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## **Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Science at the Private Madrasah Tsanawiyah Nur Ibrahimy Rantauprapat**

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### **Abstract**

This research aims to determine the Merdeka Curriculum implementation in agama Islam subject (PAI) in Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTS) Nur Ibrahimy Labuhanbatu. The subject of this research is a teacher who taught agama Islam subject in the first to third grade in Mafrasah Tsanawiyah Nur Ibrahimy. The study was conducted through qualitative analysis with observation, questionnaire, and structured interviews as research instruments. The result shows that the Merdeka Curriculum has not been implemented optimally in PAI learning at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Swasta Nur Ibrahimy. The two main obstacles to implementing this curriculum are the lack of implementation of P5 and teacher-centered learning. Meanwhile, the most significant challenges come from limited resources and infrastructure, the readiness of teaching and education staff, and obstacles in implementing P5. To overcome this, schools are required to be proactive in supporting the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum through training.

**Keywords:** Education, Merdeka Curriculum, MTS, PAI

### **Abstrak**

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka pada pelajaran agama islam (PAI). Penelitian ini dilakukan di Madrasah Tsanawiyah Swasta Nur Ibrahimy Labuhanbatu dengan subjek Guru PAI yang mengajar pada rentang pendidikan Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTS). Studi ini dilaksanakan menggunakan metode pendekatan kualitatif dengan observasi, kuesioner, dan wawancara terstruktur sebagai instrument penelitian. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Kurikulum Merdeka telah diimplementasikan pada pembelajaran PAI di Madrasah Tsanawiyah Swasta Nur Ibrahimy, namun belum optimal. Minimnya pelaksanaan P5 dan pembelajaran yang berpusat pada guru menjadi dua hambatan utama dalam penerapan kurikulum ini. Sementara itu, tantangan terbesar berasal dari keterbatasan sumber daya dan sarana prasarana, kesiapan tenaga pendidik dan kependidikan, dan kendala dalam pelaksanaan P5.

Untuk mengatasi hal ini, sekolah dituntut bersikap proaktif dalam mendukung implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka melalui pelatihan-pelatihan terkait.

**Kata Kunci:** Pendidikan, Kurikulum Merdeka, MTS, PAI

## Introduction

Providing a high-quality education is one of the keys to developing globally high-quality and competitive human resources.<sup>1</sup> This is because education serves as a fundamental element of a nation's development. As society evolves, the educational system has become more complex, adapting to this globalization and digital era. The rapid changes in technology and socio-cultural demand reformation in the educational system so that it can be relevant and adaptive to society's needs<sup>2</sup>. To pursue an exquisite education, the government continuously improves this sector. Merdeka curriculum is a brand breakthrough made by the government and implemented in Indonesia's educational system. From a broader perspective, this curriculum is designed to prioritize school and teacher freedom to determine suitable learning methods that fit the student's needs and potency, and at the same time, encourage contextual learning that is relevant to current developments.<sup>3</sup> One of the elements that is a characteristic of the Merdeka Curriculum is student-centered learning where teachers do not mean to be the only learning sources but act as facilitators.<sup>4</sup> These enable creativity, and

Collaboration, and enhance students' critical thinking.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the Merdeka Curriculum also reinforces the importance of character-building learning and students' competencies development.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, this curriculum is also flexible. The flexibility can be seen in the time, learning materials approaches, and assessment adjustments due to the school's needs.<sup>7</sup> For instance, the same topic may be carried out differently in schools located in coastal areas and those located in urban settings that have access to technology completely. This flexibility enables a closely connected learning process with students' daily lives.<sup>8</sup>

The flexibility of Merdeka Kurikulum is also can be seen through a more student-oriented approach like project-based learning that encourages students to work on tasks that could be linked to their daily lives.<sup>9</sup> The assessment of this curriculum is not done only by summative or formative, more than that, it is carried out through a continuous assessment that observes the growth of students. This allows the teacher to give such personal and more constructive feedback.<sup>10</sup>, at the same time, empowers the students to grow continuously without

being burdened by the examination pressure that often leads them to focus on grades rather than a deeper understanding of the materials being taught.

In the context of Islamic education (PAI), the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum allows teachers to develop more creative and innovative teaching strategies. This subject is not merely focused on transferring knowledge but also plays a crucial role in the development of student's character, ethics, and spirituality.<sup>11</sup>. For that reason, there is a need for integrated learning strategies that can balance students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains.<sup>12</sup>. For example, the use of edu apps, online learning platforms, and interactive videos in delivering materials to help students apply Islamic values daily.

