IJCSE

Promoting Child-Friendly Schools through the Merdeka Curriculum: A Critical Evaluation of Magelang Regency, Indonesia

Subur[1], Rasidi[2]*

[1,2]Universitas Muhammadiyah Magelang, Indonesia

Abstract:

To promote Child-Friendly Schools through the Merdeka Curriculum in Magelang Regency, this research reveals several challenges and opportunities. The study used a sequential mixed methods approach to surveying 47 teachers and 100 students, in-depth interviews with 20 school principals and 20 key informants, and participant observation in 10 schools. The findings show that implementing a child-friendly school is still early, and various obstacles are faced, such as limited understanding of teachers and school staff about the concept of a child-friendly school, limited resources, and a school culture that still needs to be fully supportive. Nonetheless, the Merdeka Curriculum offers significant opportunities to strengthen child-friendly schools by emphasizing child-centred learning, collaboration, and character development. Integrating child-friendly school principles into the Merdeka Curriculum and developing the capacity of teachers and school staff are crucial steps needed to create genuinely child-friendly schools. This research provides important insights for education stakeholders to improve and holistically increase the holistic implementation of child-friendly schools in Magelang Regency.

Keywords: Child-Friendly Schools, Merdeka Curriculum, Evaluation, School Management

1.   Introduction

Child protection, according to Child Protection Law no. 23/2002 Article 1, is all activities to guarantee and protect children and their rights so that they can live, grow, develop, and participate optimally by human dignity and receive protection from violence and discrimination (Rosalina, 2020; Santriati, 2020). The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) reported 4,124 complaints related to child protection cases during January- November 2022. This number decreased by 30.7% compared to 5,953 complaints throughout 2021. The most reported exceptional child protection cases were related to children being victims of sexual crimes, namely 746 cases. There were also 454 cases related to children who were victims of physical and psychological violence. Then, 187 cases of children faced the law as perpetrators. Then, there were 80 cases of children being economically and sexually exploited. Meanwhile, there were 70 cases of children who were victims of pornography and cybercrime (Joae et al. et al., 2022; Khairunnisa et al., 2022; Listyaningsih & Ismanto, 2022). This problem is very worrying; this needs to be followed up on wisely, and preventive action must be taken, one of which is through education.

Education is a crucial long-term investment for the development of a nation. In this context, Child-Friendly Schools have emerged as a promising approach to creating learning environments that support children's holistic growth and development. Child Protection Law No. 23 of 2002 in Indonesia has underscored the

*Corresponding author: rasidi@ummgl.ac.id

importance of protecting and fulfilling children's rights, including the right to quality education. A child-friendly school is a learning environment to meet a child's comprehensive physical, emotional, and psychological needs. Such an environment facilitates academic learning and encourages students' social-emotional, creative, and character development (Imashev et al., 2024; Karmini, 2022). Evaluation of child-friendly school management is essential to ensure that the goals of inclusive and holistic education, as stated in the national education policy, can be adequately achieved. This is also one of the government's concerns regarding providing differentiated services to students with their respective needs in the Merdeka curriculum policy. The Merdeka Curriculum, emphasizing active, creative, and meaningful learning, has great potential to strengthen child-friendly school implementation. However, integrating child-friendly school principles into daily learning requires careful planning and support from various parties. This research aims to evaluate the extent to which child-friendly school management has been integrated into the Merdeka curriculum in Magelang Regency to identify challenges and opportunities and provide recommendations for improvement.

This research was inspired by previous research on child-friendly schools. Socialization of bullying prevention to create child-friendly schools. Positive responses from students regarding efforts to prevent bullying in schools in creating child-friendly schools. Child-friendly schools can be created when school residents are not involved in bullying (Noya & Kiriwenno, 2024)—the Leadership Role of School Principals in Creating Child-Friendly Schools in Inclusive Schools. School principals have an essential role in making decisions to improve the quality of their schools. The success of a school can be seen from the attitude and decisions of the principal, one of which is in educating teaching staff and developing learning systems and models in schools that can create child-friendly schools (Izzah et al., 2023). The Role of School Committees in Implementing Friendly Schools. The results of this research show that 1) The role of school committees in implementing child-friendly schools provides compelling considerations in discussing and formulating rules, policies, and programs for child-friendly schools, and the role of school committees as supporters of implementing child-friendly schools. Through human and financial support, the role of the school committee as a supervisor of rules and policies for implementing child-friendly schools, and the role of the school committee as a liaison between the school and student parents, the government and other organizations. 2) The inhibiting factors for the committee are low awareness and participation of student parents, lack of involvement of the general public in providing education, internal limitations of the committee in providing financial support, and lack of activeness of some committee members (Ramadhan & Torro, 2022). Women's leadership in creating child-friendly schools. SWOT analysis.

Second, Branding School. Third, Implementation of child-friendly school Development. Fourth, Continuous Improvement. With the implementation of child-friendly schools at RA Nurus, learning is more conducive, and parents' trust in teachers is higher (Baharun et al., 2021). Implementation of Child-Friendly Schools to Build Character Values in Early Childhood. The school environment is safe, clean, comfortable, and healthy, and teachers have an essential role in forming students' character and implementing child-friendly school policies (Na'imah et al., 2020)—the study of Child-Friendly School Programs in Character Formation in Elementary Schools. Students are free to express their opinions in various fields of knowledge and interest without pressure, discrimination, or violence from other people. The child-friendly school program is hoped to form good and quality student character for survival in the social environment (Rohmawati & Hangestiningsih, 2019).

