

## **Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in MTs Level: Evaluative Review of Countenance Stake Model**

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### **Abstract:**

The Merdeka Curriculum was designed to offer flexibility and differentiated learning, yet its implementation in Islamic boarding schools faced challenges, particularly during early adoption. This study evaluated its implementation at Islamic boarding school-based Madrasah Tsanawiyah using Stake's Countenance Evaluation Model with a descriptive quantitative approach supported by qualitative data. Participants included 35 teachers and 234 students from five Islamic boarding schools in Agam Regency, West Sumatra, selected via purposive sampling. Data were collected through Likert-scale questionnaires, document analysis, and in-depth interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, and qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Results showed that at the antecedents stage, human resource readiness reached 86% and infrastructure readiness 81%, despite institutional disparities and infrastructure limitations. At the transactions stage, learning implementation achieved 76%, with challenges in differentiated instruction and shifting learning paradigms. At the outcomes stage, assessment documentation and qualitative impacts scored 92%, though quantitative learning outcomes were not yet measurable. Key obstacles included limited module development, low technological literacy, facility disparities, and restricted project-based learning funding. Importantly, schools maintained Islamic identity while integrating the Merdeka Curriculum. The study recommends longitudinal research, broader samples, development of quantitative outcome measures, and strengthened systematic support to improve curriculum implementation quality.

### **Abstrak:**

Kurikulum Merdeka dirancang untuk memberikan fleksibilitas dan pembelajaran yang berbeda, namun implementasinya di pesantren menghadapi tantangan, terutama pada tahap awal. Penelitian ini mengevaluasi pelaksanaan Kurikulum Merdeka di Madrasah Tsanawiyah berbasis pesantren menggunakan Model Evaluasi Countenance Stake dengan pendekatan deskriptif kuantitatif yang didukung data kualitatif. Partisipan terdiri dari 35 guru dan 234 siswa dari lima pesantren di Kabupaten Agam, Sumatera Barat, yang dipilih melalui purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner skala Likert, analisis dokumen, dan wawancara mendalam. Data kuantitatif dianalisis secara deskriptif, sedangkan data kualitatif dianalisis secara tematik. Hasil menunjukkan pada tahap antecedents, kesiapan sumber daya manusia mencapai 86% dan kesiapan infrastruktur 81%, meskipun terdapat disparitas antar lembaga dan keterbatasan fasilitas. Pada tahap transactions, pelaksanaan pembelajaran mencapai 76%, dengan tantangan dalam pembelajaran berbeda dan perubahan paradigma belajar. Pada tahap outcomes, dokumentasi penilaian dan dampak kualitatif mencapai 92%, meskipun hasil

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belajar kuantitatif belum dapat diukur. Kendala utama meliputi pengembangan modul, literasi teknologi terbatas, disparitas fasilitas, dan dana proyek terbatas. Pesantren tetap mempertahankan identitas Islam sambil mengintegrasikan Kurikulum Merdeka. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan penelitian longitudinal, sampel lebih luas, pengembangan instrumen kuantitatif, dan penguatan dukungan sistematis untuk meningkatkan kualitas implementasi kurikulum.

**Keywords:**

Evaluation, Merdeka Curriculum, Countenance Stake, Islamic Boarding Schools, Junior High Schools.

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## Introduction

The curriculum is a fundamental component that determines the success of national education and serves as a written plan outlining the competencies students must achieve based on national standards (Dariyono, 2023). Ideally, the curriculum should accommodate students' needs and facilitate the optimal development of their potential through flexible, innovative, and student-centered learning (Rahayu, Rosita, Rahayuningsih, Hernawan, & Prihantini, 2022; Samsudi, Suprpto, Utanto, Rohman, & Djafar, 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum was designed as a response to learning challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic, which created a learning crisis, by providing educators with the freedom to innovate and offering students opportunities to explore according to their abilities and interests (Indarta, Jalinus, Waskito, Samala, Riyanda, & Adi, 2022). Its main characteristics include differentiated learning, the development of projects to strengthen the Pancasila Student Profile, and greater autonomy for educational units in designing learning activities (Angga, Suryana, Nurwahidah, Hernawan, & Prihantini, 2022; Vhalery, Setyastanto, & Leksono, 2022).

In the context of Islamic boarding schools, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is particularly urgent, given that these schools operate a dual education system integrating the pesantren curriculum with the national formal curriculum (Wasehudin, Rohman, Nizarudin, & Marwan, 2023). Ideally, its implementation could optimize the integration of religious values with 21st-century competencies, producing graduates who possess both deep religious understanding and critical, creative, and innovative skills (Samsudi, Suprpto, Utanto, Rohman, & Djafar, 2024).

Research indicates that the Merdeka Curriculum has significant potential to improve learning quality in madrasahs through flexible and differentiated approaches that respond

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to students' needs (Jasiah, Mazrur, Hartati, Rahman, Kibtiyah, Liadi, & Fahmi, 2024; Oktoma, Nugroho, Suryana, & Jamal, 2025).

However, field realities reveal a significant gap between ideal expectations and actual implementation. Preliminary observations in Agam Regency, West Sumatra, show that of the 25 Islamic boarding schools operating Madrasah Tsanawiyah, only 7 (28%) implemented the Merdeka Curriculum in the 2023/2024 academic year. This low adoption rate highlights systemic barriers to implementation. Field findings identified several critical issues: educators continued to rely on ready-made teaching materials such as student worksheets (LKS) due to limited understanding of how to develop materials based on the Merdeka Curriculum; learning methods and strategies had not been differentiated; and facilities and access to technology were limited. These conditions align with findings at DDI Mangkoso Islamic Boarding School (Ramadhan, Amilusholihah, & Marno, 2024), which identified similar constraints, including limited technological resources, teachers' adaptation to new approaches, and variations in students' talents and interests. Research by Irhamni and Wanojaleni (2024) further confirmed that traditional teaching methods and teachers' limited understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum were major obstacles to its effective implementation in Islamic boarding schools.

