curriculum," which includes beliefs, norms, and social expectations communicated through classroom routines, teacher behavior, power dynamics, and school culture but not policy written works. (Kärner & Schneider, 2024). In the next section, we'll talk about how these hidden signals affect learning and how they sometimes go against or work with the official goals of curricula.

Hidden Curriculum

The hidden curriculum refers to the implicit knowledge students acquire through school culture, teacher behavior, peer interaction, and institutional routines, which shaping norms around identity, power, and values (Kärner & Schneider, 2024; Rossouw & Frick, 2023; Uleanya, 2022). Teachers and classmates show what is okay or good by how they act, often without even realizing it. If we examine these 18 articles and pay attention to these aspects, we can start to understand how the hidden curriculum affects children's lives in small but important ways. It reminds us that education isn't only about what is taught; it's also about what is lived. To make learning settings more open, thoughtful, and empowered, we need to comprehend this hidden curriculum aspect.

Table 6. *List of reviewed articles according to aspects of Hidden Curriculum*

Reviewed Study	Power and Authority Structures	Gender Norms and Identity Information	Cultural and Societal Expectations	Moral and Ethical Values	Teacher and Peer Modeling	Emotional Socialization and Silence	Implicit Messaging in School Routines
Moon & Lee (2022)			x	x		x	x
Yanko & Lee (2023)	x	x				x	
Bamkin (2020)			x	x		x	x
Muller et al. (2022)	x		x	x			x
Simms & Shanahan (2024)		x		x			x
Lynch & Curtner-Smith (2019)	x	x		x			x
Santagata et al. (2024)	x			x			
Fazio et al. (2025)	x		x	x			x
Mantei et al. (2024)	x		x				x
Hyrkkö & Kajamaa (2025)	x						x
Hyrkkö & Kajamaa (2025)	x		x				x
Herro et al. (2025)			x	x			x
Holstein & Cohen (2025)		x	x			x	x
Alcántara-Porcuna et al. (2021)		x	x				x

Frequency (f)	8	5	9	8	0	4	12
Frequency (f)	57%	36%	64%	29%	0%	29%	86%

Table 6 shows that "implicit messaging in school routines" accounts for most "hidden curriculum." This was in 86% of the publications tested. Thus, most of the content explores how school routines, schedules, and rules affect students' behavior, expectations, and social roles. These findings suggest researchers are interested in how school routines affect children's success outside of class. Then follow "cultural and societal expectations" (64%), which illustrate how students learn values and standards from daily interactions and institutions. Eighteen percent of the study addressed "power and authority" and "moral and ethical values," demonstrating moderate interest in how early childhood education settings implicitly transfer hierarchical structures and value systems.

Only 36% and 29% of the research included "gender norms and identity structures" and "emotional socialization and silence." This shows that literature rarely addresses these issues. Interestingly, none of the studies addressed "teacher and peer modeling" (0%), showing a dearth of research on how interpersonal interaction can convey concealed meanings. All seven hidden curriculum sub-dimensions exist, but the attention is inconsistent. The focus on school routines and social standards shows that people worry most about how institutions affect children's lives in small ways. Understudied themes including gender identity, emotional development, and modeling might inspire future research.

Indonesian schools' hidden curriculum is heavily influenced by power dynamics, cultural values, and implicit behavior guidelines. Student-teacher relationships are hierarchical, with students expected to obey rules without question. Students must stand when teachers enter or speak formally (Zulaikha & Wakhudin, 2023). Ethics are taught in official religious education and informal character education methods such classroom discipline and reward systems (Syarnubi et al., 2021; Wahyudi & Wuryandani, 2024). By setting dress, language, and religious restrictions, teachers and classmates model behavior without saying anything. These actions promote social standards yet are rarely questioned.

Gender norms are rarely criticized. Without considering gender equality, girls are forced to clean and boy's lead. Unlike previous research that challenges binary standards. Additionally, we know little about emotional socialization. Students are taught to keep silent as a sign of respect. Student self-image and behavior are greatly influenced by these subliminal messages. This is different from the ethno-drama study by Yanko and Lee (2020), which revealed teachers disputing these roles. The sixth dimension, Emotional Socialization and Silence, is also important in culture, but not many people talk about it.