Limitations and areas that have yet to be covered in research regarding child-friendly schools and the Independent Curriculum include several important aspects. The depth of analysis is often hampered by case studies being limited to a few schools or specific regions, so the results may only be generalizable to some areas. Research also usually only covers certain variables without considering factors such as local cultural influences or socio-economic conditions that might influence the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Additionally, measuring long-term impact is often overlooked, with many studies focusing on short-term outcomes such as changes in teacher attitudes or student satisfaction. In contrast, the effects of academic achievement and social wellbeing require more complex and time-consuming longitudinal research designs. The role of technology in supporting the Independent Curriculum may have yet to be explored in depth, including the use of online learning platforms or mobile applications, as well as the impact of the existing digital divide. The involvement of all stakeholders is also an area that receives little attention, with much research only involving teachers and students. In contrast, the role of parents, communities, and local

government often needs to be researched in depth. Lastly, the local cultural context has not been sufficiently considered in terms of how cultural values influence the acceptance of the Merdeka Curriculum and how the curriculum can be adapted to reflect the cultural diversity of Magelang Regency.

Although the child-friendly school concept has received increasing attention, its implementation in Indonesia, especially in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, still requires more in-depth study. Previous studies focus on specific aspects of child-friendly schools, such as the physical environment or learning practices. However, limited research comprehensively evaluates the implementation of child-friendly schools in various aspects of school management. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap by assessing child-friendly school management in Magelang Regency. This research will identify challenges and opportunities in child-friendly school implementation and provide recommendations for improvement. The results of this research can contribute to developing educational policies that better support the creation of child-friendly schools in Indonesia. With its rich Javanese culture and varied geographical conditions, Magelang Regency has the characteristics of a society that values education. However, like many other rural areas, Magelang Regency also faces challenges in providing equitable and quality access to education. Programs such as positive refraction and freedom of worship rituals have been positive efforts to improve the quality of education; however, implementing Child-Friendly Schools in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum still requires further study.

Global educational trends are toward more student-centred, collaborative, and meaningful learning. The Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia is an effort to answer these challenges. However, implementing the Child-Friendly School concept within the framework of this new curriculum is still relatively new, especially at the regional level, such as Magelang Regency. Magelang Regency, with its rich Javanese culture and varied geographical conditions, has shown a solid commitment to improving the quality of education. Programs such as anti-bullying declarations involve school stakeholders and involve students themselves. This is clear evidence of these efforts. However, implementing Child-Friendly Schools in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum still requires more in-depth study.
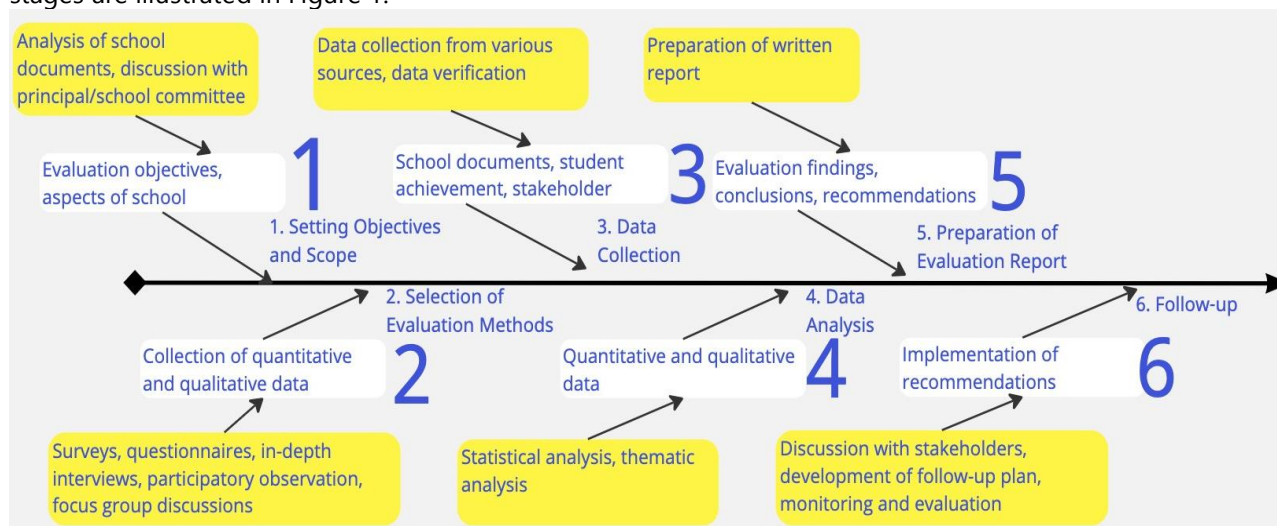
Evaluation of child-friendly school management in the context of the Merdeka curriculum is not just a need but an urgent necessity. Amid rapid educational changes and the demands of the times, ensuring that our schools truly support the Merdeka Curriculum is crucial. The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to form a profile of Pancasila students with noble character, global diversity, cooperation, independence, critical reasoning, and creativity. An in-depth evaluation will ensure that every aspect of this curriculum is implemented effectively to achieve this lofty goal. Identifying best practices and existing challenges can create a learning environment conducive to children's holistic development.

This evaluation will be a road map toward education that is better, more inclusive, and more adaptive to the needs of each student. Child-friendly schools are not only the responsibility of teachers but also involve students, parents, and the community. This evaluation will empower all stakeholders to create a supportive and safe environment for our children. Future generations must be prepared to face global challenges and contribute to sustainable development. Evaluating child-friendly school management will ensure they have a strong academic foundation and character to become strong and visionary future leaders. Accurate data and information from this evaluation will be the basis for developing better local, national, and even international education policies. Evidence-based policies will be more targeted and effective in improving the overall quality of education. This evaluation is not only about assessing but also about building and strengthening. This is a crucial step to ensure that education in Indonesia keeps up with the flow of change and becomes a pioneer in creating a brighter future for all the nation's children.

