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Teacher Interpretation in Curriculum Innovation: Enacting Child-Centered Learning in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This study examined how teachers at TK Tiara School interpreted curriculum innovation and enacted child-centered learning. It addressed the gap between curriculum expectations and the classroom decisions through which children's choices, interests, and participation are supported. The study used a qualitative case study design, drawing on semi-structured interviews with two teacher informants and one classroom observation conducted from 22 to 29 August 2026. Interview responses, an observation sheet covering twelve indicators, and field notes were examined thematically and compared to distinguish reported practice from observed practice. The findings indicate that the two teachers described using children's interests and responses to adapt activities, materials, interactions, and assessment. In the observed episode, children selected among block, art, and natural-material play areas, while the teacher used questions and material adjustments to extend their activity. Differentiated support, however, was only partially evident. Based on these findings, the article advances an Interpretive Enactment Model that connects curriculum innovation, teacher interpretation, flexible enactment, child agency, responsive pedagogy, and observable learning-development behaviors. The model is a context-bound analytical proposition; the limited dataset does not support causal or statistical generalization.

Keywords: curriculum innovation, teacher interpretation, child-centered learning, child agency, responsive pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) provides an important context for examining curriculum innovation because curriculum is realized through everyday interactions, activities, and pedagogical decisions. Written plans communicate educational intentions, but they do not fully explain how teachers respond to children's questions, make materials accessible, or modify an activity when new interests emerge. Such decisions shape the relationship between the intended curriculum and children's actual learning experiences.

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This study focuses on the interpretive work through which teachers translate curriculum expectations into classroom practice.

Recent scholarship conceptualizes teacher interpretation as a process through which intended curriculum is translated into planned and enacted curriculum. Ross (2024) argues that this process draws on teachers' knowledge of learners, pedagogy, context, and prior experience. In ECE, Keary et al. (2024) show that teachers adapt curriculum frameworks in response to local professional and institutional conditions. Studies of Indonesian curriculum reform similarly report that teachers may endorse reform principles while experiencing challenges in translating learner-centered expectations into materials, assessment, and classroom practice (Candra & Wahzudik, 2024; Nasution & Indrasari, 2024). These perspectives position teachers as active curriculum interpreters rather than passive recipients of policy. The connection between theoretical principles and classroom decisions is also addressed in Indonesian scholarship on curriculum innovation (Hasnida et al., 2025).

In Indonesia, curriculum policy has increasingly emphasized flexibility and meaningful learning. Ministerial Regulation No. 12 of 2024, as amended by Ministerial Regulation No. 13 of 2025, provides the policy context for curriculum implementation. Within ECE, play, exploration, contextual resources, and responsiveness to children are important pedagogical orientations (Kementerian Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah Republik Indonesia, 2025). Nevertheless, policy does not determine classroom practice. Teachers interpret what flexibility means in a particular setting, how children's choices relate to intentional teaching, and how evidence of learning should inform subsequent decisions.

Child-centered learning makes this interpretive problem especially visible. The concept can be misunderstood as either teacher withdrawal or unrestricted child choice. Research on guided play instead demonstrates that children's initiative and adult intentionality can coexist (Skene et al., 2022; Weisberg et al., 2016). Dialogic interaction can further strengthen child agency when teachers follow children's interests while extending concepts through questions, invitations, and responsive language (Myklebust & Fagerbakke, 2024). The quality of adult-child interaction is also associated with developmental and educational outcomes in ECEC, making interaction a critical site through which curriculum is experienced (Howard et al., 2024).

Existing studies have examined curriculum reform, play-based learning, child agency, interaction, and assessment. However, these strands do not always explain how the elements connect within everyday classroom decision-making. One unresolved issue concerns how teachers' interpretations of curriculum change shape planning, children's opportunities to make choices, and subsequent teaching responses. Ghunu and Utari (2025) identify adaptation, operational curriculum, negotiated curriculum, and teacher agency as recurring themes in curriculum enactment, while emphasizing the importance of context. Building on this discussion, the present study examines the relationship among teacher interpretation, child agency, responsive pedagogy, and assessment in one ECE setting.