Negotiated Curriculum & Teacher Agency

The table 7 below shows that 18 of 20 examined studies discuss negotiated curriculum and teacher agency, proving its importance across educational contexts. However, defining teacher autonomy does not capture the complexity of real-world curricular negotiation. To comprehend the agency's exertion and negotiation, we must analyze whether these studies cover its key features. We want to know if the studies assess professional autonomy how much teachers are trusted to make judgments and adjust courses based on their knowledge (Poulton, 2020). Before making instructional judgments, teachers should consider student needs, practices, and the learning environment. Teaching requires systematic mediation of institutional rules, leadership structures, and accountability mechanisms. Teacher agency in 18 papers was contextual, ethical, and collaborative, not just professional. It reveals how human judgment, institutional expectations, and community values create negotiated curricula (Hyrkkö & Kajamaa, 2025b; Poulton, 2020; Priestley et al., 2013).

Table 7. *List of reviewed articles according to aspects of negotiated curriculum & teacher agency key of dimensions*

Reviewed Study	Productive adaptation of curriculum content	Increased pedagogical design capacity	Systematic and reflective decision-making	Context-specific curriculum enactment	Sustained engagement in professional learning
Yanko & Lee (2023)	x	x			x
Sutopo et al. (2020)	x		x		x
Yang & Li (2022)	x		x	x	
Ahmed (2019)	x	x	x	x	
Baji & Haeusler (2022)	x	x		x	x
Bamkin (2020)	x		x	x	
Muller et al. (2022)	x		x	x	x
Gutierez (2019)	x	x		x	
Simms & Shanahan (2024)	x	x	x	x	
Lynch & Curtner Smith (2019)	x		x	x	x
Santagata et al. (2024)	x	x		x	
Fazio et al. (2025)		x		x	
Mantei et al. (2024)	x	x		x	
Hyrkkö & Kajamaa (2025)	x			x	
Hyrkkö & Kajamaa (2025)	x	x		x	
Herro et al. (2025)	x	x		x	
Holstein & Cohen (2025)	x		x	x	
Frequency (f)	16	10	8	15	5
Frequency (f)	94%	59%	14%	88%	29%

According to Table 7, "productive adaptation of curriculum content" is the most common sub-dimension of negotiated curriculum and teacher agency, appearing in 94% of the studies evaluated. This illustrates that many studies examine how teachers adjust the curriculum to meet student needs and teaching contexts. The second most common topic in the literature is "context-specific curriculum enactment" (88%)—how teachers adapt and apply the curriculum to their social, cultural, and institutional contexts. "Increased pedagogical design capacity" (59%) is the next most common sub-dimension, indicating growing interest in how instructors might improve their instructional design skills through negotiation and agency. Fourty-seventh percent of studies discussed "systematic and reflective decision-making", highlighting the importance of evidence-based educational methods. We found only 29% of publications that mentioned "sustained engagement in professional learning," suggesting that while professional development is recognized, the literature doesn't focus on it.

All five sub-dimensions are evaluated, but some matter more. Researchers seek to know how teachers deploy their agency locally since context-specific enactment and curricular adaptation are stressed. Understudied professional learning may be interesting. Teacher agency lets instructors negotiate, challenge, and change official conventions to serve students and communities and implement curriculum. Teachers have large questioning, analyzing, modeling, and acting cycles, according to Finnish Change Laboratory interventions. (Hyrkkö & Kajamaa, 2025b, 2025a). This agency allows teachers to identify systemic issues and collaborate on new curriculum and leadership strategies. Agency is an individual and group activity influenced by professional judgment, cultural norms, and institutional rules. Teacher agency is crucial for relevant, responsive, and fair curriculum in early childhood and basic education in Finland, the US, and Indonesia (Hyrkkö & Kajamaa, 2025; Santagata et al., 2024; Gutiérrez, 2019; Lynch & Curtner-Smith, 2019).