2. Method

The approach used was preliminary research to study and evaluate child-friendly school management in Magelang Regency, involving 46 teachers from 14 driving schools. The method applied is a mixed method with a sequential pattern. Sample selection involved driving schools using a purposive sampling technique. These 14 schools were chosen because they received special intervention with funding support and mentoring support from the Ministry of Education and Culture in implementing the Merdeka curriculum.

The data collection method was carried out sequentially by conducting quantitative actions and analyzing them, then continuing with qualitative observation and in-depth interviews. The research consists of several stages: CIPP-based evaluation of child-friendly school management within the Merdeka Curriculum framework, in-depth investigation using a qualitative approach to identify supporting, inhibiting, and recommendation factors, development of a child-friendly school management model, and model testing to test feasibility, effectiveness, and practicality. Evaluation is carried out by establishing clear objectives and scope, selecting quantitative and qualitative methods, collecting data from various sources, analyzing systematically, preparing evaluation reports, and following up for sustainable implementation. The evaluation stages are illustrated in Figure 1.

Fig. 1 - Child-friendly school evaluation stages

The research method was carried out in 6 stages. In stage 1, objectives and scope were determined by analyzing 14 Independent Curriculum Education Unit Operational Curriculum documents and 20 learning documents (teaching modules, learning objective flow, teacher note documents, and teacher reflection documents). In stage 2, determine the evaluation method by determining instruments with questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and FGDs with school principals, which have been derived from the concept of child-friendly school management with a focus on efforts that have been carried out, plans to support child-friendly schools, the questionnaire data is analyzed quantitatively, by looking at prominent data then deepening it with in-depth interviews, and looking at the results of FGDs which were analyzed qualitatively, in stage 3 data analysis was carried out on school documents, student achievement documents, and stakeholder involvement in realizing child-friendly schools. In stage 4, data analysis was carried out by cross-checking quantitative and qualitative data to find patterns and findings in the research. Stage 5 is carried out by reviewing the findings and evaluation reports, compiling recommendations, and confirming several findings with the school principal, teachers and stakeholders to consolidate the research findings. In stage 6, follow up on the findings and recommendations from the research results. Communication is acknowledged by providing a monograph of research results. Then, the researcher conveys the research results to the Operational Management Project, a routine driving school meeting facilitated by the Magelang district education and culture office.

The selection of evaluation methods includes the use of quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative methods involve surveys, questionnaires, or forms to collect data from various stakeholders, such as teachers, school staff, students, parents, and the community. Qualitative methods include in-depth interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions to gain deeper insight into implementing child-friendly schools and the Merdeka Curriculum. The survey research instrument developed concepts from theories about child-friendly school management in a breakdown and then operationalized in the school context. Before being used for research, an empirical test was carried out in the elementary school at SD Kemirirejo, also a driving school.

Data is collected from relevant sources such as school documents, reports, and student learning outcomes, ensuring validity, reliability, and accuracy. Data analysis is systematically and structured on

quantitative and qualitative data to identify patterns, trends, and important findings. Preparing an evaluation report produces a clear, concise, and easy-to-understand report containing findings, conclusions, and recommendations for improvement. Follow-up involves discussing the evaluation results with stakeholders to obtain input and suggestions, preparing follow-up plans to follow up on recommendations, and conducting regular monitoring and evaluation to ensure the effectiveness of implementing Child-Friendly Schools and the Merdeka Curriculum.
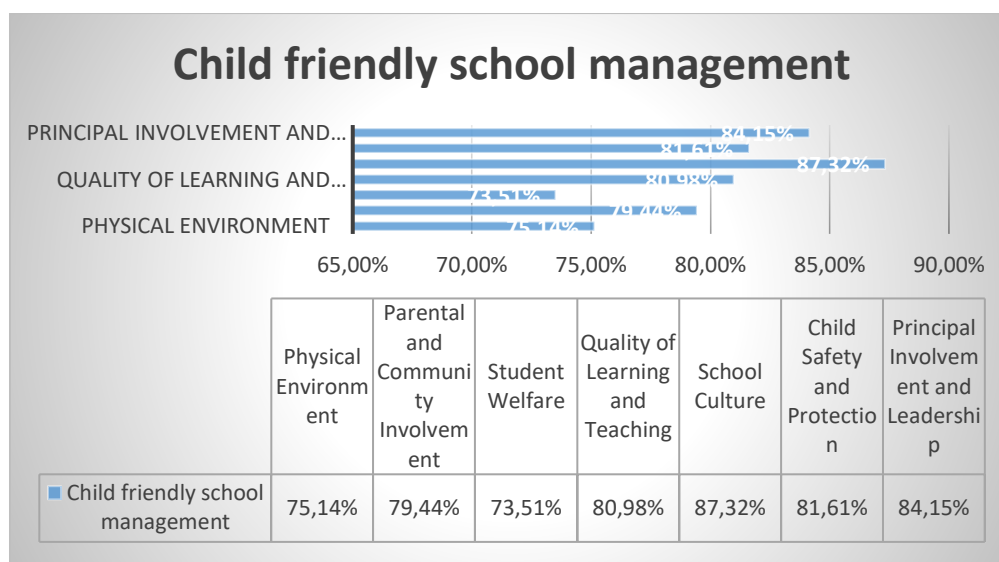
3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Result

Significant sample size variations were found when analyzing data from various school agencies. For example, SDN Paremono 4 and SDN Wonolelo 3 have a high number of samples, namely five, while SDN Ngrancah and SDN Ngasinan 2 only have two samples. The age distribution of the majority of respondents was in the 51-60 year range with 14 people, while the 21-30 year age range had the lowest number of respondents, namely nine people. Most teachers have teaching experience between 11 and 20 years, with 20 people, while the 1 to 10-year range has 12 people. These findings indicate that between 11 and 20 years of teaching experience was most common among respondents. The variation in research samples shows the sample's representativeness and provides confidence that the existing research findings are research findings that can be generally recognized. With a variety of research samples, it shows that the reliability of the instruments and research results is high and meets scientific principles.