The gap analysis revealed three main dimensions of problems. First, regarding readiness, there was a gap in educators' competencies in understanding and applying the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in the development of teaching materials, differentiated learning, and formative assessment (Aisyah, Hayati, Raihan, Fathonah, Maulida, Marini, Hidayatullah, Aslamiah, & Pratiwi, 2024; Zubaedah, Sianturi, R., & Adla, 2024). Differentiated learning, a key feature of the Merdeka Curriculum, required teachers to be prepared to plan, implement, and assess instruction tailored to students' diverse needs, interests, and readiness levels (Assirri, 2025; Sitorus, 2025). Second, concerning implementation, there was a gap between the curriculum's design, which emphasized innovative and technology-based learning, and the reality of limited infrastructure, coupled with internal pesantren policies that restricted access to technology (Lailiyah & Imami, 2023; Ramadhan, Amilusholihah, & Marno, 2024). Third, in terms of outcomes, no comprehensive evaluation had been conducted to measure the effectiveness of Merdeka Curriculum implementation in Islamic boarding schools. Consequently, students' learning achievements and the impact on their competencies had not been systematically assessed (Mardiana & Emmiyati, 2024a; Murtadlo, Oktafiani, & Faizah, 2024).

This gap is particularly critical given that recent studies indicate the success of Merdeka Curriculum implementation is highly dependent on the readiness of the educational ecosystem, including educators' competencies, the availability of resources, and management support (Marlina, Kusumastuti, & Ediyanto, 2023). An evaluative study by Sumarsih, Marliyani, Hadiyansah, Hernawan, and Prihantini (2022) emphasized the importance of continuous evaluation to ensure that curriculum implementation optimally improves learning quality. Research by Wasehudin, Rohman, Nizarudin, and Marwan (2023) at Darul Qolam Islamic Boarding School, Banten, demonstrated that pesantren

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successfully integrating the Merdeka Curriculum were those capable of aligning the national curriculum with the pesantren curriculum and designing programs responsive to students' needs. Nevertheless, research on the evaluation of Merdeka Curriculum implementation in Islamic boarding schools, particularly at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah level, remains limited and partial (Ramadhan, Amilusholihah, & Marno, 2024; Zainuri, Yunita, Baim, Wijaya, Purnamasari, & Meyrinda, 2023). Islamic boarding schools have unique characteristics that differ from general schools, necessitating targeted studies to identify factors that support or hinder curriculum implementation.

This study is highly urgent for several reasons. First, the findings could serve as a basis for educational policy-making to optimize the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic boarding schools. Second, given that the curriculum serves as a benchmark for the success of the educational process (Huda, 2017), evaluating its implementation is essential to ensure it delivers maximum benefits to students. Third, as a strategy to improve educational quality, the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum needs to be empirically assessed to facilitate continuous improvement (Wafi & Umarul, 2023). Fourth, the low adoption rate of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic boarding schools in Agam Regency (only 28%) underscores the need to identify systemic barriers and develop contextual implementation strategies to encourage broader adoption.

The novelty of this study lies in several aspects that distinguish it from previous research and contribute to the development of knowledge. First, the study employed a comprehensive evaluation approach using Stake's Countenance Evaluation Model, systematically addressing the three stages of antecedents, transactions, and outcomes. In contrast, prior studies on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic boarding schools were often partial, focusing on only one or two aspects of implementation (Jailani, 2022; Masturoh & Mahmudi, 2023; Ramadhan, Amilusholihah, & Marno, 2024). Second, the study focused on Islamic boarding schools in Agam Regency, which possess unique characteristics, including a dual education system integrating the pesantren curriculum with the national curriculum and a strong Minangkabau cultural context. This focus provides a contextual perspective rarely explored in the literature, as most evaluations of the Merdeka Curriculum have been conducted in public schools or non-pesantren madrasahs (Mardiana & Emmiyati, 2024; Zainuri, Yunita, Baim, Wijaya, Purnamasari, & Meyrinda, 2023).

Third, the study not only identified implementation constraints but also conducted an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms for integrating the pesantren and national curricula. It revealed how Islamic boarding schools maintain their Islamic identity and local values while adopting key principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, such as differentiated instruction and project-based learning, offering important insights into curriculum adaptation dynamics in traditional Islamic educational institutions. Fourth, the study employed a systematic evaluation framework integrating quantitative and qualitative data to generate a holistic understanding of curriculum implementation. This approach enabled the development of strategic, applicable, and context-sensitive recommendations for other Islamic boarding schools with similar characteristics across

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Indonesia. Thus, the study not only fills gaps in the literature on the evaluation of Merdeka Curriculum implementation in Islamic boarding schools but also contributes a contextual evaluation model and empirical findings on curriculum integration strategies, which can serve as references for Islamic education stakeholders seeking to optimize national curriculum policies without diminishing the distinctive values of pesantren education.

Based on these gaps and urgencies, the study aimed to: (1) evaluate the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic boarding schools at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah level in Agam Regency, West Sumatra, in terms of preparation, including educators' readiness, the completeness of learning devices, and the availability of supporting resources; (2) assess the implementation process; and (3) evaluate the outcomes, including students' learning achievements, the impact on competency development, and the alignment of outcomes with curriculum objectives. The findings are expected to provide scientific contributions in the form of a contextual evaluation model for Merdeka Curriculum implementation in Islamic boarding schools, as well as practical recommendations to improve the quality of implementation in other madrasahs, particularly those operating under Islamic boarding schools across Indonesia.