Discussions

The findings illuminate the inherently complex, situated, and dynamic nature of curriculum enactment in early childhood and elementary education. Teachers are not passive recipients of official frameworks; they actively negotiate, reinterpret, and contextualize curriculum content in response to children's developmental needs, institutional cultures, and shifting sociopolitical demands. This confirms a growing consensus that enactment is a mediated process shaped simultaneously by policy texts, teacher agency, collaboration, and local realities (Gutiérrez 2019; Hyrkkö & Kajamaa 2025). Far from being linear, implementation resembles an intricate dance in which teachers interweave professional judgement with structural constraints to keep the curriculum alive, relevant, and humane.

One of the most salient themes to emerge is the central role of professional collaboration in sustaining curriculum adaptation. Structured spaces such as lesson study circles in Indonesia (Ahmed 2019; Saparuddin et al. 2024) and Change Laboratory interventions in Finland (Hyrkkö & Kajamaa 2025) serve as incubators where teachers collectively interrogate practice, generate innovations, and reconcile the tensions between national mandates and classroom realities. Through iterative cycles of planning, enactment, observation, and reflection, these communities distribute leadership and cultivate a culture of shared responsibility. Importantly, collaboration does more than build individual competence; it constructs collective agency, positioning the teaching corps not policy documents as the true engine of curricular renewal.

This discussion underlines that curriculum is never objective. As strong as official curricula, implicit messages in routines, spatial arrangements, language norms, and disciplinary procedures form learners' identities. Hierarchical teacher–student connections, ritualized moral instruction, and tacit acceptance of traditional gender roles in Indonesia reinforce obedience, collectivism, and binary identity. Other research shows teachers can break scripts: Yanko & Lee (2020) examine agency's moral and ethical consequences in heteronormativity-challenging ethno-drama. They emphasize the responsibility to sustain or challenge dominant narratives. Well- intentioned policies may aggravate inequality without thinking.

Yet the findings also expose persistent systemic constraints. High-stakes examinations, rigid timetables, and accountability pressures continue to narrow pedagogical scope (Lynch & Curtner-Smith 2019; Mantei et al. 2025). In Indonesia, for instance, teachers frequently postpone project-based learning to "prepare" for the national assessment, despite Merdeka Curriculum emphasis on holistic assessment. Similarly, resource disparities, uneven internet connectivity, textbook shortages, overcrowded classes compel educators to make pragmatic compromises, sometimes at the expense of deeper learning goals. These tensions lay bare the dual burden of teacher's shoulder: to comply with performance metrics while nurturing context-sensitive, socially just learning experiences.

These findings collectively point to several critical implications for curriculum reform and teacher development, particularly in the context of Indonesia's evolving education landscape. First and foremost, it becomes evident that collaborative infrastructures must be more than occasional or optional; they should be structurally embedded within the education system. Initiatives such as lesson study, Change Laboratory cycles, and teacher learning communities have already demonstrated their transformative potential. When teachers are given dedicated time, recognition, and institutional support to reflect together, co-plan, and problem-solve, they are more likely to enact curricula meaningfully and sustainably. However, without formal policy endorsement and career advancement incentives, these practices risk remaining localized or short-lived.

Equally important is the reorientation of professional development toward deepening teachers' curriculum design capacity. Many Indonesian educators continue to perceive government-issued modules as fixed rather than adaptable. This perception is less about resistance and more about a lack of pedagogical confidence and prior training in curriculum construction. Professional development, therefore, needs to go beyond technical compliance or training in administrative routines. It must instead foreground principled design thinking how to align learning goals with local culture, students lived experiences, and authentic assessments. Only then can teachers shift from implementers to co-creators of the curriculum. Another vital area of attention is assessment. While Merdeka Curriculum promotes holistic and formative approaches, high-stakes exams such as the national assessment still dominate the classroom climate. If assessment

practices remain rigidly summative and disconnected from the values of inquiry-based, student-centered learning, they will continue to undermine the very agency the curriculum intends to foster. Aligning assessment systems with curricular ideals is not merely a technical adjustment; it is a political and pedagogical imperative.

