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Analysis of Teacher Professionalism in Implementing the Independent Learning Program in Islamic Educational Units

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Abstract

This study examines teacher professionalism in the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) program within Islamic educational institutions. The Merdeka Belajar initiative, launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, seeks to foster a flexible and inclusive learning ecosystem, empower teachers to design curricula responsive to students' characteristics, and enhance the overall quality of education. Employing a qualitative approach with a case study design, this research utilizes in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis as its primary data collection techniques. The study focuses on identifying the challenges teachers encounter in designing, implementing, and evaluating instruction aligned with Merdeka Belajar principles, as well as the factors influencing teacher professionalism, including leadership support, professional development opportunities, and resource availability. The findings reveal that while most teachers have adopted the Merdeka Belajar framework, significant challenges persist regarding conceptual understanding, teacher preparedness, and resource constraints. These results underscore the necessity for more comprehensive training programs and stronger institutional support to optimize the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar program, particularly within Islamic educational contexts.

Keywords: Curriculum, Independence Study, Teacher professionalism

1. Introduction

The curriculum serves as a fundamental instrument for achieving the objectives of advanced education; therefore, it requires systematic planning aligned with national educational goals.[1] It also functions as a framework for guiding and organizing educational activities.[2] A well-developed curriculum plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of education in a country, as education itself is inherently represented through the curriculum.[3] In Indonesia, curriculum reform and development have undergone several phases, influenced by various factors such as changes in national policy, evolving times, shifting social phenomena, and emerging educational needs.[4, 5]

The evolution of the Indonesian curriculum began with the Rencana Pelajaran 1947 (Lesson Plan Curriculum of 1947), followed by the curricula of 1964, 1968, 1975, 1984, 1994, the Competency-Based Curriculum, the 2006 Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan (School-Based Curriculum), the 2013 Curriculum, and most recently, the Merdeka Belajar (Independent Learning) Curriculum.[6] The Merdeka Belajar curriculum revitalizes the national education system by fostering core competencies and creating more engaging and enjoyable learning experiences. From a pedagogical perspective, Merdeka Belajar promotes competency- and values-based learning, curriculum flexibility, and assessments tailored to individual learner needs through a student-centered approach. In terms of curriculum design, it emphasizes competency-based structures focused on developing soft skills and character building. Regarding assessment, Merdeka Belajar introduces formative and portfolio-based evaluation systems to support continuous learning and holistic student development [7].

The Merdeka Belajar (Independent Learning) program initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) of Indonesia aims to create a more flexible, inclusive, and adaptive learning ecosystem that responds to students' diverse needs. This program grants greater autonomy to teachers in designing and implementing curricula that align with the unique characteristics and potential of each learner, thereby fostering meaningful learning outcomes. Moreover, Merdeka Belajar emphasizes project-based and practice-oriented learning, as well as the integration of technology in the educational process, with the overarching goal of preparing students to face future challenges more effectively.[8]

In this context, teacher professionalism in implementing the Merdeka Belajar (Independent Learning) program constitutes a pivotal element in ensuring the success of the initiative. Teacher professionalism entails the capacity to design, implement, and evaluate learning processes that are aligned with the fundamental principles of independent learning.[9, 10] Accordingly, teachers are expected to possess a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical foundations of independent learning, demonstrate adaptability to dynamic curricular changes, and exhibit proficiency in the integration of technology and the application of innovative pedagogical methods.[11] Moreover, teachers must cultivate evaluative competencies that enable them to assess the effectiveness of instructional approaches employed in the classroom, monitor student development, and engage in systematic reflection aimed at continuous improvement.[12] Consequently, teachers in Islamic education settings are required to possess an in-depth understanding of both pedagogical principles and religious values, coupled with the ability to harmonize the ideals of Merdeka Belajar with the spiritual and moral objectives of Islamic education. As such, the enhancement of teacher professionalism in these institutions becomes an essential prerequisite for realizing the transformative goals envisioned by the Merdeka Belajar policy.

In the context of Islamic educational institutions, however, the implementation of this program presents unique and multifaceted challenges. In addition to complying with the standards of the national curriculum, these institutions must also integrate Islamic values that serve as their defining educational foundation [13, 14] This requires teachers to have a deep understanding and adequate skills in aligning the principles of Merdeka Belajar with the objectives of Islamic education.