## **Research Method**

This study was designed as an evaluative study employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach. Methodologically, quantitative data served as the primary basis for evaluation and were subsequently elaborated and explained through qualitative data. An evaluative orientation was selected because the main objective of the study was to assess the quality of Merdeka Curriculum implementation based on predefined criteria and standards, rather than merely describing the implementation phenomenon.

The evaluation model applied in this study was Stake's Countenance Evaluation Model (Stake, 1967), selected for three main reasons. First, this model provides a comprehensive framework encompassing three critical stages of curriculum implementation: antecedents (readiness), transactions (process), and outcomes (results), aligning with the need for a holistic evaluation of a newly implemented curriculum. Second, the Countenance model emphasizes comparison between intended conditions (intentions) and actual conditions (observations), which is particularly relevant for identifying implementation gaps in the Merdeka Curriculum within Islamic boarding schools. Third, compared to other evaluation models, such as CIPP (Context, Input, Process, Product), which is more oriented toward managerial decision-making, or the Goal-Free Evaluation model, which disregards formal objectives, the Countenance model is more suitable for this study due to its focus on comprehensive description and standards-based judgment, allowing systematic identification of strengths and weaknesses in curriculum implementation.

The research sample included all stakeholders involved in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in five Islamic boarding school-based Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) in Agam Regency, West Sumatra. Participants comprised five principals (total sampling), five vice principals for curriculum affairs (total sampling), 25 subject teachers (purposive

sampling), and 234 students from the five schools (stratified proportional random sampling), determined using the Slovin formula ( $e = 5\%$ ) with an additional 10% margin, proportionally distributed across each MTs. The instrument grid is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Instrument Grid

No	Stage	Aspect	Indicator	Instrument	Scale
1	Antecedents	Readiness of agencies in implementing the Merdeka curriculum	Human Resource Readiness	<i>Questionnaire</i>	Likert 1-4
			Facilities and Infrastructure Readiness	Document analysis	Dichotomous 0-1
2	Transactions	Process of Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum	Preliminary, main and conclusion activities	<i>Questionnaire</i>	Likert 1-4
3	Outcomes	Results of the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum	Learning Outcomes	Document analysis	Dichotomous 0-1
			Inhibiting Factors and Impacts of the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum	Semi-structured interviews	-

The interview instrument consisted of a semi-structured guide comprising 12 open-ended questions developed around three main focal areas. First, the impact of Merdeka Curriculum implementation (5 questions), which addressed changes in instructional practices, student motivation and participation, the development of creativity and learner autonomy, classroom interaction patterns, and significant positive and negative effects observed during implementation. Second, implementation barriers (5 questions), which explored constraints at the preparation stage, challenges during instructional implementation, limitations in facilities and infrastructure, assessment-related difficulties, and external factors influencing curriculum implementation. Third, strategies for overcoming barriers (2 questions), which investigated efforts undertaken by schools and the types of support required to improve implementation quality. Each main question was accompanied by probing questions to elicit deeper and more contextualized information based on participants' responses. All quantitative instruments, including teacher questionnaires, student questionnaires, and document analysis checklists, underwent a three-stage validation process. First, content validity was assessed using Aiken's V formula to measure expert agreement from five experts, comprising three educational evaluation specialists and two curriculum experts. All instruments achieved V values greater than 0.80, indicating high content validity (Aiken, 1985). Second, construct validity was evaluated through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) using SmartPLS to examine the dimensional structure of the instruments. Third, reliability was estimated using Cronbach's Alpha, following the criteria proposed by George and Mallery (2003). Detailed results of the validity and reliability testing are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Analysis Validity and Reliability Results			
Instrument	Content Validity	Construct Validity	Reliability Estimation
Teacher Questionnaire	> 0.80 (High)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• KMO = 0.669</li> <li>• Bartlett's = 0.000</li> <li>• MSA anti-image = &gt; 0.50</li> <li>• Loading value = &gt; 0.50</li> </ul>	0.719 (Acceptable)
Student Questionnaire	> 0.80 (High)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• KMO = 0.641</li> <li>• Bartlett's = 0.000</li> <li>• MSA anti-image = &gt; 0.50</li> <li>• Loading value = &gt; 0.50</li> </ul>	0.855 (Good)
Document Review	> 0.80 (High)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• KMO = 0.860</li> <li>• Bartlett's = 0.000</li> <li>• MSA anti-image = &gt; 0.50</li> <li>• Loading value = &gt; 0.50</li> </ul>	0.717 (Acceptable)

The requirements for Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) were met, as indicated by Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) values exceeding 0.60 and a significant Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity ( $p < 0.001$ ) for all instruments. The Measure of Sampling Adequacy (MSA) values in the anti-image correlation matrix were greater than 0.50 for all items, and factor loadings above 0.50 indicated that each item adequately measured its intended construct. The interview guide was validated through expert judgment and pilot testing involving two principals outside the research sample to ensure clarity and relevance of the questions to the research objectives. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in three stages. First, raw scores were converted into percentages according to the measurement scale employed. The resulting percentages were then categorized based on the criteria proposed by Arikunto (2010). Qualitative data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis following the six systematic phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), with the coding process supported by NVivo 12 software to ensure consistency and traceability. Internal coherence (homogeneity within themes) was maintained by ensuring that all codes within a theme shared similar meanings, while external differentiation (heterogeneity across themes) was ensured by verifying that each theme was clearly distinct from the others.