The study addresses three questions: (1) How do teachers interpret curriculum innovation in relation to child-centered learning? (2) How is this interpretation reflected in flexible curriculum enactment? and (3) How do teacher decisions and children's responses interact in the enactment of child agency and responsive pedagogy?

The study also develops an Interpretive Enactment Model from the case analysis. The model connects six elements: curriculum innovation, teacher interpretation, flexible enactment, child agency, responsive pedagogy, and observable learning-development behaviors. These elements are conceptualized as a recursive process: observations of children's activity may prompt teachers to reconsider their interpretations and plans. Because the evidence comprises interviews with two teachers and one classroom observation, the

model is presented as a provisional, context-specific explanation rather than a universal theory or causal account.

Curriculum enactment concerns what occurs when curriculum intentions are translated into situated educational practice. The distinction between intended, planned, and enacted curriculum is useful because each layer involves interpretation. Ross (2024) argues that teachers interpret curriculum through a broader curriculum potential shaped by knowledge of subject matter, pedagogy, learners, and context. Keary et al. (2024) show that ECE teachers selectively adapt curriculum frameworks within local professional conditions. These perspectives position teachers as curriculum makers.

In this study, teacher interpretation means the process through which teachers assign meaning to curriculum innovation and convert that meaning into pedagogical decisions. Three dimensions are emphasized: interpretation of the child, interpretation of the teacher role, and interpretation of flexibility. This definition distinguishes change in documents from change in pedagogical reasoning. A teacher can use a new planning format while retaining teacher-directed assumptions, or use a simple plan while enacting substantial flexibility. The analytical unit is therefore the relationship between meaning and decision.

Child agency is treated as children's capacity to influence aspects of learning through choice, initiative, communication, exploration, persistence, and participation. Agency is relational rather than absolute. Children can exercise agency when adults recognize their actions as meaningful and when the environment provides real possibilities for choice. Clark (2017) emphasizes listening to children as a way of incorporating their perspectives into educational decisions. Myklebust and Fagerbakke (2024) show how a dialogic stance can support agency even when young children initially contribute little verbal language.

Responsive pedagogy provides the mechanism linking agency with teacher intentionality. Responsiveness requires teachers to observe, interpret, and decide how much support is appropriate. Guided-play research demonstrates that child choice and adult guidance are compatible when adults structure conditions while allowing children to retain meaningful initiative (Skene et al., 2022; Weisberg et al., 2016). In this study, responsive pedagogy includes open-ended questioning, modeling, scaffolding, feedback, material adaptation, and differentiated support.

The model developed in this study does not treat the six components as a fixed sequence. Curriculum innovation establishes a new or reinterpreted expectation; teacher interpretation gives it practical meaning; flexible enactment materializes the interpretation in planning, space, materials, and activities; child agency becomes visible through participation; responsive pedagogy captures teachers' subsequent decisions; and observable learning-development behaviors provide information for further observation and planning. The process is therefore recursive. This formulation explains why the same curriculum principles can produce different classroom practices across contexts.

METHODS

Following case study approaches described by Stake (1995) and Yin (2018), a qualitative case study design was employed to examine how curriculum innovation was interpreted and enacted in the institutional context of TK Tiara School. The case focused on teachers' understandings and practices relating to planning, classroom arrangement, interaction, and assessment. Data were collected from 22 to 29 August 2026. The dataset comprised semi-structured interviews with two teacher informants, a structured classroom observation sheet, and field notes. The observation documented one classroom episode and used twelve indicators of child-centered practice. A case study was appropriate because the inquiry concerned meaning-making and pedagogical decisions in context, rather than the measurement of causal effects.