Thus, the implementation of the Independent Study program faces various challenges in the field, such as teachers' readiness to adopt a new paradigm, limitations in available resources, and differing interpretations of the Independent Study framework itself. Several studies indicate that the level of teacher professionalism is one of the key determining factors in the successful implementation of educational policies. Therefore, it is important to analyze teacher professionalism within the context of the implementation of the Independent Study program to provide strategic input for improving teacher capacity.

Based on preliminary research conducted, it appears that not all teachers possess sufficient understanding of the Independent Study framework or how to apply it effectively in the classroom. Many teachers still encounter difficulties in designing flexible and innovative learning activities that meet students' needs while maintaining alignment with curriculum objectives. The implementation of the Independent Study program thus encounters numerous obstacles, including limited teacher readiness to embrace the new paradigm, inadequate resource allocation, and inconsistent comprehension of the program's objectives. Furthermore, constraints in training and technical support also serve as significant barriers to effective implementation, particularly within Islamic educational institutions.

Several previous studies have explored curriculum development and implementation in Indonesia, as well as the role of teacher professionalism in this process. Hidayat et al. examined the dynamics of curriculum development in Indonesia and noted significant transformations from the 1947 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum, which required educators to continually adapt to evolving educational policies[6]. In this regard, research by Malikah et al. highlighted learning management in the Merdeka Curriculum, which was designed to increase flexibility and be competency-based, and how this was applied in mathematics learning in elementary schools.[4] A study by Insani also reviewed curriculum development from the independence era to the present, emphasizing the importance of adapting the curriculum to the needs of the times and social dynamics.[2] Research by Mufidah identified challenges faced by teachers in improving their professionalism, especially in the face of the increasing demands of globalization.[10] Research by Prahastina et al. further discussed the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation on student achievement and how these curriculum changes contributed to learning effectiveness.[13]

In a related study, Malikah et al. discussed learning management under the Merdeka Curriculum, which was designed to enhance flexibility and promote a competency-based approach, particularly in the context of mathematics instruction at the elementary level [15] Mulyono et al. presented an academic study related to the Independent Curriculum, focusing on the strategies and challenges faced by educators in implementing this curriculum.[16] In addition, Sahrandi and Bahri discussed the importance of teacher involvement in curriculum development to improve the quality of education and how teacher professionalism can support the successful implementation of a more effective curriculum.[17] Finally, Yamin and Syahrir examined educational development within the Independent Learning framework, emphasizing flexible and student-centered learning methods, which are essential components of this study.[18]

Despite numerous studies discussing the independent curriculum and national efforts to promote the Merdeka Belajar program, many teachers in Islamic educational institutions face challenges in aligning the program's principles with their Islamic educational values. The execution of the Merdeka Belajar program in Islamic education must not only adhere to the national curriculum but also take into account the religious values and attributes of the students in those institutions. This paper addresses the gap in educational literature regarding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic educational institutions, particularly in the context of teacher professionalism. Although numerous previous studies have addressed various aspects of the curriculum in Indonesia, such as the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum, the Independent Curriculum, and teacher professionalism in general education, few have explicitly examined the challenges and professionalism of teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum in Islamic educational institutions. The novelty of this research lies in its primary focus on examining how teachers in Islamic educational institutions design, implement, and evaluate flexible, student-centered learning, in accordance with the principles of Merdeka Belajar, while still considering Islamic values. Furthermore, this study also identifies specific challenges faced by teachers in integrating the national curriculum with Islamic educational values and explores factors influencing teacher professionalism in this context, such as support from school leaders, resource availability, and training provided. Therefore, this study offers

a new perspective in understanding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which is more inclusive, adaptive, and contextual to the needs and characteristics of Islamic education.

Referring to the above problem, this study aims to analyze teacher professionalism in implementing Referring to the aforementioned problem, this study aims to analyze teacher professionalism in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) program within Islamic educational institutions. The primary focus of this research is to examine teachers' competencies in designing, implementing, and evaluating learning activities aligned with the principles of independent learning. In addition, this study seeks to identify factors influencing teacher professionalism, including leadership support, the availability of resources, and the training provided to teachers.