The hidden curriculum also demands deeper scrutiny. Although often overlooked, it operates powerfully in everyday school routines, reinforcing norms around gender, hierarchy, discipline, and emotional expression. For teachers to become critically aware of the implicit messages they transmit intentionally, or not, pre-service and in-service training must explicitly address these dimensions. Through structured reflection on social norms, power relations, and cultural assumptions, educators can begin to dismantle inequities embedded not only in content but also in the silent operations of school culture. Lastly, teacher agencies cannot thrive in a vacuum. It requires enabling conditions, particularly in under-resourced or geographically isolated contexts. Equitable access to teaching materials, digital infrastructure, supportive school leadership, and manageable classroom sizes are not optionalthey are foundational. Without targeted investment in these areas, efforts to cultivate reflective, context-sensitive enactment of the curriculum will remain aspirational rather than achievable. A just curriculum, then, is not only about what is taught or how it is taught, but also about ensuring the conditions under which meaningful teaching and learning can take place.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that curriculum adoption in early childhood and elementary settings is not policy-to-practice. It is a dynamic, reflective, and local discussion. Teachers adjust, break, and alter conventions to meet children's developmental needs, cultural identities, and community goals. Curriculum implementation should promote diversity, emotional well-being, cultural relevance, and social justice. These commitments are evident in planned courses and implied classroom norms, including space setup and interaction.

Though significant, this agency is rarely utilized by anyone. Professional learning infrastructures like Indonesian lesson study groups and Finnish Change Laboratory interventions help teachers solve difficulties, try new ideas, and create new curriculum. These collaborative spaces became even more crucial after the COVID-19 pandemic showed how working together can turn a disaster into a teaching opportunity. The study also found that high-stakes accountability limits teaching, resource gaps make ambitious concepts difficult to implement, and the veiled curriculum maintains gender, power, and emotion hierarchies. These findings demonstrate that a teacher agency is the key to responsive and fair education. Reflective judgment, collegial debate, and moral pedagogy help teachers bring policy texts to life. They become meaningful, context-specific learning experiences for the kids and communities they serve.

This study shows that curricular enactment is negotiated and changing, but further research is needed. Examining teachers' power over time is intriguing. Most current research provides snapshots of innovation or opposition at various times. It is unclear how legislation, leadership styles, and societal pressures affect teacher agencies. Long- term studies, especially ethnographic ones, could illustrate how teachers adapt, adjust their approaches, and maintain their beliefs over years rather than minutes. Another underrepresented category is students and their families. Teachers' opinions matter, but schoolchildren and their communities shape the curriculum. Students' tales, especially those from Indigenous, rural, or linguistically diverse origins, would better illustrate how curriculum is taught, experienced, contested, and reinterpreted in school. Learning how families feel about the curriculum's relevance or lack thereof could enhance enactment's relationship aspect.

The hidden curriculum is generally recognized, but future research should focus on it. Routines and classroom frameworks silently pass on gender, obedience, emotional expression, and identity, but few research examines how to break them. Design-based interventions that help teachers question and recast hidden signals are effective. Making emotional literacy part of classroom activities or rethinking language

and hierarchy could make learning settings more equitable and pleasant. The persistent clash between formative ideals and summative accountability frameworks raises crucial questions about how evaluation influences teaching and learning. Comparative studies of assessment ecologies, especially those that emphasize student growth, agency, and reflection, may help us align evaluation systems with transformative curricula like Merdeka Curriculum.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital learning; therefore, we must examine access and design. How teachers can develop online and mixed learning environments that foster warm relationships, cultural competence, and questioning is the major issue, not who has internet or devices. In low-resource areas, technology must do more than replicate the classroom it must innovate. Finally, future research should examine the intricate interactions between policy and practice. Mixed-method research on how school administrators, teachers, and communities understand and deal with curricular requirements may assist in determining how implementation can be helped or suffered. Learning about these small-scale agreements can assist in building an adaptable, situation-sensitive education policy. All of these study directions could address gaps in the literature and assist create a fair, open, and based on real-life experiences curriculum.

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