Studies on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the learning process are not a new phenomenon. Several studies talk about the implementation of this curriculum in many subjects in several areas in Indonesia. Generally, the implementation has a positive impact on the students' growth.<sup>13</sup>. A study conducted by Nawawi et. al done in SMA Bustanul 'Ulum, for instance, showed that teachers' innovation through the use of contextual teaching and learning (CTL) strategies enable the students to understand learning materials and enhance their thinking ability.<sup>14</sup>.

Another result shows that the lesson plan of the Merdeka Curriculum has been customized to the school's needs and students' characteristics. However, there are some inconsistencies with the teaching model found during the execution.<sup>15</sup>. Teachers' lack of understanding, followed by inadequate school facilities serves as obstacles to its implementation.<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, there is a need to conduct active participation among principals, teachers, students, and parents in optimizing the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the school area.

Even though there are many studies related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum have been done, most of the studies are focused on the general subject.<sup>17</sup>. There are limited studies that specifically examine how this curriculum in Islamic education (PAI). PAI holds a crucial role in shaping students' characteristics and spiritual values which should be noticed extensively due to consideration in curriculum reform. More than that, some gaps still need to be filled further, especially in Islam education at Madrasah Tsanawiyah. A research done by Prasetya in SMP Negeri 2 Wanggarasi as sekolah penggerak<sup>18</sup>, had explored the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum widely. However, it majority highlight managerial aspects and school policies rather than the learning process in the classroom. Due to that

reason, there is a need to conduct a deeper study related to how this curriculum is implemented in Islamic studies for teenage students as they are in a very crucial phase for religious identity formation.

This study aims to explore the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic education in Madrasah Tsanawiyah by emphasizing the practical application and challenges faced by teachers and students. Specifically, this research will examine whether this Merdeka Curriculum has been implemented in Islamic education in Private Madrasah Tsanawiyah Nur Ibrahimy, how the curriculum is applied, and the challenges faced by teachers in implementing this curriculum in Islamic education. This research is expected to provide a realistic overview of the application of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic education at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah level. The results are also expected to be able to recommend teachers, schools, and the government to optimize the application of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic education.

## **Method**

This study was conducted through a qualitative descriptive method using a phenomenology approach. A qualitative descriptive method is generally known as a method to explore and understand a phenomenon with the researcher acting as

the primary instrument to analyze and interpret the phenomenon.<sup>19</sup>. Qualitative studies originate from social phenomena which are designed to help researchers explore and gain a deeper understanding of sociocultural issues.<sup>20</sup>. The strength of qualitative research is in the information accuracy<sup>21</sup>. Reports of qualitative research often consist of more detailed research explanations than quantitative studies<sup>22</sup>. Therefore, descriptive studies is a method that is used to draw phenomena as accurately as possible<sup>23</sup>. Descriptive research is also known as a study that examines individuals and events as they naturally occur.

Meanwhile, the phenomenology approach was developed by Edmund Husserl to criticize objectivism in science.<sup>24</sup>. This approach is frequently used to understand research subjects' experiences in depth, aiming to capture their emotions and perceptions<sup>25</sup>. It emphasizes the importance of researchers in comprehending others' experiences without directly making any pre-assumptions<sup>26</sup>. A researcher who utilizes this approach should choose respondents with direct experience with the research object, and conduct observation and in-depth interviews to gain, write, and analyze their experience without adding any personal opinion.<sup>27</sup>.

Subjects of this research were Islamic education teachers, the vice principal of curriculum, and the principal. Moreover, this study employs data triangulation, including observation, document analysis, and structured interviews. The observation was done to understand how the Islamic education teacher applied the Merdeka Curriculum in classroom settings. Document analysis was done to assess the alignment between the teaching module and the Merdeka Curriculum. Last, a structured interview is used to understand teachers, vice principals, and principals' perspectives towards the Merdeka Curriculum, identify their obstacles, and find out causative factors in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at school. Interview results were also used to compare or strengthen findings from other studies. The collected data, next, being processed in the steps of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **The Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in Private Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTS) Nur Ibrahimy Rantauprapat**

Based on the observation result, it is found that Merdeka Curriculum has been applied in the learning process partially in Private Madrasah Tsanawiyah Nur Ibrahimy. This can be observed in the

teaching module used by the teacher as teaching guidelines and aids in the classroom.

Document analysis findings indicated that teaching modules used by teachers have not fully considered and covered the differentiated learning approach required by the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers still were the main learning sources in Madrasah Tsanawiyah Nur Ibrahimy. It was found that most of the teaching modules primarily employ a one-way direction such as a lectured-based method which did not fully support the differentiated learning. Students were not given chances to discuss and express their understanding through methods like projects, group discussion, or self-reflection. This caused boredom to fast-learner students as they did not get further stimulation.