This study extends previous research by exploring the specific context of Islamic education, which presents unique challenges in integrating the national curriculum with Islamic values. The findings are expected to contribute significantly to the body of literature on Indonesian education, particularly in enhancing understanding of how teachers in Islamic educational institutions can design, implement, and evaluate flexible, student-centered learning in accordance with the principles of *Merdeka Belajar*, while upholding Islamic values

2. Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to analyze teacher professionalism in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* program in Islamic educational institutions. The research design is descriptive qualitative, allowing researchers to explore in-depth how teachers design, implement, and evaluate learning within the *Merdeka Belajar* context, as well as identify factors influencing their professionalism.[19]

2.1 Participants and Procedures

The participants in this study comprised teachers employed at various Islamic educational institutions in Mandailing Natal Regency. The sample was selected using a purposive sampling technique, with the inclusion criteria requiring that participants possess prior experience in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) principles in their classrooms and have participated in training or programs related to *Merdeka Belajar*. A total of 15 teachers were selected, representing both elementary and secondary school levels. Demographic data, including age, years of teaching experience, and educational background, were collected to provide a comprehensive overview of participants' diverse experiences, which may influence the implementation of the program.

2.2 Instruments and Data Collection

The instruments employed in this study included in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The in-depth interviews were conducted to explore teachers' perceptions and understanding of the *Merdeka Belajar* framework, as well as the challenges and successes encountered during its implementation. Classroom observations were undertaken to directly assess the application of *Merdeka Belajar* principles in instructional practices, focusing on the integration of technology and the use of project-based learning methods. Document analysis involved the examination of lesson plans (*Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran* or RPP), instructional materials, and assessment results to evaluate the extent to which these documents reflected the *Merdeka Belajar* principles and their implementation effectiveness.

2.3 Research Procedure

The study was conducted across several Islamic educational institutions within Mandailing Natal Regency. The research procedure commenced with the identification and selection of teachers who

met the purposive sampling criteria. Subsequently, in-depth interviews were administered to gain insights into teachers' comprehension of and experiences with the *Merdeka Belajar* program. This was followed by direct classroom observations to capture the implementation of the program in day-to-day teaching activities. Data obtained from interviews, observations, and document analyses were triangulated and analyzed thematically to identify emerging patterns and key themes related to the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar*.

Data obtained from interviews, observations, and document analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis process began with interview transcription, followed by coding to identify emerging categories within the data.[20] Key themes reflecting challenges and successes in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* program were then extracted and developed. This coding process involved multiple readings of the interview transcripts to ensure consistency and accuracy of the codes. The identified themes were then analyzed in-depth to explore factors influencing teacher professionalism and the effectiveness of program implementation. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, which involved cross-checking data obtained from interviews, observations, and documents. Member checking was also conducted by soliciting feedback from several participating teachers to ensure accurate data interpretation.[21]

This study adhered to strict ethical principles. All participants were explained the purpose of the study and were given the opportunity to provide voluntary consent to participate. Participants' identities were kept confidential, and the data collected was used solely for research purposes. The researchers also ensured that participation in the study was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time without any consequences.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Teacher Adaptation Challenges

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine teacher professionalism in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) program within Islamic educational institutions. The descriptive qualitative design enables an in-depth exploration of how teachers plan, implement, and evaluate learning activities in the context of *Merdeka Belajar*, as well as the identification of factors that influence their professional practices.

The participants in this study comprised teachers from several Islamic educational institutions in Mandailing Natal Regency. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select participants based on specific criteria, namely teachers who had prior experience applying the principles of *Merdeka Belajar* in classroom settings and who had actively participated in relevant training or professional development programs. The sample consisted of 15 teachers, including both elementary and secondary school educators. Demographic data such as age, years of teaching experience, and educational background were collected to provide a comprehensive overview of the participants' diverse experiences, which may contribute to variations in the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* program.