Integration of quantitative and qualitative data was achieved through method triangulation. Quantitative findings regarding the impacts and barriers of curriculum implementation were confirmed, elaborated, and explained using interview data. Patterns of convergence (similar findings) and divergence (contrasting findings) across data sources were identified to strengthen the validity of the results. The triangulation process involved comparing descriptive statistical results from the questionnaires with themes emerging from interviews to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

## Result and Discussion

### Result

The antecedent stage examined aspects of institutional readiness for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, which were categorized into human resource readiness among teachers and facilities and infrastructure readiness, based on document analysis. Human resource readiness was assessed in terms of: (1) teachers' readiness in learning planning, (2) technical readiness, and (3) professional competence of teachers. Figure 1 presents the results of the analysis of human resource readiness.

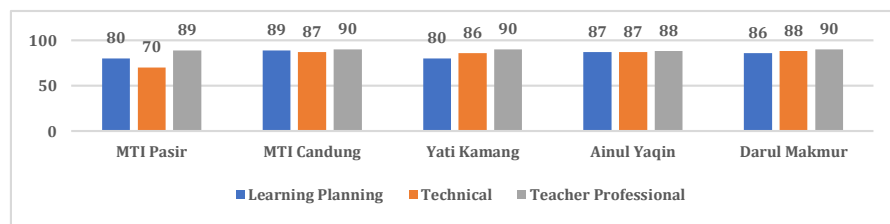


Figure 1. Results of Human Resource Readiness Analysis

Based on the analysis, the average level of human resource readiness across the five educational institutions reached 86%. An internal imbalance was observed at MTI Pasir, where a considerable gap existed between the learning planning aspect and technical readiness. This indicated that teachers' ability to design learning was not fully supported by their technical mastery, creating obstacles in translating concepts into practice. In contrast, the other four institutions demonstrated more balanced and integrated readiness profiles across the three measured aspects. Interestingly, despite variations in planning and technical readiness, teacher professionalism was consistently high across all institutions, suggesting that educators' commitment and professional attitudes were not significantly affected by their technical skills. The condition at MTI Pasir likely reflected challenges related to transitioning or adapting to new competency demands, whereby teachers exhibited strong dedication and pedagogical understanding but had not yet fully mastered the technical tools or methods required in contemporary learning.

**Table 3.** Antecedent Evaluation Matrix stage on Human Resource Readiness

Description Matrix		Judgement Matrix	
Intent	Observation	Standard	Judgment
Human resource readiness in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum was related to learning planning, technical competence, and teachers' professionalism	The actual level of achievement reached an average score of 86%, which was categorized as good	The standards in the preparation for implementation were: (1) the ability to build an educational unit culture that supported the implementation of Merdeka Learning; (2) the ability to understand the roles of human resources involved in the implementation of learning; and (3) the ability to encourage the strengthening of educators' capacity in implementing learning activities	All aspects of human resource readiness were in good condition, and there were no significant differences among schools.



The matrix in Table 1 shows that the schools' human resource readiness falls within the "good" category. Human resource readiness serves as an essential foundation for the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. These results indicate that educators possess a solid level of understanding; however, shortcomings remain in the area of technical readiness, particularly in the preparation and utilization of learning media. Regarding the antecedent aspect of facilities and infrastructure readiness, the indicators assessed included educational equipment, books, learning media, classrooms, administrative offices, principals' offices, arts rooms, libraries, laboratories, bathrooms, prayer rooms, and canteens. The results of this analysis are presented in Figure 2.

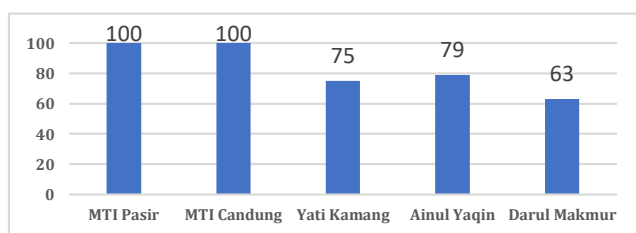


Figure 2. Results of the Analysis of Facilities and Infrastructure Readiness

Figure 2 shows that MTI Pasir and MTI Candung achieved a complete level of facilities and infrastructure across all indicators, reaching 100%. Yati Kamang scored 75%, categorized as "good," due to the absence of certain facilities, such as classrooms without electricity and incomplete educational equipment. Darul Makmur attained 79%, also in the "good" category, with several facilities still unavailable, including an arts room and a canteen. Ainul Yaqin achieved 62.5%, classified as "good," although several indicators were incomplete, such as the absence of a library and shared bathrooms for both educators and students.

**Table 4.** Antecedent Evaluation Matrix stage on Facilities and Infrastructure

Description Matrix		Judgement Matrix	
Intent	Observation	Standard	Judgment
Readiness of facilities and infrastructure	The actual level of achievement reached an average score of 81%, which was categorized as good	The standards in the preparation for implementation were: (1) classrooms were sufficiently spacious and conducive to differentiated learning and project-based activities; (2) supporting rooms were available; and (3) learning media and learning resources were complete	There were four schools in the very good category and one school in the sufficient category

Table 2 presents the evaluation matrix for facilities and infrastructure readiness. The results indicate that the achievement scores fall within the "good" category, influenced by several factors. First, classrooms were generally available and equipped with desks, chairs, and other learning tools; however, some classrooms experienced issues with electricity supply, limiting the implementation of learning activities that required powered media. At the process stage of learning implementation, Figure 3 presents the results of the analysis of students' learning processes.