Otherwise, students who had difficulties understanding the subject also did not get any supplementary learning methods like visual illustrations or case studies. If the learning modules were more flexible by adding various activities based on students' needs, the Islamic education learning process might be more effective and push students' involvement as asked by the Merdeka Curriculum. To pursue an interactive learning process, Madrasah Tsanawiyah Swasta Nur Ibrahimy has begun

utilizing interactive teaching media like a projector and other teaching resources. Nonetheless, the use of interactive teaching media is limited to delivering information only. It has not been functioning as an active explorative tool for students. The observation results reveal that most of the students remain passive by watching the videos without engaging in reflection or any discussion. Students tend to have a lack of chances in analyzing, exploring, and connecting materials with their personal experience which leads to a limit of learning concepts. Consequently, these conditions also affect the minimum involvement of students in learning. Over a long time, this kind of learning approach may impact both the students' development and critical and analytical thinking which are one of the core objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum.



**Picture 1.** A teacher-centered and traditional learning approach used by the school

Islamic education teachers had taken initiatives to incorporate peer tutoring,

however, the application remained constrained. For example, the students were divided into group discussions and asked to share their knowledge about the materials. Observational data showed that there was only a small amount of students actively engaged with the discussion while the others tended to passively follow without making any meaningful contributions either by listening without expressing opinions or taking notes but not fully comprehending the subject being discussed. About the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum, this condition highlights the learning process that should be done based on exploration and independence, has not run effectively.

According to the Merdeka Curriculum, the learning approach must be focused on students. This implies that students are not only receiving the materials passively, but also being pushed to do critical analysis, active discussion, and understanding growth through interaction with fellow students. Nevertheless, in reality, the students' dependency on lecture-based learning made it difficult for them to adapt to a more dynamic learning system. In addition, the lack of different strategies in peer tutoring like accompanying students in making structured discussion techniques, or giving a suitable prompting question that suits their levels also contributes to the low level of students' participation.

The assessment used in Madrasah Tsanawiyah Nur Ibrahimy was dominated by summative tests like writing which test memorization. Even though there was a formative assessment, the P5 project, for example, this type of assessment has not been the central component of the evaluation. A summative evaluation system is an assessment that prioritizes final scores as a benchmark of students' academic achievement. This kind of assessment fosters a learning culture where students emphasize theoretical understanding without knowing how the concept would be implemented in real life.

The school elements like teachers, vice principal, and principal have tried to implement formative assessment including project-based assessment by *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5)*. Therefore, the assessment has not been fully implemented yet. The form of assessment remained supplementary which made it largely seen by teachers as a complement rather than a fundamental part of evaluation. Formative assessment has not been used to measure students' development comprehensively.



**Picture 2.** One of the formative assessment forms used by Islamic education teachers outside the P5 project.

Seen from the students' perspective, project-based formative assessment is usually considered a complementary task. The students were not used to doing tasks that require exploration, creativity, and deep reflection. As a result, projects are commonly seen as additional tasks. Students tend to prioritize memorizing materials for written tests than actively collaborating in projects since they perceive exam scores determine their final result.

The evaluation system adopted by the Merdeka Curriculum not only evaluates students' theoretical comprehension but also students' thinking processes, creativity, and ability to solve problems. For that reason, there is a need for a paradigm shift from only assessing the final result to comprehensively tracking students' growth holistically. A holistic evaluation can be done by collaborating project-based assessment, observation, portfolio, and self-reflection with summative assessment. By

optimizing formative assessment, students' motivation to study deeply and independently could be increased which is in line with the spirit and objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum.

### Obstacles in Implementing Merdeka Curriculum in Private Madrasah Tsanawiyah Nur Ibrahimy Rantauprapat

According to structured interview results with the teacher, vice principal, and principal, there were some obstacles faced by the school in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, such as the minimum use of Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) in Islamic education. Therefore, the questions used in structured interview are as follows:

**Table 1.** Detail questions are used to do a structured interview to get an in-depth understanding

| No | Questions                                                                                                                         |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. | According to the teachers, what are the main obstacles you face while using the Merdeka Curriculum in teaching Islamic education? |
| 2. | According to the teachers, what is the main cause of teacher-centered learning done by the teachers?                              |
| 3. | I find that the evaluation system is still dominated by summative assessment; can you explain the reason and cause?               |
| 4. | How is the implementation of projek penguatan profil pelajar pancasila (P5) at school recently?                                   |
| 5. | What are problems faced by school why implementing projek penguatan profil pelajar pancasila (P5) recently?                       |
| 6. | What do the Islamic education teachers expect to optimize the                                                                     |

|    |                                                                                                                                   |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|    | implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at school?                                                                               |
| 7. | What does the principal/ vice principal expect of the teacher to optimize the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at school? |