The instruments used in this study include in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore teachers' perceptions regarding their understanding of *Merdeka Belajar*, as well as the challenges and successes they experienced in implementing this program. Classroom observations were conducted to directly assess the application of the principles of *Merdeka Belajar* in learning practices, including the use of technology and project-based learning methods. Meanwhile, document analysis involves reviewing lesson plans (RPP), teaching materials, and learning evaluation results to assess the extent to which these docu-

ments reflect the principles of *Merdeka Belajar* and the effectiveness of their implementation.

This research was conducted at several Islamic educational institutions in Mandailing Natal Regency. The research procedure began with the selection of teachers who met the purposive sampling criteria, followed by in-depth interviews to understand their understanding of the *Merdeka Belajar* program. Subsequently, direct classroom observations were conducted to assess the program's implementation in daily learning activities. Data obtained from interviews, observations, and documents were then analyzed to identify key themes related to the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar*.

Data collected from interviews, observations, and document analyses were examined using thematic analysis. The analytical process commenced with the transcription of interview data, followed by systematic coding to identify emerging categories and patterns. Subsequently, key themes representing the challenges and successes in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* program were derived and further developed. The coding procedure involved multiple readings of the interview transcripts to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the assigned codes.

The identified themes were then subjected to in-depth analysis to explore the factors influencing teacher professionalism and the effectiveness of the program's implementation. To ensure data validity, source triangulation was employed by cross-verifying information obtained from interviews, observations, and document reviews. Additionally, member checking was conducted by soliciting feedback from selected participants to confirm the accuracy and credibility of data interpretation.

This research adheres to rigorous ethical standards. All participants were thoroughly informed about the objectives and procedures of the study and provided their voluntary consent to participate. The confidentiality of participants' identities was strictly maintained, and all collected data were utilized solely for research purposes. Furthermore, the researchers ensured that participation was entirely voluntary, with participants retaining the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without facing any adverse consequences.

Many teachers have struggled to adapt to the principles of *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn), which calls for a more flexible and student-centered approach to learning. The *Merdeka Belajar* program encourages more independent learning, allowing students to take an active role in their learning process, through a project-based approach and the use of technology. However, these principles differ significantly from the more common approach, which is more structured and based on direct instruction by teachers.

The results of interviews with several teachers show that adapting to this new approach is not easy. Some teachers stated that they felt hampered by the traditional teaching methods they had long used. One teacher said, "I find it difficult to implement project-based learning because I am used to more traditional methods, and am not used to managing projects over the long term." This statement reflects the difficulty in moving from a more structured, direct-teaching approach to one that is more open, flexible, and based on collaboration and independent exploration by students.

This challenge is not only related to understanding the concept of *Merdeka Belajar*, but also to changes in teachers' mindsets regarding their role in the classroom. In traditional learning, the teacher acts as a central source of information, providing direct knowledge to students. In project-based learning, the teacher acts more as a facilitator, supporting students in exploring, designing, and evaluating their own projects. Therefore, teachers accustomed to traditional approaches need to change their roles and approaches to the learning process. This requires a deep understanding of how to design and manage effective project-based learning, as well as how to encourage students to think critically and independently.

Observations in several classrooms indicate that although teachers have begun to implement the principles of *Merdeka Belajar*, many still adhere to highly structured and rigid lesson plans. Teachers

tend to use lecture methods or assign predetermined assignments, without providing much space for students to develop their own ideas or projects independently. In some classrooms, teachers appear hesitant to allow students to work on long-term projects that allow for deeper exploration, due to concerns about control over learning outcomes and the time required.

An example observed during the observation was teachers who preferred to give structured, time-limited assignments, rather than providing opportunities for students to work on more open-ended, needs-based projects. These projects typically involve completing tasks in a shorter time and provide less space for students to collaborate or develop their creativity.

These findings indicate that there is still a significant need to improve teachers' understanding and skills in designing project-based learning. This can be achieved through more in-depth and ongoing training on how to manage projects over the long term, as well as developing strategies that enable students to become more independent in their learning. Teachers also need to be equipped with knowledge on how to provide constructive feedback during projects and how to facilitate student reflection on their learning.

Overall, these adaptation challenges demonstrate that to realize *Merdeka Belajar*, teachers need more than just an understanding of new educational concepts; they also need practical skills in designing, implementing, and evaluating learning that is based on students' needs and potential. This is a paradigm shift that takes time and effort to implement effectively in the classroom.