The results of the evaluation of child-friendly school management are quantitatively interpreted categorically. Each range of predicate scores has a different interpretation regarding the level of success of the school in creating a learning environment that is safe and comfortable and supports children's growth and development. Very Good (91% - 100%): The school has achieved high standards for child-friendly school management. All aspects, from policies to daily practices, align with the principles of child-friendly schools. Good (81% - 90%): The school has strongly committed to being child-friendly. Although several areas still need improvement, the school has successfully created a conducive environment for children. Fair (70% - 80%): The school has made quite good efforts in implementing the child-friendly school concept. However, several aspects still need to be improved to achieve higher standards. Medium (60% - 70%): Schools are still in the early stages of implementing child-friendly schools. Significant improvements are needed in various aspects to create a better learning environment for children. Less (< 60%): Schools must make fundamental management and daily practice changes to create child-friendly schools. The current standards still need to be revised.

Analysis of critical variables in child-friendly school management shows several aspects that require further attention. The school's physical environment is 75.14% in the good category, indicating a need for infrastructure and security improvements. Parent and community involvement is at 79.44%, with a pretty good category showing good involvement but still needs improvement. For a high percentage, student wellbeing requires a thorough evaluation to address the student's physical and mental needs. The quality of learning and teaching was assessed at 80.98% in the good category, which indicates good quality but requires continuous improvement. School culture reached 87.32% in the very good category, indicating positive results that need further strengthening. Child safety and protection was rated at 81.61% in the very good category, which indicates good performance but requires constant attention. Finally, the principal's involvement and leadership received 84.15% in the very good category, indicating good leadership with room for further strengthening. A description of the quantitative evaluation results is illustrated in Figure 2.

Fig. 2 - Description of child-friendly school evaluation results

	Physical Environment	Parental and Community Involvement	Student Welfare	Quality of Learning and Teaching	School Culture	Child Safety and Protection	Principal Involvement and Leadership
■ Child friendly school management	75,14%	79,44%	73,51%	80,98%	87,32%	81,61%	84,15%

Implications for Schools: Schools with Excellent and Good Predicate Need to maintain and improve the achievements that have been achieved. This can be done by conducting regular evaluations, involving all stakeholders in program development, and following the latest developments regarding child-friendly schools. Schools with Fair and Medium Predicate: Improvements should be made to focus more on aspects that are still weak. Identifying areas that need improvement can be done through in-depth analysis of the evaluation results. Schools with Poor Predicate Need to make radical and comprehensive changes. This includes policy changes, training for teaching staff, and involving all school community members in the change process. This analysis implores continuous evaluation of every aspect of school management and identification of areas for improvement. With a better understanding of the needs and challenges in school management, schools can take appropriate steps to improve the learning environment for all students.

The school's physical environment is one of the critical aspects of creating a friendly and safe environment for children's development. School environmental security factors, such as adequate security and supervision, are very important. Apart from that, the availability of open and green space around the school also positively impacts providing space for physical activities, recreation, and relaxation for students. Evaluation of the condition of buildings and other supporting facilities, such as the quality of classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and toilets, is also essential to ensure that the school's physical environment supports an effective learning process. Accessibility for children with special needs must also be considered, including accessibility for students with physical disabilities or other special needs, to ensure they can access school facilities and services comfortably and independently. By paying attention to these aspects, schools can ensure that their physical environment meets safety, comfort, and accessibility standards for all students, ultimately supporting the creation of a friendly and inclusive learning environment. With a score of 1106 and a percentage of 75.14%, there is still room for improvement in this aspect to ensure that the school's physical environment creates optimal conditions for children's growth and development.

Research findings show that the school's physical environment is generally considered quite good, but improvement in the condition of the buildings and facilities is required. The involvement of parents and the community in school activities and cooperation between related parties is going well but needs to be improved to ensure broader and more integrated participation. Pupil wellbeing is rated as good overall, although there is a need for improvement in managing pupils' unique needs. The quality of learning and teaching is also considered good but must continue to be updated so that students receive optimal learning. The school culture received positive reviews, but respect for diversity still needs improvement. Child safety and protection are considered quite good, but the effectiveness of the case reporting and handling system needs to be improved. The principal's involvement and leadership are considered good but must continue to be strengthened to create a more responsive and inclusive school environment.

Priority improvements in school management include several essential aspects. First, improving the condition of school buildings and facilities is necessary to ensure a safer and more comfortable environment. Second, parent and community participation must be increased, and there needs to be better integration between schools, parents, and the community to support school activities. Third, managing students' unique needs needs to be improved so that each student gets support that suits their needs. Fourth, learning methods and curricula must be updated continuously to ensure optimal learning. Fifth, respect for diversity in schools must be strengthened to create a more inclusive environment. Finally, the effectiveness of the system for reporting and handling cases of child violence and abuse must be improved to protect students better.

The proposed improvement strategy includes several essential steps to improve school quality. First, physical repairs and routine maintenance of buildings and supporting facilities must ensure that the school environment remains safe and comfortable. Second, developing exciting and relevant parent and community participation programs is necessary to increase their involvement in school activities. Third, teachers and staff should be trained in managing students' unique needs to provide appropriate support. Fourth, the curriculum needs to be reviewed and updated regularly, and teachers should receive training on innovative teaching methods to ensure optimal quality of learning. Fifth, activities and events that respect students' cultural diversity and backgrounds must be organized to create an inclusive environment. Finally, training for school staff in handling cases of child violence and abuse needs to be improved, and reporting procedures must be improved to protect students better.