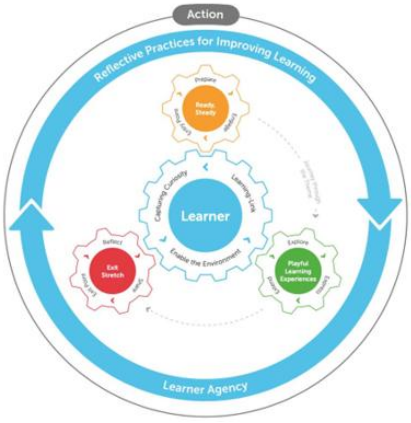
Two teachers participated as interview informants, and these were the same two teachers whose classroom practices were documented in the classroom observation. Their identities are kept confidential in this manuscript. The interviews addressed curriculum innovation, child-centered learning, planning, children's choices, teacher roles, assessment, differentiation, challenges, enabling conditions, perceived changes in children, and areas for improvement. The observation documented children selecting among block, art, and natural-material play areas, constructing and discussing their work, and receiving prompts and support from the teachers. Field notes recorded the teachers' invitation to consider alternative materials, a child's comment about building a tall tower, and the provision of small stones and pieces of wood after children proposed creating a garden around their block structures.

The data were analyzed thematically, following the analytic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). Interview responses and observation notes were read to identify meaning units and then coded in relation to curriculum interpretation, flexible planning, child choice, responsive teacher support, assessment, differentiation, and contextual conditions. The researchers compared interview accounts with the observation record. This comparison was used to distinguish teachers' reported or intended practices from practices documented during the observed episode. For example, differentiated support was coded as only partially evident in the observation. The resulting themes were interpreted in dialogue with literature on curriculum enactment, guided play, child agency, and developmentally appropriate assessment.

The Interpretive Enactment Model was developed by examining recurring relationships across the two interview accounts and the observation materials. The teachers' accounts referred to flexible planning, play invitations, and observation-based assessment. The classroom record documented children selecting play areas, constructing with materials, discussing ideas, and returning materials independently. These sources informed the model as an analytical interpretation of the case. Given the limited empirical base of two interviews and one observation, the model is not presented as a generalizable or causal explanation.

Credibility was supported by comparing the accounts of the two teacher informants with the classroom observation. Areas of convergence informed the analysis, while differences between reported intentions and observed practice were retained rather than resolved artificially. The research record indicates that participant consent and institutional authorization were obtained for data collection and publication. The name of TK Tiara School is retained as the research setting. The single-observation design does not permit claims of saturation or comprehensive representation of practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

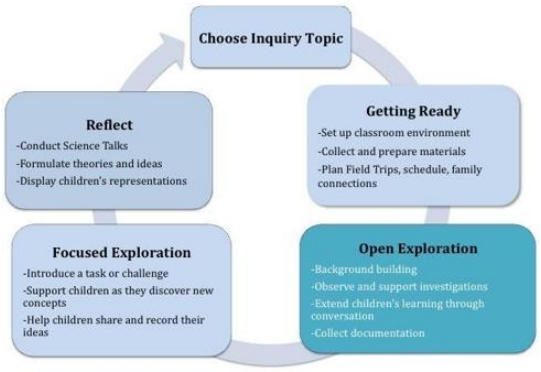


Teacher Interpretation Repositioned the Meaning of Curriculum Innovation

Across the interviews, teachers described curriculum innovation as a change in classroom relationships and pedagogical decision-making, rather than merely the introduction of a new planning document. They indicated that children's interests and responses could inform the direction of an activity. In this account, the teacher's role included observing, guiding, and deciding when an adjustment was appropriate.

This pattern suggests that teachers' interpretations shaped the conditions under

which learning activities were planned and adjusted. Children's questions, choices, hesitation, and emerging interests were treated as potentially relevant information for subsequent decisions. This interpretation is consistent with scholarship that positions teacher understanding between curriculum intentions and enacted classroom practice (Ross, 2024; Keary et al., 2024).



Flexible Enactment Was Prepared Flexibility, Not Absence of Planning

Teachers reported using flexible daily plans and "invitations to play" rather than relying exclusively on worksheets. The observation sheet documented three play invitations using open-ended materials arranged on tables and a carpet. Children could choose among the block, art, and natural-material areas. During the episode, they concentrated on constructing and discussing their work. Field notes record that the teacher added small stones and pieces of wood after children proposed making a garden around their block structures. This episode illustrates how a prepared environment can be adjusted in response to children's ideas.