3.1.2 Principal Support

Support from school leaders plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* program in Islamic educational institutions. This program, which requires significant changes in the way learning is conducted, requires full commitment from all school elements, including the principal. Research shows that when school leaders, particularly the principal, provide active and consistent support, teachers feel more motivated to adopt and effectively implement the *Merdeka Belajar* principles.

Many teachers reported that they felt more prepared and had greater confidence to try new approaches to learning after receiving support from their principal. One teacher in an interview stated, "Our principal is very supportive of this program, providing regular training and ensuring we have the necessary resources." This indicates that support from the school leadership is not limited to administrative aspects, but also includes training, providing resources, and providing clear direction regarding the importance of implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* program.

Observations made in the field strengthen this finding, where the interaction between teachers and principals greatly influences the success of program implementation. Principals who actively engage in supporting teachers through open communication and ensuring that the challenges they face are addressed collaboratively demonstrate effective leadership. For example, principals who set aside dedicated time to meet with teachers, discuss issues, and provide constructive solutions or input will facilitate more efficient and expeditious problem-solving. In this way, teachers feel morally and practically supported in implementing *Merdeka Belajar*.

In addition, principals who support teachers through clear policies regarding *Merdeka Belajar*, such as setting training times and providing necessary learning tools, significantly influence program implementation. Principals who ensure that all teachers have access to relevant training and adequate facilities demonstrate visionary leadership and have a direct impact on teacher motivation and preparedness.

Open communication between teachers and principals also creates an environment that supports change and innovation in learning. When teachers feel that they can talk about the challenges they

face without fear or burden, they are more likely to implement new approaches with more confidence. Principals who provide space for teachers to speak and provide feedback on their experiences implementing *Merdeka Belajar* can help improve learning practices and address obstacles that arise in the field.

Support from the leadership has also been shown to strengthen the sense of shared responsibility for the success of the program. Principals who actively monitor the progress of *Merdeka Belajar* implementation in the classroom and provide encouragement and positive feedback regularly can increase teacher confidence. With regular communication and clear support from the principal, teachers feel valued and encouraged to continuously improve the quality of their teaching.

Overall, these findings suggest that good leadership, characterized by active support, open communication, and supportive policies, is a key factor in the successful implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* program. Effective principals not only provide direction and policies but also provide the emotional and practical support teachers need to adapt to these dynamic curriculum changes.

3.1.3 Limited Resources

One of the most significant obstacles teachers face in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* program is limited resources, both in the form of facilities and teaching materials. The *Merdeka Belajar* program demands more flexible, innovative, and technology-based learning, but many schools, especially in certain regions, lack adequate facilities to support this approach. These limitations are the main obstacle in implementing more modern learning methods that are in accordance with the principles of Independent Learning.

Interviews with several teachers showed that although they are eager to utilize technology in learning, many schools are unable to support the maximum use of digital tools. One teacher said, "Although we want to utilize technology in learning, the facilities in our school do not support the maximum use of digital tools." This statement reflects the reality that many schools still lack the technological devices needed to support digital-based learning, such as computers, projectors, or other devices that can facilitate interactive and project-based learning.

Classroom observations revealed that many learning environments were not equipped with adequate technological facilities. Most classrooms continued to rely on traditional whiteboards and printed materials as the primary tools for instructional delivery. In many instances, the limited integration of technology not only impeded the implementation of digital-based learning but also constrained students' opportunities to engage in interactive activities, such as participating in online discussions, submitting assignments digitally, or accessing online learning resources.

In addition, many teachers still rely on manual teaching materials, such as textbooks, which are outdated or inadequate to support a more creative and student-centered learning approach. Many teachers expressed that they felt limited in creating teaching materials that were more interesting and relevant to current developments. One teacher noted, "We often have to rely on textbooks that are old and not up to date with the latest curriculum developments." This shows that limitations in teaching materials not only limit teachers' creativity in designing learning, but also limit students in accessing more diverse and up-to-date information.

On the other hand, the limited access to digital resources and educational software constrains teachers' ability to fully integrate technology into the learning process. Many schools do not have subscriptions to digital learning platforms or educational software that could enhance instructional effectiveness. Teachers who seek to incorporate technology into their teaching are often restricted by financial limitations, as access to advanced digital learning tools and platforms typically requires budgets that exceed the financial capacity of many schools.