One of the main obstacles faced by the school in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Madrasah Tsanawiyah Swasta Nur Ibrahimy was the limited implementation of Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) in the Islamic educational learning process. P5 should be an integral part of the curriculum where students were asked to improve values based on six dimensions of *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* student's characteristics; The Almighty God (*Tuhan Yang Maha Esa*), global diversity (*berkebinekaan global*), independence (*mandiri*), cooperation (*gotong royong*), critical analysis (*bermalar kritis*), and creativity (*kreatif*). Due to the interview results, this was found that teachers face difficulties in integrating materials in Islamic education subjects into projects, so; teachers became more focused on implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in the form of teaching modules and methods. This caused project-based Islamic value has not be given priority. Hence, the P5 project could be an effective way to internalize Islamic values in students' daily lives, for instance, religious-based social activities, Islamic studies development, and humanity programs that involve the students.



**Picture 3.** Interview with Islamic education teacher.

The next obstacle was the teacher-centered teaching approach commonly used by the teacher. Even the Merdeka Curriculum stressed that the teaching process must be student-centered, in fact, in some learning sessions, the class is still dominated by lectured-based methods completed with interactive media. Despite the use of interactive media in teaching, the teacher seldom stimulates students' understanding by opening discussion and question sessions. The example that showed the domination of the teacher-centered method in Islamic education learning was shown when the students were not given any chance to explore how tajweed was implemented in Qur'an reading by themselves. This highlighted that the one-way direction approach was still used where the teacher only corrected without further discussion or deep reflection from the students. The main effect of this approach is the low level of students' engagement in learning, which leads to a shallow understanding of tajweed and its practical

application. Most students merely focus on memorizing theoretical rules of Qur'an recitation without fully understanding how to apply them.

This phenomenon might lie in teachers' reliance on conventional methods, as they have been using them for an extended period. As a result, even though there was an attempt to enhance interactivity among the students to explore learning material independently, the application remained not maximum.

Thus, to enhance the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum in Madrasah Tsanawiyah Nur Ibrahimy, a transformation of the teaching approach is needed. The teacher needs to be encouraged to use interactive teaching strategies, providing more chances for students to independently explore the material, and also create a learning environment that facilitates discussion, collaboration, and deeper exploration. More than that, teachers must be supported by providing them with training on project-based learning design and how to use digital media to migrate the prevalence of teacher-centered teaching approaches. Through an explorative approach, the students were not only understood the rule of tajweed but also able to apply it daily.

The Merdeka Curriculum highlighted the use of technology in the

learning process, but the implementation in Madrasah 'Tsanawiyah was obstructed due to the limitation of teaching aids like a projector. Technology should be used as an explorative tool, allowing students to learn interactively, visually, and independently. Nevertheless, the teacher still uses the lectured-based method and textbook as the main source of learning since there was a lack of teaching aids. This made students' learning experience less dynamic and contextual. Based on the explanation above, it can be seen that the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic education subject has not been fully implemented in Private Madrasah 'Tsanawiyah Nur Ibrahimy. Some aspects like teaching modules, the use of technology, and peer tutoring have been done but are not effective yet. The less integration of P5 in Islamic education subjects combined with the teacher-centered method became the main obstacle. Moreover, the evaluation systems which are dominated by writing tests also showed that the school is still in the transition process to a more suitable Merdeka Curriculum assessment method. A more systematic strategy is needed to optimize the implementation of this curriculum with focus in strengthening the curriculum, utilizing interactive technology, and integrating the P5 project. By doing those, Islamic education subject is expected not only to emphasize cognitive aspects but also

to reinforce character building and students' daily real experience.

### **Challenges in Implementing Merdeka Curriculum in Private Madrasah 'Tsanawiyah Nur Ibrahimy**

Challenges faced by schools in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum came from the limited human resources, readiness from the teaching staff, and obstacles in applying the P5 project.

First, the teaching model used has not been in line with the principle of the Merdeka Curriculum due to its flexibility in accommodating students' needs. Hence, the use of technology-based teaching media like laptops and projectors has not been improved because of the lack of devices. In some learning sessions, Islamic education teachers often had to share the teaching aids with another teacher. This made them disable to integrate multimedia into every meeting. The lack of operational school funds was the obstacle to equipping teaching aids. This condition leads to conventional teaching where the teacher tends to use a lecture-based method rather than a project or discussion-based method that is more interactive.