Flexibility therefore required preparation and professional judgment. Teachers prepared spaces, materials, and possible invitations in advance, but did not treat them as scripts. This is consistent with evidence that ECE teachers selectively adapt curriculum frameworks in response to local practice (Keary et al., 2024).

Child Agency Emerged Through Real Choices in the Learning Environment

The observation record documented opportunities for children to choose among the block, art, and natural-material areas. Materials were placed on low shelves within children's reach. One child remarked, "Look, I can make a tall tower without it falling!" The interview responses also indicated that children were sometimes able to select media and determine the time needed to complete their work. These examples suggest that agency was expressed through practical choices and initiative. However, one observation cannot establish whether similar opportunities were consistently available across activities or days.

The examples point to agency as a relationship between children, adults, and the learning environment. Children could make meaningful choices, while teachers remained responsible for safety, resources, and the purpose of the activity. This interpretation is compatible with research on guided play and dialogic interaction (Skene et al., 2022; Myklebust & Fagerbakke, 2024).

The observed choices and routines illustrate agency through opportunities to select materials, influence the direction of activity, and return resources independently. These examples are drawn from the observation record. The accompanying figure is conceptual and should not be interpreted as photographic evidence of the observed classroom.



Figure 1. Children's choices and independence. Conceptual illustration of children choosing activities and materials; it is not a photograph or direct record of the observed classroom.

Responsive Pedagogy Connected Children's Initiatives with Teacher Intentionality

During the observed activity, the teacher used questions and material adjustments while children explored. The teacher asked, "How can we make your bridge stronger?" rather than immediately solving the construction problem. Field notes also record the prompt, "How about trying another material for the adhesive?" These questions invited children to consider possible solutions while retaining ownership of the activity. The teacher's provision of small stones and pieces of wood after children proposed making a garden around their block structures provides another example of responding to emerging interests. The observation sheet nevertheless coded differentiated support as only partially evident; responsiveness was therefore not uniform across all children or moments.

This pattern clarifies the relationship between child agency and teacher intentionality. Child-centered learning did not eliminate adult purposes; purposes were enacted through responses to children's actions. Guided-play literature similarly positions learning between direct instruction and unguided play (Weisberg et al., 2016; Skene et al., 2022). Figure 2 offers a conceptual illustration of play and exploration. It is intended to clarify the pedagogical ideas discussed in this section, not to represent a photograph or direct record of the observed classroom. The empirical examples in the article are drawn from the interview responses, observation sheet, and field notes, including block construction, choices among play areas, and the use of natural materials.



Figure 2. Play and exploration. Conceptual illustration of children engaging with blocks and natural materials; it is not a photograph or direct record of the observed classroom.

Assessment Functioned as Feedback Rather Than an Endpoint

Teachers reported using observation, anecdotal records, developmental checklists, photographs, and documentation to understand children's learning. They described using assessment information to consider material difficulty and plan subsequent activities. In this account, assessment informed a recurring sequence of observation, interpretation, pedagogical adjustment, and a new learning experience. The interview data thus position assessment as part of curriculum enactment rather than solely as an endpoint.

This is consistent with developmentally appropriate practice, which connects observation, documentation, assessment, curriculum planning, and intentional teaching (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020). The contribution here is to place assessment inside the interpretive loop: what teachers notice becomes part of what they decide to offer next.

Differentiation Was Evident but Uneven

Teachers reported adapting media, levels of challenge, and scaffolding in response to children's developmental needs. They described varying material sizes and providing additional verbal support when needed. The observation sheet, however, marked this indicator as partially evident and noted that the teacher supported a child who hesitated to hold a measuring tool. This distinction is important: interview responses describe reported practice, whereas the observation provides limited evidence of what occurred during one classroom episode.

This unevenness is important because it prevents the analysis from converting every reported intention into an achieved practice. The difference between intention and consistency demonstrates that curriculum innovation remains under development and is shaped by professional knowledge, time, resources, and immediate classroom demands.