The parties involved in school improvement include various stakeholders. The principal, school staff, and school board are responsible for planning and implementing physical improvements and educational programs. Some steps that schools can take are reviewing the school management that has been carried out, prioritizing the concept of a child-friendly environment, collaborating with various parties to support child-friendly programs, and creating an environment that appreciates processes and efforts, not just appreciation results. Parents and families play an essential role in supporting school participation programs. Parents must build a joint agreement with the school and contribute to student rights and welfare improvement programs. Parents need to have a growth mindset so they can think positively about positive developments and policies made by the school. Teachers and staff need training for managing students' unique needs, curriculum updates, and innovative teaching methods. Teachers are vital in facilitating learning in schools; teachers must respond positively to and deal with students' conditions. Teachers also always have self-development and a desire to serve students better and improve continuously. Religious committees and school policies play a role in promoting respect for diversity. In addition, school staff must increase preparedness and response to cases of child violence and abuse. By addressing improvement priorities and implementing recommended strategies, schools can significantly improve Child-Friendly Schools management and create more positive and inclusive learning environments for all students.

3.2   Discussion

This shows significant variation in the number of samples from various school agencies, with SDN Paremono 4 and SDN Wonolelo 3 having the highest number of samples. In contrast, SDN Ngrancah and SDN Ngasinan 2 have lower numbers. The age distribution of respondents shows that the majority are in the 51-60 year range, while those aged 21-30 have the lowest number. Most teachers have between 11 and 20 years of teaching experience, the most common range of experience. Although there is an assumption that teachers with more extended teaching experience will be better at creating child-friendly learning environments, the relationship between the two is sometimes linear and straightforward. Many other factors need to be considered, such as the quality of experience, training, environmental support, and teacher personality. Further research is required to provide a more definitive answer to this question.

Analysis of critical variables in child-friendly school management identified several areas that require further attention. The school's physical environment, with a 75.14% percentage, indicates the need for improvements in infrastructure and security. This suggests that schools that do not have security at the gate and CCTV will provide opportunities for irregularities and bullying. Schools need to install CCTV and have a security force that will protect and take preventative action if there is a fight or something that threatens and harms students if something happens. If addressed psychologically, students and parents will be clear and relaxed about going to school or feel safe.

Parent and community involvement is 79.44%, indicating good involvement but requiring improvement for broader and integrated participation. The role of parents in creating a child-friendly school is crucial because they are not only supporters from home but also equal partners with the school in creating a safe, comfortable and conducive learning environment for children. Parents can play an active role in formulating policies, programs and activities that support child-friendly schools and provide emotional, social and academic support to children at home. As agents of change, parents can also campaign for the importance of child-friendly schools in the community and invite other parents to get involved. In addition, parents can contribute in the form of materials, energy or time to support various school activities. This parental participation has positive implications, such as improving the quality of education, strengthening communication between schools and parents, increasing children's learning motivation, and forming a solid school community. Real examples of parent participation include involvement in school committee meetings to provide input, volunteering in school activities such as extracurricular activities or the library, holding regular meetings with teachers to discuss child development, forming study groups with other parents, and campaigning for the importance of education in the environment. Public. All of this shows that the active role of parents not only improves children's learning experiences but creates a more inclusive and responsive educational ecosystem.

Student wellbeing, considered good, requires more in-depth evaluation to meet students' unique needs. The quality of learning and teaching, with a percentage of 80.98%, shows good quality but needs continuous updating. Teacher quality has significant implications for various aspects of education, especially in supporting students with special needs to reach their maximum potential. Quality teachers are not only able to improve student learning achievement but also play a role in improving their quality of life by helping students become more independent and productive. In addition, the presence of competent teachers creates an inclusive learning environment where all students feel comfortable and safe, regardless of differences in their abilities or backgrounds. The continuously improving quality of teachers also contributes to increased professionalism in the school environment, making them valuable assets in the educational community. A concrete example of the role of a quality teacher includes implementing differentiated learning, where materials, methods and assessments are tailored to individual student needs. They also use various learning tools to make it easier to understand difficult concepts and form small, heterogeneous study groups to encourage collaborative learning. Quality teachers provide constructive feedback, help students correct mistakes, and apply an individualized approach by paying special attention to students who need additional help, ensuring that each student gets the support that matches their needs.

School culture, with a score of 87.32%, shows positive results that need to be strengthened; building a positive school culture has broad and significant implications, especially in creating an environment that supports the well-being of students, teachers and parents. Students feel happier, healthier, and more protected, which increases their motivation and success in learning. A positive school atmosphere increases motivation and job satisfaction for teachers, so they are more enthusiastic about carrying out their duties. In addition, a positive school culture also increases the involvement of parents, who feel more confident and active in their children's educational process. Another implication is an increase in the school's reputation in the community, where a school with a good culture will be known as a safe, comfortable place that supports children's development. Actual examples of building a positive school culture include creating a joint class agreement between teachers and students about the rules and values that must be adhered to, implementing reward programs for positive behavior, and holding fun activities such as competitions, art performances, or social activities. Another important effort is to foster mutual respect among students, teach them to accept differences and build open communication where students feel free to express their opinions and feelings. Strategies to strengthen a positive school culture include involving the entire school community, establishing a clear vision and mission, training teachers, creating a supportive physical environment, and conducting regular evaluations to ensure that positive values are maintained and continue to develop.