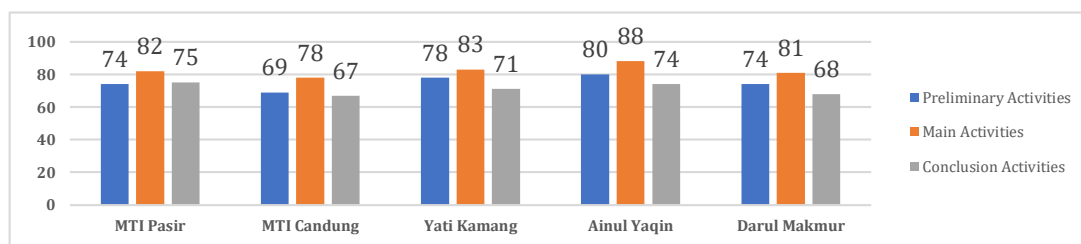


Figure 3. Results of Learning Implementation Analysis

Figure 3 presents the results of the analysis of the overall success of the implementation stage for each Islamic boarding school across all indicators. The analysis shows that MTI Pasir achieved 77% (very good), MTI Candung 71% (good), Yati Kamang 77% (good), Ainul Yaqin 80% (good), and Darul Makmur 74% (good). Further details are provided in the matrix presented in Table 3.

**Table 5.** Process Evaluation Matrix stage on learning process

Description Matrix		Judgement Matrix	
Intent	Observation	Standard	Judgment
The implementation of learning included initial activities, optimization of the implementation process, and closing activities	The implementation of learning included initial activities, optimization of the implementation process, and closing activities	The standards in learning were inspirational, enjoyable, challenging, participatory, and fostered independence as well as mentoring	All schools were included in the good category

The final stage was the outcomes stage, which involved analyzing the document review sheets of students' learning outcomes in Islamic boarding schools at the MTs level in Agam Regency, West Sumatra. The completeness of the students' learning outcome documents from each Islamic boarding school is presented in Figure 4.

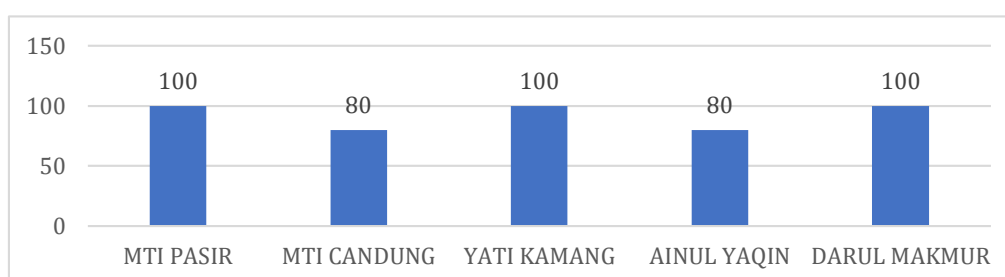


Figure 4. Results of Student Learning Outcomes Analysis

Figure 4 shows that, for the indicator of completeness of students' learning assessment documents, not all Islamic boarding schools achieved 100%. Of the five schools, three had complete and appropriate documents, obtaining a score of 100%, whereas MTI Canduang and Ainul Yaqin had appropriate documents but only achieved 80% due to shortcomings in the attitude assessment component. Further details are presented in the results matrix in Table 4.

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**Table 4.** Outcomes Evaluation Matrix stage on output learning

Description Matrix		Judgement Matrix	
Intent	Observation	Standard	Judgment
The assessment results were informative by showing students' learning outcomes	The average score achieved in the document review was 92%, which was categorized as very good	The standards used were based on the reviewed document indicators, namely task assessment, daily test assessment, mid-semester examination assessment, end-of-semester examination assessment, and attitude assessment	The analysis results showed that several schools had performed very well; however, some were still lacking because teachers tended to assess students' attitudes in class rather than using formal assessment sheets

The outcomes stage also examined the inhibiting factors and impacts of Merdeka Curriculum implementation, based on interviews with principals and teachers. At MTI Pasir, challenges included teachers' continued reliance on the 2013 Curriculum, difficulties in adapting to the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in preparing teaching modules, and limited technological literacy. At MTI Candung, the main obstacles involved module preparation and funding constraints for implementing Pancasila project-based learning. Yati Kamang faced challenges related to incomplete facilities and infrastructure, as well as limited knowledge and skills in using information technology. Similarly, Ainul Yaqin encountered obstacles primarily due to insufficient facilities and infrastructure, which hindered the teaching and learning process. At Darul Makmur, challenges included a lack of training or workshops on module development and other teaching materials, alongside limited teacher proficiency in effectively utilizing information technology and learning-support applications.

Despite these obstacles, the impacts of the Merdeka Curriculum were generally positive. At MTI Pasir, both students and teachers became more enthusiastic and creative. At MTI Candung, the implementation encouraged greater student creativity and motivation. At Yati Kamang, increased independence and creativity were observed among both teachers and students. At Ainul Yaqin, the curriculum fostered enhanced creativity and learning motivation among students. At Darul Makmur, students demonstrated increased enthusiasm when participating in Pancasila profile-based project learning. Overall, the findings indicate that the main challenges were related to module and teaching material preparation, limited utilization of existing learning resources such as student worksheets, and insufficient technological competence among teachers. One potential solution is the provision of in-depth training and workshops focused on developing teaching materials and learning modules. Nevertheless, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at MTs-level Islamic boarding schools in Agam Regency, West Sumatra, resulted in heightened creativity among students and teachers, with students displaying greater enthusiasm for learning, particularly in Pancasila profile-based project activities.