Family Expectations and Organizational Conditions Shaped Enactment

Teachers identified preparation time and differences in parental expectations as challenges. They reported that some parents expected visible, conventional calistung outcomes, often associated with paper-

and-pencil tasks. Teachers described using daily activity records and portfolios to explain how exploratory play may support language, problem solving, and independence. They also identified collaborative teacher teams, supportive school leadership, ongoing training, access to natural and recycled materials, and weekly discussion through the school learning community as enabling conditions. These accounts indicate that curriculum enactment is shaped by classroom decisions as well as organizational and family contexts.

Teachers also identified school leadership, collaboration, professional development, and natural or recycled materials as supporting conditions. Teacher interpretation is therefore not purely individual; it occurs within an organizational field that can expand or constrain possibilities for enactment (Keary et al., 2024).

The Interpretive Enactment Model Emerged as a Recursive Process

The findings can be interpreted through six connected analytical elements: curriculum innovation, teacher interpretation, flexible curriculum enactment, child agency, responsive pedagogy, and observable learning-development behaviors. The available data do not support a linear claim that one element inevitably produces another. Instead, the proposed relationship is recursive: children's actions may inform teacher interpretation; observation may prompt changes to planning; and assessment may influence subsequent pedagogical decisions.

Analytical moment	Interpretive question	Empirical indicator
Curriculum innovation	What pedagogical orientation is changing?	Meaningful play, flexibility, participation.
Teacher interpretation	What does the change mean for teacher and child?	Children as active subjects; teacher as facilitator/observer.
Flexible enactment	How is meaning translated into practice?	Open planning, play invitations, accessible materials, adaptation.
Child agency	How can children influence learning?	Choice, initiative, exploration, communication, pace.
Responsive pedagogy	How does the teacher respond?	Questioning, modeling, scaffolding, feedback, differentiation.
Observable learning-development behaviors	What becomes visible and feeds the next decision?	Engagement, communication, persistence, independence, interaction.

Table 1. Interpretive Enactment Model. The arrows represent analytical relationships, not statistical causation; observation and assessment operate as feedback mechanisms across the model.

The model's theoretical contribution is its identification of teacher interpretation as a connecting mechanism between curriculum expectations and classroom practice. Curriculum innovation becomes consequential when teachers interpret what its principles mean for particular children, materials, relationships, and situations. Flexible enactment represents the practical expression of that interpretation; child agency is visible in the opportunities made available; responsive pedagogy captures teachers' subsequent decisions; and observable learning-development behaviors provide information for further interpretation. These behaviors are not treated as proof of causal developmental gains.

From Curriculum Implementation to Curriculum Interpretation

The central theoretical issue is the difference between implementation as execution and implementation as interpretation. A transmission model can imply that policy moves downward and is reproduced in practice. The present case suggests a different mechanism: curriculum principles are interpreted through teachers' professional knowledge, assumptions about children, pedagogical roles, and reading of the local environment. This is consistent with Ross (2024) and Keary et al. (2024).

The contribution is to connect curriculum interpretation directly with child-centered pedagogy. Interpretation determines whether children's responses are treated as interruptions or information, whether flexibility is understood as reduced structure or professional responsiveness, and whether assessment is documentation or a basis for the next decision. Teacher interpretation is therefore a mechanism of curriculum meaning-making.

Teacher Interpretation as a Relational Mechanism

Teacher interpretation is not only an individual cognitive process. Teachers interpret children while interpreting curriculum. When a child chooses an unexpected material, proposes a new direction, hesitates, persists, or asks a question, the teacher decides what that response means pedagogically. Interpretation links official curriculum, child, environment, and professional judgment.

This explains why identical curriculum principles can produce different practices. Teachers may agree that learning should be child-centered while differing in the amount of choice they provide or the way they respond to unexpected ideas. Interpretive freedom nevertheless requires professional support because weak understanding can produce superficial or inconsistent enactment.

Flexibility as Professional Design

The findings complicate the assumption that flexible curriculum is less structured. Flexibility depended on preparation: materials were selected, activity areas arranged, and possible directions anticipated. What remained open was the precise path children would take. Flexibility is therefore a professional competence: teachers prepare a field of possibilities and use evidence from children to decide subsequent directions.