Child safety and protection, with a score of 81.61%, shows good performance but requires further attention to the effectiveness of the reporting and case-handling system. Guaranteeing the safety and protection of children at school significantly impacts creating an effective and healthy learning environment. When children feel safe, they focus more on the learning process, ultimately improving their academic performance. In addition, a safe and positive environment supports children's character development through

empathy, tolerance, and self-confidence, which are essential for personal growth. Schools that prioritize child safety and protection improve the overall quality of education and become a model for other schools to follow. Forming a strong school community is another impact of these protection efforts, where teachers, students and parents work together to create a safe and conducive environment. Concrete examples of realizing guaranteed safety and protection for children include implementing clear school rules, violence prevention training for all school members, providing a safe space for students to report unpleasant incidents, forming a child protection team, and collaborating with the police to maintain environmental security. Schools should ensure that all facilities and infrastructure are in good and safe condition. Through these steps, schools can become places that truly support children's holistic development, both academically and emotionally.

Principal involvement and leadership were rated as good at 84.15%, but further strengthening is required to create a more responsive and inclusive environment. The principal's active participation in creating a responsive and inclusive environment positively impacts the school community. With a focus on inclusion, the quality of education increases as all students are encouraged to reach their maximum potential without discrimination. Students' well-being improves as they feel more accepted, valued and safe, which is important for their academic and emotional success. On the other hand, teachers are motivated to continue developing their professionalism, increasing competence in teaching students with diverse needs. In addition, schools committed to inclusion will build a good reputation in the eyes of the community, being seen as safe and supportive places for all children. Actual examples of the principal's involvement include forming an inclusion team responsible for designing and implementing programs that support diversity, training teachers to teach students with special needs, ensuring school facilities are accessible to all students, including those with disabilities, and building communication. Effectively with the entire school community to listen to their input and ideas and hold events celebrating diversity and inclusion, strengthening a sense of togetherness and mutual understanding between all parties. Strengthening child-friendly schools is a specific and sustainable improvement where each school, class, and teacher requires different enhancements. Strengthening child-friendly schools is a complex process requiring all parties' long-term commitment. With the right approach tailored to the needs of each school, we can create a safe, comfortable, and supportive learning environment for all students.

This analysis implies the need for continuous evaluation of every aspect of school management to identify and improve areas that need improvement (Alves et al., 2017; Sitzia et al., 2020; Yan, 2018). The school's physical environment, in particular, requires attention to security, availability of open space, accessibility, and quality of facilities. Improvement priorities include improving the condition of buildings and facilities, increasing parent and community participation, managing special needs of students, updating curriculum and learning methods, respect for diversity, as well as the effectiveness of systems for reporting and handling cases of child violence and abuse (Cage, 1988; Finlayson & Koocher, 1991; Ihsanuddin et al., 2023; Mac Murray, 1989; Martone et al., 1996; Stroud et al., 2000).

Improvement strategies include physical repairs and routine maintenance, development of relevant participation programs, training for teachers and staff, curriculum updates, activities that respect diversity, and improving training and procedures in handling cases of violence and harassment. The parties involved, including the principal, staff, school board, parents, and families, are essential in planning and implementing these improvements. By implementing the recommended strategies, schools can significantly improve Child-Friendly School management and create a more positive and inclusive learning environment for all students (Imashev et al., 2024; Miftahudin et al., 2023; Mustika et al., 2023; Nugraheni et al., 2019).

A limitation of this research is that the focus on driving schools means that the results may not be generalizable to all schools, especially those not designated as driving schools. The implication is that the findings and recommendations from this study may only be partially applicable to schools with different statuses or that have yet to be involved in drive programs. Therefore, it is essential to conduct additional research covering different types of schools to gain a more comprehensive picture of the challenges and needs in various educational contexts. Implications for future research highlight several essential aspects. First, a robust research design is crucial for minimizing bias and increasing the validity and reliability of research results. Second, there is a need for a representative sample so that research results can be generalized to a broader population. Third, data triangulation, namely collecting data using various methods, will provide a more comprehensive and in-depth picture of the phenomenon being studied. Lastly, collaboration with

stakeholders such as teachers, principals, parents, and the community is essential to increase the relevance and impact of research. By paying attention to these aspects, future research can produce more accurate and valuable findings for educational practice.

Research highlights several important aspects. The following are recommendations for further research that can deepen understanding of child-friendly schools, the Independent Curriculum, social welfare and mental health:

1. The Relationship between Child-Friendly Schools and Students' Social Welfare. Research can explore how the implementation of child-friendly school principles affects students' social welfare in the long term. This includes the impact on social, economic, and student health aspects. Research could also identify relevant indicators to measure students' social well-being in this context. In addition, it is important to research the role of families and communities in supporting students' social welfare in child-friendly schools and how collaboration between schools and communities can be optimized.

2. Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Child-Friendly Schools. This research can examine how the flexibility of the Independent Curriculum is utilized to meet the needs and interests of students in child-friendly schools. In addition, research can explore the contribution of the Merdeka Curriculum in developing student character, which aligns with the values of child-friendly schools. The challenges faced in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and potential solutions also need research, including overcoming obstacles to curriculum implementation.

3. Mental Health of Students in Child-Friendly Schools. This research can focus on factors influencing students' mental health in child-friendly schools, such as the learning environment, social support, and academic load. Additionally, research could evaluate the effectiveness of programs designed to improve students' mental health in these schools. The role of teachers in detecting and treating student mental health problems is also an important area to examine, including the training and support required for teachers.

4. Relationship between Child-Friendly Schools and Academic Achievement. This research can investigate whether a significant correlation exists between implementing child-friendly school principles and increased student academic achievement. Factors that mediate this relationship, such as learning motivation, classroom climate, and parental support, also need to be considered. Comparing the academic performance of students in child-friendly schools and students in conventional schools can provide insight into the effectiveness of this approach in improving academic outcomes.