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## Discussion

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic boarding school-based Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) in Agam Regency, West Sumatra, demonstrated notable achievement in human resource readiness, with an average score of 86%. This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing that teacher readiness is a crucial factor in the successful implementation of new curricula (Labib, Ihsanuddin, & Ikhrom, 2024). Human resource readiness, encompassing lesson planning, technical readiness, and teacher professionalism, indicated that the majority of educators possessed a solid conceptual understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum. However, an internal imbalance was observed at MTI Pasir, reflecting a gap between planning abilities and technical mastery, a phenomenon also identified in studies on curriculum implementation in Indonesia, where the translation from concept to practice often encounters technical and operational challenges (Faiz & Kurniawaty, 2020).

Teacher professionalism, which exhibited high consistency across all institutions, suggested that educators' commitment was not significantly affected by limitations in technical competency. This finding reinforces the view that professional attitude and teacher dedication constitute essential foundational capital in educational transformation processes (Sofia, Hidayah, & Saqinah, 2024). Research on teacher competence during curriculum changes has shown that high professionalism can serve as a foundation for developing other competencies through continuous training and mentoring (Sari & Asmendri, 2020). Accordingly, although gaps in technical readiness exist, a strong professional base can act as a leverage point for accelerating teacher capacity development in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum.

Facilities and infrastructure readiness varied significantly among institutions, with achievement scores ranging from 62.5% to 100%. MTI Pasir and MTI Candung achieved optimal completeness (100%), while Ainul Yaqin remained in the adequate category with 62.5%. This disparity reflects the longstanding challenge of educational facility equity in Indonesia, particularly in regions with diverse geographical and economic conditions (Indarta, Jalinus, Waskito, Samala, Riyanda, & Adi, 2022). Limitations in facilities and infrastructure, such as classrooms without electricity, inadequate libraries, and shared sanitation facilities for educators and students, represent structural obstacles affecting curriculum implementation quality. Previous research on educational infrastructure emphasizes that adequate facilities not only support the learning process but also create a conducive environment for differentiated and project-based learning, which are key characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum (Angga, Suryana, Nurwahidah, Hernawan, & Prihantini, 2022).

Analysis of learning implementation revealed an average achievement of 76%, categorized as *"good"* across all Islamic boarding schools. Score variations among institutions, ranging from 71% to 80%, indicated that the learning process generally adhered to the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes inspirational, enjoyable, challenging, and participatory learning. This finding aligns with evaluations of Merdeka Curriculum implementation in other regions, which also reported generally good

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performance at the implementation stage, though with room for improvement (Mardiana & Emmiyati, 2024). Success at this stage suggests that teachers were able to translate Merdeka Curriculum concepts into daily classroom practices, despite ongoing technical and infrastructure limitations. Regarding differentiated learning, a key feature of the Merdeka Curriculum, student questionnaire data provided insight into actual classroom practices. Analysis of items measuring differentiated learning showed that 68% of students reported receiving assignments with varying levels of difficulty according to their abilities. In the core learning activity dimension, 72% of students at MTI Candung and 70% at Ainul Yaqin indicated that teachers offered learning activities tailored to their interests, whereas only 54% of students at MTI Pasir reported similar experiences. These results suggest that the implementation of differentiated learning varies across institutions and has not yet been consistently applied in all classes.

Interview data further contextualized these findings. The Principal of MTI Candung stated, *"We encouraged teachers to provide task choices to students. For example, in science lessons, students could choose to create written reports, experiment videos, or infographic posters according to their strengths and learning preferences."* Similarly, the Vice Principal of Ainul Yaqin explained, *"Our mathematics teacher began grouping students based on understanding levels and providing problems of varying complexity, although this is still in the early stages."* Conversely, the Vice Principal of Yati Kamang acknowledged, *"Teachers still struggled to design truly differentiated learning due to limited understanding of students' diverse learning needs and insufficient preparation time to develop materials at varying difficulty levels."*

The limitations in implementing differentiated learning align with Tomlinson (2014), who emphasized that differentiated learning is not merely a teaching technique but a learning philosophy requiring a fundamental paradigm shift from a one-size-fits-all approach toward learning that responds to student diversity. Effective implementation demands careful planning, deep understanding of student characteristics, and flexibility in execution. The gap between the conceptual understanding of differentiated learning and actual classroom practice reflects challenges also reported by Assirri (2025) and Sitorus (2025), indicating that teachers require intensive training encompassing both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. This includes designing and implementing differentiated learning, employing diagnostic assessment strategies to identify student learning needs, applying flexible grouping techniques, and developing teaching materials with varying levels of complexity. Although awareness of differentiated learning is present, transforming traditional practices into differentiated approaches still requires systematic and sustained support.

The assessment of student learning outcomes showed the highest achievement, with an average score of 92%, falling into the "very good" category. The completeness of assessment documents, including assignments, daily tests, mid-semester exams, end-of-semester exams, and attitude assessments, indicates that the assessment system has been functioning well. However, two Islamic boarding schools exhibited deficiencies in the attitude assessment component, achieving only 80%, as teachers tended to conduct

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attitude assessments informally without structured instruments. This reflects challenges in implementing authentic assessment, a cornerstone of the Merdeka Curriculum (Arifin & Retnawati, 2017). Previous research in Indonesian schools has similarly noted that teachers often struggle to operationalize affective assessments, which require systematic observation and consistent documentation.

Although the outcomes aspect demonstrated very good achievement (92%), this finding warrants critical interpretation, given the contrast with identified implementation obstacles such as difficulties in developing teaching modules, limited technological literacy, and insufficient facilities and infrastructure. The high score primarily reflects the completeness of administrative documentation rather than the substantive quality of overall learning implementation. Further analysis suggests that while assessment documents were largely complete, this does not necessarily indicate authentic assessments aligned with Merdeka Curriculum principles, which emphasize formative, holistic, and competency-based evaluation. This discrepancy highlights a gap between formal-administrative achievement and actual classroom practice, where teachers successfully documented various types of assessments but had not fully integrated assessment as an integral part of learning that provides meaningful feedback for student improvement.