This distinction matters for curriculum policy. Flexibility should not be measured only by the number of child-choice opportunities. More important is whether planning creates possibilities that can be adapted in response to children's actions.

Agency and Responsiveness Form a Reciprocal Relationship

The findings challenge a binary between child agency and teacher guidance. Agency became more visible when teachers created conditions for choice, but it was sustained when teachers responded without taking control. Responsive pedagogy therefore operates reciprocally: children influence the direction of activity, while teachers influence the depth and quality of learning opportunities. Myklebust and Fagerbakke (2024) similarly show how a dialogic stance can support agency by sharing children's interests and extending thinking through questions and invitations. The present study extends this insight to curriculum enactment by treating responsiveness as an interactional expression of an interpreted curriculum.

Assessment Closes the Interpretive Loop

Assessment was more accurately understood as a feedback mechanism than as a final stage. Teachers observed actions, interpreted possible meanings, adjusted materials or support, and observed again.

This recursive structure strengthens the model because it prevents the six stages from being read as a one-way pipeline.

ECE assessment is contextual and should inform pedagogical reflection rather than be treated as definitive proof of development. Observable engagement, independence, or communication in one activity can provide useful evidence, but the study does not establish developmental change over time.

Organizational and Family Contexts as Boundary Conditions

Teacher interpretation occurs within organizational and social conditions. Time, collaboration, professional learning, materials, leadership expectations, and family beliefs shape what teachers consider possible. Family expectations are especially relevant because curriculum innovation also requires pedagogical translation beyond the classroom. When families equate learning with visible academic products, teachers need to explain why play, exploration, communication, persistence, and problem solving constitute meaningful learning.

Sustainable innovation therefore cannot be reduced to teacher training. Institutional routines and family communication need to support the same pedagogical interpretation.

Theoretical Proposition

The study proposes that curriculum innovation in ECE becomes pedagogically consequential when teachers interpret curriculum principles through situated knowledge of children, context, and learning possibilities; that interpretation is materialized through flexible curriculum design; flexible design creates conditions for child agency; children's actions provide new information; and responsive pedagogy converts that information into subsequent teaching decisions. Observation and assessment continuously feed the process.

The proposition is deliberately modest. It does not establish a causal effect of child-centered curriculum on child development or claim that all teachers enact curriculum similarly. Its value is explanatory: it provides a mechanism for understanding how curriculum principles become classroom practices in a bounded ECE context.

CONCLUSION

This case study examined how teachers at TK Tiara School interpreted curriculum innovation and enacted child-centered learning. Interview accounts and one classroom observation indicate that teachers associated innovation with flexible planning, play invitations, exploration, and children's participation. In the observed episode, children selected among block, art, and natural-material areas, discussed their constructions, and influenced the direction of play. The teacher responded with questions and adjusted materials after children proposed extending their construction into a garden.

The analysis positions teacher interpretation as a link between curriculum principles and classroom decisions. The proposed Interpretive Enactment Model brings together curriculum innovation, teacher interpretation, flexible enactment, child agency, responsive pedagogy, and observable learning-development behaviors in a recursive relationship. The model is a context-specific analytical proposition derived from the available interviews and observation; it is not a causal explanation or a statistically generalizable framework.

The findings also draw attention to organizational and family conditions, including preparation time, collaboration, school leadership, professional learning, material availability, and communication with families. An important limitation is the small, single-site dataset and the use of only one classroom observation. Differentiated support was only partially evident in that episode. Further research involving multiple settings,

more observations, and a longer period of engagement is needed to examine the model's applicability and refine its components.

For practice, the findings suggest that teachers and school leaders can approach planning as preparation for responsive possibilities rather than as a fixed script. Observation and documentation may be used to adjust support and communicate learning processes to families. Professional learning can place greater emphasis on teachers' interpretive judgment through classroom observation, case discussion, and collaborative reflection.

These implications should be read in light of the study's design. Two teacher interviews and one classroom observation provide an analytically useful but bounded account. The study does not establish causal effects on children's development or demonstrate that the reported practices were consistently enacted over time.

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