5. The Role of Technology in Supporting Child-Friendly Schools. Research can assess how technology can support personalized, collaborative and fun learning in child-friendly schools. Challenges and opportunities in implementing technology in child-friendly school contexts must also be studied, including how technology can be integrated effectively. Research into the digital divide and ways to address disparities in technology access and use in child-friendly schools is also critical to ensuring that all students benefit from technological innovation.

4.   Conclusion

This research uses a mixed sequential method to evaluate the implementation of Child-Friendly Schools through the Merdeka Curriculum in Magelang Regency, Indonesia. The findings show that the child-friendly school in Magelang Regency is still in its early stages and faces several obstacles, including a limited understanding of the child-friendly school concept, limited resources, and a school culture that still needs to be fully supportive. Nevertheless, the Merdeka Curriculum has excellent potential to strengthen child-friendly schools focusing on child-centred learning, collaboration, and character development. The evaluation shows that several aspects of school management, such as the physical environment, parental and community involvement, and the quality of learning, require further attention and improvement. The school's physical environment needs infrastructure and security improvements, parent and community involvement must be increased, and the quality of learning needs to be updated continuously. Creating child-friendly schools in Magelang Regency faces various challenges, such as a lack of awareness among teachers, parents and the community about the importance of child-friendly schools, limited resources, the need for special training for teaching staff, differences in students' socio-economic backgrounds, and frequent changes in education policy. If these challenges are not immediately addressed, long-term negative impacts can occur, including low learning achievement, increased school dropout rates, behavioural problems such as bullying and violence,

lower quality of life for children in the future, and hampered community development. Some potential solutions to overcome this challenge include increasing awareness through outreach and campaigns, increasing education budgets, continuous training for teachers, collaboration between government, schools, parents and communities, and regular evaluation and improvement of programs.

Student welfare, school culture, child safety, and principal leadership also show promising results but still require improvement. Several recommendations can be proposed to improve the implementation of child-friendly schools in Magelang Regency:

1. Structured ongoing training is essential in creating effective child-friendly schools. Training modules should be designed comprehensively, covering all aspects, from basic concepts to best practices and problem-solving. Tiered training, from basic to advanced levels, helps accommodate participants' varying levels of understanding. In contrast, practical training that combines theory with practice—such as simulations, case studies, and real projects—ensures the effective application of knowledge. In developing local curricula, involving teachers, students, parents, and community leaders is crucial to ensure the curriculum is relevant to local needs. The curriculum must refer to the principles of the Independent Curriculum, which is flexible and student-centred and integrates local values and customs. Regular evaluation of training and curriculum is needed to make continuous improvements.

2. Stakeholder involvement through comprehensive outreach is very important for the success of child-friendly schools. Various media, such as direct outreach, social media, and mass media, help reach multiple groups. Information must be conveyed in simple language so all parties can easily understand it. Practical examples of the benefits of child-friendly schools for students, parents and the community can strengthen understanding. Interactive discussion forums also play an important role, where relevant topics are selected, and facilitators competently manage discussions to encourage participation. Follow-up on the results of discussions ensures that the ideas and solutions produced are implemented effectively.

3. Improving facilities and infrastructure is crucial in creating an optimal learning environment. The first step is to identify priorities for urgent facilities and infrastructure, such as toilets, classrooms, libraries and sports fields. Regular maintenance must be scheduled to keep the facility in good condition. Innovations in funding, such as seeking corporate CSR funds, donations, or collaboration with international institutions, can help overcome budget constraints. Utilizing local resources—both materials and labour—can reduce costs and support the sustainability of improvements.

4. Participatory monitoring and evaluation is very important to assess the success and effectiveness of child-friendly school programs. Establishing clear indicators of success, such as increases in student achievement, parent satisfaction, and changes in student behaviour, makes it easier to measure progress. To obtain a comprehensive picture, data collection must be carried out using various methods, including surveys, interviews, observation and documentation. Involving teachers, students, parents, and the community in the data collection and analysis ensures that all perspectives are considered. Evaluation reports must be prepared transparently and comprehensively to make them easy for all parties to understand.

Child-friendly education in Indonesia has become a major focus in recent years, with various government policies and programs supporting the development of child-friendly schools. However, significant challenges still exist, including unequal access to quality education in remote areas, lack of awareness among teachers and parents about the importance of child-friendly schools, limited resources, and the role of culture that is sometimes less supportive, such as the practice of early marriage and violence against a child. Globally, the concept of child-friendly education is also gaining attention, with UNESCO setting quality education standards emphasizing lifelong learning, inclusion, the use of technology in learning, and cross-sector collaboration. Global challenges include cultural and social differences, conflict and natural disasters, and the impact of climate change, all of which can affect children's access to education and wellbeing.

Acknowledgement

sustainable and beneficial changes for better school improvements that favour students. Thank you again for your dedication and hard work.

References

Alves, A. C., Moreira, F., Fernandes, S., Leão, C. P., & Sousa, R. (2017). PBL in the first year of an industrial engineering and management program: A journey of continuous improvement. *International Symposium on Project Approaches in Engineering Education*, *9*.

Baharun, H., Wibowo, A., & Hasanah, S. N. (2021). Kepemimpinan Perempuan Dalam Menciptakan Sekolah Ramah Anak. *QUALITY*, *9*(1). https://doi.org/10.21043/quality.v9i1.10109

Cage, R. L. (1988). Criminal investigation of child sexual abuse cases. In *S. M. Sgroi (Ed.): Vol. Vulnerable*.