The apparent contradiction between high evaluative achievement and the presence of significant technical obstacles can be explained through three analytical perspectives. First, from a methodological perspective, the evaluation instruments used in this study were more sensitive to compliance (administrative adherence) than to the quality (substantive practice) of implementation. The document review instrument, which employed a dichotomous scale (available/not available), effectively measured document completeness but had limitations in capturing the quality of the content. For example, the existence of attitude assessment documents received full marks even if the instruments did not fully reflect comprehensive, authentic assessment principles. This limitation aligns with criticisms of checklist-based evaluations, which tend to emphasize procedural rather than substantive aspects (Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014). Second, from an organizational behavior perspective, the high teacher professionalism observed in the antecedent stage, consistent across all institutions, motivated teachers to fulfill administrative obligations despite technical challenges in learning implementation. Teachers' dedication and commitment to the new curriculum encouraged the completion of required documents as a form of professional accountability, even when they faced difficulties in module development or using learning technology. This phenomenon reflects what Fullan (2007) termed "false clarity," wherein changes appear on the surface, through document completeness and formal procedures, but are not yet accompanied by deep shifts in paradigms or practices. In other words, Islamic boarding schools had succeeded at the adoption stage (fulfilling formal Merdeka Curriculum requirements) but were still progressing toward the implementation stage (substantive execution) and institutionalization (internalization into school culture).

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Third, from a temporal perspective, the evaluation was conducted during the early stages of Merdeka Curriculum implementation (first or second year), when institutional focus is naturally on meeting formal requirements and structural adjustments. Transforming learning paradigms into daily practice is a gradual process, typically requiring several years to become fully internalized. Research on educational change cycles indicates that new curriculum implementation generally takes three to five years to reach the institutionalization stage, where new practices are fully embedded in school culture and become taken-for-granted routines (Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2020). The finding that formal achievement was high despite persistent substantive obstacles is therefore a common pattern in the early phase of educational policy implementation, reflecting a gap between policy and practice that requires sustained support to close.

This interpretation aligns with Stufflebeam's program evaluation framework, which distinguishes between merit (intrinsic quality of the program) and worth (value of the program in a particular context). High achievement in the outcomes aspect demonstrates good merit in terms of administrative completeness, but the worth, substantive value in improving learning quality, requires additional time and support to be fully realized. Thus, although formal achievement was categorized as very good, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic boarding schools remains at the adoption-implementation stage and requires ongoing support, including intensive training, school-based mentoring, infrastructure enhancement, and the creation of a conducive learning culture, to achieve quality institutionalization. This conclusion underscores the urgency of the research recommendations regarding continuous professional development and intensive mentoring for teachers to implement the Merdeka Curriculum substantively, rather than merely fulfilling administrative requirements.

Implementation obstacles of the Merdeka Curriculum, as identified from interview results, showed a consistent pattern across the five Islamic boarding schools, namely difficulties in developing teaching modules, limited technological literacy, and inadequate facilities and infrastructure. This finding aligns with studies on new curriculum implementation challenges in Indonesia, which highlight that shifts in learning paradigms require not only conceptual understanding but also technical competence in developing learning tools (Mansyur, 2020). Difficulties in developing teaching modules reflected a transition from reliance on conventional textbooks and student worksheets to creating teaching materials that are more contextual and adaptive to student needs. Research on module development within the Merdeka Curriculum context indicates that teachers require intensive mentoring and exposure to examples of good practice to develop high-quality teaching modules (Syahfitri, Akhadi, & Rizka, 2022).

Limited technological literacy among educators emerged as a significant obstacle in the digital learning era. Many teachers still struggled with using learning support applications and integrating technology into pedagogy, reflecting the digital divide that persists among educators, particularly in areas with limited access to technology (Rahma, Harjono, & Sulisty, 2023). Studies on teachers' digital competence emphasize that technology literacy development requires continuous, contextualized training programs,

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combining technical skills with guidance on pedagogical integration (Demissie, Labiso, & Thuo, 2022). This challenge is further compounded by infrastructure limitations, such as classrooms without electricity, which hinder the use of digital learning media.

Despite these challenges, the positive impacts of Merdeka Curriculum implementation were observed across all Islamic boarding schools. Students demonstrated increased creativity and learning enthusiasm, while teachers exhibited greater engagement in the instructional process. These findings support the notion that the Merdeka Curriculum, with its emphasis on student-centered, project-based, and differentiated learning, can enhance student motivation and engagement (Irawati, Iqbal, Hasanah, & Arifin, 2022). The observed increases in student independence and creativity align with the Merdeka Curriculum's goal of developing the Pancasila student profile, which emphasizes independence, creativity, and good character. Research on project-based learning further confirms that this approach is effective in fostering 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication (Priyatni & Nurhadi, 2017).