Observational findings indicate that, although some teachers have attempted to address these challenges by utilizing basic tools such as mobile phones or free applications, these efforts are often only partially effective and remain limited in scope. Such restricted use of technology impedes the implementation of innovative pedagogical approaches within the *Merdeka Belajar* framework, which emphasizes extensive technological integration to support project-based learning, collaboration, and experimentation.

These resource limitations also exacerbate the inequality in education between more advanced schools and those in areas with limited facilities. Teachers in schools with limited resources must be more creative in designing learning, but they still feel hampered by not having adequate tools or teaching materials to support more interactive and student-based learning.

To address this issue, greater efforts are needed from the government and relevant parties to provide better facilities, including technological devices, digital teaching materials, and relevant training for teachers. Providing adequate resources will enable schools to implement the *Merdeka Belajar* program more effectively and give teachers the freedom to explore more innovative learning methods tailored to students' needs.

Overall, limited existing resources have become a significant obstacle in the implementation of Independent Learning. To ensure the success of this program, greater attention is needed to provide more relevant and adequate facilities and teaching materials, as well as greater support for technology training for teachers. With better resources, teachers will be better able to adopt more creative, project-based learning approaches, aligned with the principles of Freedom to Learn.

3.1.4 The Impact of the Independent Learning Program Training

The training provided to teachers has proven to have a significant impact on their understanding and ability to implement *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn). This program requires significant changes in the way teachers teach and design lessons, requiring mastery of various new methods, including the use of technology and project-based approaches. Therefore, training is key to helping teachers adapt to this curriculum change.

Most teachers reported that the training they received was very helpful in introducing them to the basic principles of *Merdeka Belajar*. One of the teachers in the interview said, "The training we received was very helpful, but we still need further training to deepen our understanding and skills in using learning technology." This statement suggests that although the initial training provided a good foundation, many teachers felt that they were not fully ready to implement the new method confidently without further support.

Observations during the training also showed a gap between theoretical understanding and practical application in the field. Although teachers receive very useful information in the initial training, many of them feel less confident in implementing new technologies and learning methods in their classrooms. For example, even though they are trained on the use of digital devices and online learning platforms, many teachers feel confused or have difficulty when it comes to integrating these technologies into their daily learning. Most of them admitted that they had no previous experience in using technology optimally in learning, so they found it difficult when faced with implementing more innovative methods.

This indicates that continuous training is very important. Further training that is more in-depth and more focused on practice, not just theory, is urgently needed by teachers so that they can truly master new skills and feel more confident in implementing them in the classroom. Advanced training should not only be limited to an introduction to tools and technology, but should also include techniques in designing project-based learning, how to facilitate collaboration between students, and how to effectively utilize technology to support more independent and creative learning.

It is also important to provide more intensive technical support after the initial training. For example, many teachers reported needing direct access to coaches or mentors who could assist them when they encountered difficulties implementing technology in the classroom. This support could take the form of Q & A sessions, ongoing training, or discussion forums that allow teachers to share experiences and solutions to the challenges they face. With ongoing support, teachers can learn from collective experiences and receive the help they need to overcome the obstacles they face in implementing *Merdeka Belajar*.

A more sustained and in-depth training experience will help teachers develop their professional skills and ensure that they not only gain theoretical knowledge of the new curriculum but also feel prepared and capable of adapting their teaching methods to align with *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn). This will boost teachers' confidence and strengthen their commitment to implementing the program effectively.