Finlayson, L. M., & Koocher, G. P. (1991). Professional judgment and child abuse reporting in sexual abuse cases. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *22*(6). https://doi.org/10.1037//0735-7028.22.6.464

Ihsanuddin, I. M., Munandar, R., Mayda, S., Permana, S., Arifah, S. N., & Kania, D. (2023). Strategi Pencegahan Dan Penanggulangan Pelecehan Seksual Terhadap Anak Menurut Standar Lembaga Perlindungan Anak (Lpa) Jabar. *Jurnal Hukum Dan Kewarganegaraan*, *1*.

Imashev, A., Kydyrbekova, A., Oralbayeva, N., Kenzhekhan, A., & Sandygulova, A. (2024). Learning sign language with mixed reality applications - the exploratory case study with deaf students. *Education and Information Technologies*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-024-12525-1

Izzah, N., Setianti, Y., & Tiara, O. (2023). Peran Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah dalam Mewujudkan Sekolah Ramah Anak di Sekolah Inklusi. *Murhum : Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*, *4*(2). https://doi.org/10.37985/murhum.v4i2.236

Joae Brett Nito, P., Hanik Fetriyah, U., & Ariani, M. (2022). Sex Education "Kekerasan Seksual Pada Anak" Upaya Preventif Tindak Kekerasan Dan Pelecehan Seksual Pada Anak. *Jurnal Suaka Insan Mengabdi (Jsim)*, *3*(2). https://doi.org/10.51143/jsim.v3i2.306

Karmini, N. W. (2022). Humanism Education Model at Rama Park School, Denpasar. *Eduvest - Journal of Universal Studies*, *2*(9). https://doi.org/10.59188/eduvest.v2i9.576

Khairunnisa, A., Aisyah, S., Dina, S., & Pangestuti, R. (2022). Program Pencegahan Kekerasan Seksual pada Anak dan Remaja di Desa Srimahi, Taman Rahayu dan Bantar Gerbang. *Community Engagement and Emergence Journal (CEEJ)*, *3*(1). https://doi.org/10.37385/ceej.v3i1.452

Listyaningsih, L., & Ismanto, G. (2022). Strategi Pencegahan Kekerasan Seksual Terhadap Anak Berbasis Masyarakat di Wilayah Pesisir Kabupaten Serang. *JIPAGS (Journal of Indonesian Public Administration and Governance Studies)*, *6*(1). https://doi.org/10.31506/jipags.v6i1.13072

Mac Murray, B. K. (1989). Criminal Determination for Child Sexual Abuse: Prosecutor Case-Screening Judgments. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *4*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/088626089004002007

Martone, M., Jaudes, P. K., & Cavins, M. K. (1996). Criminal prosecution of child sexual abuse cases. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, *20*(5). https://doi.org/10.1016/0145-2134(96)00020-8

Miftahudin, Suharti, L., Sugiarto, A., & Sasongko, G. (2023). Why Does Anti-Bullying Child-Friendly School Program Matter? A Study of Junior High Schools in Indonesia. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, *13*(6). https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2023-0153

Mustika, D., Yurika Irsanti, A., Setiyawati, E., Yunita, F., Fitri, N., Zulkarnaini, P., Studi, P., Guru, P., & Dasar, S. (2023). Pendidikan Inklusi: Mengubah Masa Depan Bagi Semua Anak. *Student Scientific Creativity Journal (SSCJ)*, *1*(4).

Na'imah, T., Widyasari, Y., & Herdian, H. (2020). Implementasi Sekolah Ramah Anak untuk Membangun Nilai-Nilai Karakter Anak Usia Dini. *Jurnal Obsesi : Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*, *4*(2). https://doi.org/10.31004/obsesi.v4i2.283

Noya, A., & Kiriwenno, E. (2024). Sosialisasi Pencegahan Perundungan Dalam Upaya Mewujudkan Sekolah Ramah Anak. *Jurnal Abdi Insani*, *11*(1). https://doi.org/10.29303/abdiinsani.v11i1.1337

Nugraheni, P. P., Salim, A., & Hidayatullah, M. F. (2019). Teachers' Knowledge and Understanding Toward Learning-Friendly Education for Children with Disabilities in Inclusive School. *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding*, *6*(1). https://doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v6i1.490

Ramadhan, R. A., & Torro, S. (2022). Peran Komite Sekolah terhadap Pelaksanaan Sekolah Ramah Anak di SMPN 2 Parepare. *Pinisi Journal of Sociology Education Review*, *2*(1), 65–73.

Rohmawati, N., & Hangestiningsih, E. (2019). Kajian Program Sekolah Ramah Anak Dalam Pembentukan Karakter Di Sekolah Dasar. *Prosiding Seminar Nasional PGSD*, *1*(35), 225–229.

Rosalina, M. (2020). Akta Kelahiran Anak Luar Kawin Sebagai Hak Perdata Anak. *Jurnal Hukum Dan Kemasyarakatan Al-Hikmah*, *1*(1).

Santriati, A. T. (2020). Perlindungan Hak Pendidikan Anak Terlantar Menurut Undang Undang Perlindungan Anak. *El-Wahdah: Jurnal Pendidikan*, *1*(1).

Sitzia, E., Pianesi, F., Mirante, N., Marini, G., Micardi, M., Panatta, M. L., Resca, A., Marsella, P., & De Vincentiis, G. C. (2020). Behavioural disorders and parental stress in children suffering from obstructive sleep apnoea syndrome: A pre-and post-adenotonsillectomy confrontation. *Acta Otorhinolaryngologica Italica*, *40*(5). https://doi.org/10.14639/0392-100X-N0670

Stroud, D. D., Martens, S. L., & Barker, J. (2000). Criminal investigation of child sexual abuse: A comparison of cases referred to the prosecutor to those not referred. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, *24*(5). https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134(00)00131-9

Yan, C. B. (2018). Research on the construction of student physical fitness assessment model from the health promotion perspective. *Basic and Clinical Pharmacology and Toxicology*, p. *123*.