Proposed solutions to overcome these implementation obstacles include in-depth training and workshops focused on developing teaching modules and enhancing teachers' technological competence. This approach aligns with the principle of continuous professional development, emphasizing practice-based learning and sustained mentoring (Putranto & Shavira, 2024). Studies on teacher training effectiveness indicate that hands-on, contextual training coupled with school-based mentoring enables teachers to directly apply acquired knowledge and skills in daily classroom practices (Sumarsih, Marliyani, Hadiyansah, Hernawan, & Prihantini, 2022). Additionally, the development of adequate educational infrastructure is a critical prerequisite for supporting optimal implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Overall, the evaluation of Merdeka Curriculum implementation in Islamic boarding school-based Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) in Agam Regency, West Sumatra, indicated that, despite various challenges and obstacles, implementation proceeded at good to very good levels across multiple aspects, particularly in the formal administrative dimension. However, this high formal achievement should be interpreted cautiously, as substantive transformation in learning practices remains in progress and requires sustained support. The findings suggest that, with adequate support in the form of continuous training, sufficient infrastructure, intensive mentoring, and the establishment of professional learning communities, Islamic boarding schools have significant potential to serve as agents of educational transformation through Merdeka Curriculum implementation. Furthermore, the success of implementation in this context demonstrates that Islamic education can adapt to national educational policy changes while maintaining its distinct Islamic characteristics and values (Muali, Islam, Bali, Hefniy, Baharun, Mundiri, Jasri, & Fauzi, 2018). Future research is needed to identify best practices in Merdeka Curriculum implementation in Islamic boarding schools that could serve as models for other Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia.



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This research has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved only five Islamic boarding schools in a single geographical area, so generalization to all Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia should be approached cautiously, considering the diversity of pesantren characteristics across regions. Second, data collection occurred during the early stages of Merdeka Curriculum implementation, so the outcomes evaluation could not yet measure student learning achievement quantitatively in terms of average grades or mastery rates. Instead, this study focused on the completeness of assessment documentation and qualitative impacts based on stakeholder perceptions, limiting observation of long-term effects on student learning outcomes. Third, the research emphasized institutional-level implementation and did not explore in depth the perspectives of students as primary learners. Fourth, limitations of the research instruments in capturing qualitative aspects, such as changes in teacher mindsets and the transformation of learning culture, suggest the need for more in-depth approaches in future studies. Fifth, this study did not develop instruments to systematically measure the achievement of Pancasila Student Profile dimensions, so alignment between learning outcomes and curriculum goals, particularly regarding student character development, could not yet be quantitatively assessed.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, the regional government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Agam Regency, should design tiered and continuous training programs focused on developing teachers' technical competencies in teaching module development and digital literacy, incorporating direct school-based mentoring (Sulfemi, 2019). Second, special budget allocations are needed to improve educational infrastructure, particularly electrical installations, procurement of technological equipment, and the completeness of facilities according to national standards. Third, the formation of professional learning communities among Islamic boarding schools could facilitate the sharing of best practices, especially since some institutions had already achieved optimal readiness levels. Fourth, future research is recommended to employ mixed-methods approaches with direct classroom observations, involve broader samples, conduct longitudinal studies to assess long-term impacts on graduate competencies, and develop evaluation instruments sensitive to the distinctive characteristics of Islamic boarding school learning, including the integration of Islamic values.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the evaluation of Merdeka Curriculum implementation in five Islamic boarding schools at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah level in Agam Regency, West Sumatra, using Stake's Countenance Evaluation Model, it can be concluded that, overall, implementation proceeded well across the three evaluation stages. At the antecedents (preparation) stage, teacher readiness was categorized as good, with adequate pedagogical competence. However, a gap was identified between teachers' instructional planning abilities and their technical mastery, particularly in the development of teaching modules and the use of educational technology. Facilities and infrastructure readiness was also classified as good,

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yet significant disparities were observed among institutions. Key issues included the absence of electricity in some classrooms, limited educational equipment, and insufficient supporting facilities. Then, at the transactions (implementation) stage, learning activities were conducted in accordance with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, being inspiring, enjoyable, challenging, and participatory, and achieved a good category across all institutions. Despite this, challenges remained in transforming instructional paradigms from teacher-centered to student-centered approaches, as well as in ensuring consistent implementation of differentiated instruction. At the outcomes stage, the completeness of assessment system documentation was categorized as very good. Nonetheless, weaknesses were observed in the attitude assessment component, indicating the need for more structured instruments. Qualitative evaluation of implementation impacts, based on stakeholders' perceptions, revealed significant positive effects, including increased creativity among students and educators, enhanced learning motivation and student independence, and high levels of enthusiasm in the learning process.

The main obstacles identified included teachers' habitual reliance on the 2013 Curriculum, difficulties in developing teaching modules, limited technological literacy, inadequate facilities and infrastructure, and constrained funding for project-based learning. A key finding demonstrated that Islamic boarding schools in Agam Regency successfully maintained their institutional identity and distinctive Islamic values while adopting the Merdeka Curriculum through a harmonious integration of the pesantren and national curricula. These institutions adapted learning practices to accommodate Merdeka Curriculum characteristics, such as differentiated instruction and project-based learning, while simultaneously preserving religious values and Minangkabau local wisdom. This integration positions Islamic boarding schools as models for balancing educational modernization with the preservation of pesantren traditions.

Overall, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic boarding schools at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah level in Agam Regency reflected strong readiness and commitment. However, systematic and sustained support remains necessary, including continuous teacher professional development, infrastructure improvement, adequate resource provision, and the cultivation of an organizational culture that encourages instructional innovation. Such efforts are essential to achieve national education goals while maintaining the distinctive characteristics and noble values of pesantren education. Future research should conduct longitudinal studies to measure the long-term quantitative impacts of Merdeka Curriculum implementation on student learning outcomes and graduate competencies. Additionally, further studies should develop systematic instruments to assess the achievement of Pancasila Student Profile dimensions and explore curriculum integration mechanisms between pesantren and national curricula, which could serve as best practices for other Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia.

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## Ethical Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. Permissions were obtained from school authorities, and informed consent was secured from all participants, including parental consent for students. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. Data were used solely for research purposes, and all findings were reported accurately and objectively.

## CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

- **Author 1:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft Preparation
- **Author 2:** Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing, Validation, Project Administration.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this article.

## Data Availability

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available upon reasonable request.

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