Despite the lack of facilities, the minimal use of technology in Islamic education subjects at Madrasah 'Tsanawiyah Nur Ibrahimy can also be attributed to the

lack of teacher training about the effective use of digital media. Many teachers felt more comfortable using the old teaching methods because they were not used to technology devices or not having any opportunity to get training related to teaching strategies. Teachers also perceived that the use of technology in the teaching process was difficult, prompting them to rely on lecture-based instruction and printed materials.

As a result, although the Merdeka Curriculum provided more flexibility and a technology-based teaching method, the implementation in reality remains hindered by the lack of human resources readiness in utilizing the technology. The impact of the limited use of technology in learning is quite significant. Students who are used to conventional learning methods tend to have limited understanding and are less explorative since they are not used to looking for information through digital sources independently. Thus, learning which mostly relies on lectures and textbooks book made students more passive as they were not allowed to interact directly with the material through more dynamic and interesting media. This was contradictory to the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum which highlights independent and explorative learning and the use of technology-based learning as an effective teaching aid.

To overcome these obstacles, several strategic techniques were needed so the technology can be utilized optimally in Islamic education subject. Intensive training for teachers in the use of technology was very necessary to improve the teachers' skills in integrating digital media into the teaching and learning process. The skills improvement will affect their teaching confidence directly. If these obstacles can be overcome, technology could be a very effective tool in improving student engagement and supporting the concept of independent learning carried out by the Merdeka Curriculum.

Through technology utilization, students not only function as information receivers, but also get opportunities to explore, experiment, and understand material deeper through innovative and dynamic learning experiences. Second, structured interviews with Islamic education teachers showed that there was a feeling of hesitation in moving completely from the teacher-centered to student-centered learning method. Teachers faced difficulties in learning approaches that oriented more to students' exploration and reflection since they were more familiar with structured lecture-based methods. Less training about teaching strategies that aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum also became another obstacle for the teacher. Therefore, teachers recognized further guidance related to

formative assessment design, project-based learning, and the use of technology as effective teaching tools.

Third, schools still experience various obstacles in implementing P5, which should be an important element in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Based on the results of interviews with the vice principal for curriculum, the school already has several P5-based projects, but their implementation is not optimal yet. Sometimes this project was carried out once a semester, in certain cases, this was not implemented at all due to limited time and coordination among teachers. The main obstacle in P5 execution is the lack of ability of teachers in designing and assessing character-based projects effectively which came from a shortage of relevant examples from the same subject. Teachers also struggle to integrate the *profile pelajar Pancasila* framework into Islamic education subjects. As they were more familiar with theoretical teaching approaches, they became hesitant to develop experiential learning activities. Another challenge comes from learning time allocation, as P5 projects often take longer time to complete compared to conventional teaching approaches.

Thus, it is essential to employ more actionable strategies like giving applicative teaching modules, training the teachers, and

constructing projects that allow students to practice Islamic values in their daily lives to fully integrate P5 projects with Islamic education subjects. If these obstacles can be solved, Islamic education learning at school will be more meaningful and align with the purpose of the Merdeka Curriculum to shape students who are not only knowledgeable about religious teachings in theory but can also practice them in real-world contexts.

## Conclusion

The finding showed that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Private Madrasah Tsanawiyah has been implemented not optimally yet. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in general still faces various obstacles and challenges such as the lack of procurement of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) in Islamic Education learning, teacher-centered learning approach, exam-based assessment systems, limitations in the use of technology, and constraints in terms of resources and readiness of teaching staff. Limited school infrastructure, teacher readiness in implementing exploration-based learning, and obstacles in implementing P5 are the main factors that hinder the optimization of this curriculum. In addition, the lack of in-depth training for teachers and difficulties in developing an appropriate

evaluation system are also challenges that need to be addressed immediately. To be compared with the results of previous studies, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the Nur Ibrahimy Private Middle School (MTS) is still far behind. Therefore, to optimize the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, support is needed from the school by giving further training for teachers, provision of adequate learning facilities, and a more systematic strategy in integrating P5 into Islamic Education learning. Additionally, this is also need for the school to encourage teachers to be more active in developing student-centered and project-based learning methods so that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum will have a positive impact on students. If these obstacles can be overcome, the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah can run more effectively, and relevantly, and have a greater positive impact on the academic development and students' character.

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