Overall, these findings suggest that while initial training was helpful in introducing *Merdeka Belajar*, the program's successful implementation relies heavily on more intensive follow-up training and technical support. Thus, ongoing training is a crucial element that enables teachers to continuously develop and adapt to more flexible and student-centered curriculum changes, ensuring that Independent Learning can be implemented more effectively and sustainably.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 General Concept of Implementing the Independent Curriculum

Based on the principles of curriculum design, the theoretical framework of curriculum implementation, learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and various lessons from curriculum implementation that have been carried out in various contexts, there are three key principles that underlie the implementation strategy of the Independent Curriculum [22, 23]. First, although the Independent Curriculum is implemented nationally, its implementation is gradual and remains an option based on the readiness of each educational unit within a certain period of time. Second, curriculum implementation is a learning process, so that just as students learn according to their competency achievement stages, educational units and educators also implement the curriculum according to the context of their environment. Thus, the form of curriculum implementation does not have to be uniform for all educational units. Third, assistance and support for curriculum implementation are carried out comprehensively as an ecological system adapted from Bronfenbrenner's theory (OECD, 2020) so that interventions are carried out to influence factors that are directly and indirectly related to curriculum implementation [24, 18]

In order to restore learning after the COVID-19 pandemic, in the 2022/2023 academic year, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology is offering the implementation of the Independent Curriculum as one of three curriculum frameworks that can be chosen by educational units. The three options are (1) the 2013 Curriculum with intact Core Competencies and Basic Competencies (KI-KD), (2) the 2013 Curriculum with simplified Core Competencies and Basic Competencies (KI-KD) or what is commonly referred to as the curriculum in special conditions (emergency curriculum), and (3) the Independent Curriculum. No educational unit is designated and then required to implement this curriculum, as is the approach usually used in the implementation of the previous national curriculum.[25]

Educational units are given the freedom to choose by utilizing their autonomy and agency to make decisions regarding the curriculum to be implemented in the 2022/2023 academic year. Meanwhile, for private educational units, this decision needs to be approved by the foundation. The local government (education office) plays an important role in supporting decisions taken by educational units. This policy will continue until the 2023/2024 academic year. When it is determined as the

national curriculum, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum still provides flexibility for educational units to implement it based on their respective readiness until the 2025/2026 academic year. This means that some educational units that have not implemented this curriculum still have sufficient preparation and learning time before implementing the new curriculum [24].

In its implementation, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology conducted monitoring and evaluation (monev) of the implementation of the School Mover Program (PSP) and the Center of Excellence Vocational Schools (SMK PK), one of which was through ethnographic studies in schools implementing the program. The findings generally show that educational units have attempted to implement the Independent Curriculum, although there is still much confusion in the process. For example, all educational units have attempted to create a curriculum, although there is still confusion in analyzing the characteristics of educational units and utilizing the results of the analysis as a basis for organizing learning [26].

To implement learning according to student achievement levels, schools have tried to conduct diagnostic assessments, but some are still confused about using the results of these assessments to implement differentiated learning. Almost all schools have also implemented a project to strengthen the Pancasila student profile, although they still feel unclear about the position of the project in the curriculum structure [27, 28]. Most teachers consider the Pancasila student profile strengthening project to be linked to intracurricular lesson content, and some others have difficulty understanding the assessment for learning the project. These findings indicate that at the beginning of its implementation, teachers need time and support to understand the curriculum and carry out more detailed things so that the curriculum can be implemented in its entirety.

The implementation of the curriculum and the process of interpreting policies are essentially a learning process. Drake in Wahyudi et al. said that, this time, it is not students who are learning but educational units, educators, and also local governments. Just as students are the center of the learning process in the classroom, teachers also need to be the center of curriculum implementation. The principle of learning according to the level of student achievement (teaching at the right level) also needs to be applied in the implementation process that is in accordance with the readiness of educational units and teachers (implementation at the right level). A curriculum implementation strategy that pays attention to the needs of teachers to learn and interpret it will not only help students learn better but also help teachers learn in depth about curriculum policies so that they can implement them better and last longer (sustainable).

By placing teachers at the center of curriculum implementation, the implementation strategy of a policy needs to clearly state what changes in practice and behavior are expected from teachers. This is similar to the principle of learning where teachers determine learning objectives for their students. Therefore, to support the implementation process according to the readiness of educational units and educators, it is necessary to create learning stages as teachers create learning flows for their students. These implementation stages can be a reference for educational units and teachers to determine the targets they need to achieve when they are just starting to learn to implement the curriculum based on their readiness.[24]

The Independent Curriculum seeks to apply the constructivist learning theory. According to this theory, students are active learners who construct their knowledge through real interactions and experiences.[29, 30] In terms of curriculum implementation, teachers also need to be given the opportunity to learn using the same approach, namely through the experience of using the Independent Curriculum. They also need to learn through observations and narratives delivered by fellow teachers who apply the curriculum in different contexts and/or also from teachers and educational units that have implemented it first.

Thus, the learning process to implement the curriculum is not only through socialization and formal

training from the government (top-down), but also requires a more constructive approach. This will change the tradition of curriculum implementation that is usually applied in Indonesia, which uses a lot of top-down direction approaches.[24]

The support needed by educational units and educators can change over time. When it began to be implemented in the COVID-19 pandemic situation, where the learning process was still a combination of face-to-face learning and distance learning, the support needed by educational units would be different when learning returned to normal. Likewise, after two years of implementation, for example, educational units could begin to increase their implementation stages, and the support needed would be different again. Therefore, the government needs to be responsive to needs that change over time.

As a policy change, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum requires a division of tasks and roles from various parties, starting from the central government, local governments, to educational units. The division of tasks and roles is needed to ensure that the implementation of this curriculum can run well. At the central government level, the tasks and roles required are policy support and the necessary implementation tools. This includes providing various implementation guides for the Independent Curriculum, main textbooks, examples of teaching tools that are easy to understand, modify, and use as references, learning resources and training opportunities for educators and education personnel, advocating and assisting in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum to local governments, and conducting regular monitoring and evaluation.

At the local government level, support is needed to ensure that educational units in their areas can implement the Independent Curriculum properly. Local government support can be in the form of policies and assistance needed for educational units. Policy support can be in the form of strengthening the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in regional regulations and/or regional head regulations, specifically including the preparation and determination of local content, facilitating the development of local content teaching tools, and determining the academic qualifications and competencies of local content teachers. Support in the form of assistance can be realized through assistance in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum to educational units, support for educators and heads of educational units in studying and implementing the Independent Curriculum to improve the quality of learning, and support in activating learning communities within educational units and between educational units.

Meanwhile, at the educational unit level, the head of the educational unit is expected to play a role in supporting teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum properly. This support includes developing and determining the educational unit curriculum based on the curriculum framework and structure set by the government, providing special needs program services according to the conditions of students with special needs for schools that provide special needs program services, continuously reflecting, evaluating, and improving the implementation of the curriculum to improve the quality of learning, and forming and actively participating in teacher learning communities both in educational units and between educational units [24].

3.2.2 Implementation of Independent Curriculum in Units Islamic Education

The Independent Curriculum is a curriculum with intracurricular learning that is diverse, where the content will be more optimal so that students have enough time to deepen concepts and strengthen competencies. The independent curriculum also provides freedom for teachers to choose various teaching tools so that learning can be adjusted to the learning needs and interests of students. The project is one of the ones implemented in the independent curriculum to strengthen the achievement of the Pancasila student profile developed based on certain themes determined by the government (Permendikbud, 2024).

The Merdeka Belajar curriculum has the motto "independent learning, driving teachers" with five plans, namely USBN (National Standard School Exams) becoming the authority of the school, the UN (National Exam) system being abolished and replaced with Minimum Competency Assessment and Character Survey, simplification of RPP (1-page RPP), and using a zoning system when PPDB (New Student Admissions) except in the 3T (underdeveloped, frontier, and outermost) areas.[31]

The independent curriculum is an innovation that aims to create an ideal learning environment. The independent curriculum emphasizes character learning to produce a young generation with character and superior human resources (HR). Learning will not burden teachers or students who are burdened with achieving high scores or KKM. Students are given the freedom to think independently and learn from various sources to help solve problems. If students are given the freedom to choose the desired teaching method, students will be more motivated to learn. The independent curriculum gives control over the learning process and the right to independent learning to students. The independent curriculum allows teachers to use the right learning approach and is tailored to the needs of each individual's learning style. Project-based learning strategies are one of the learning approaches that can be used in this curriculum by involving students in applying what has been learned through projects or case studies.

Curriculum implementation policy in the madrasah is regulated by the Ministry of Religion by adapting in accordance with developments the uniqueness of madrasah values and learning needs in madrasahs.[32, 33] The implementation of the independent curriculum in madrasahs is the implementation of a curriculum that provides space for creativity and innovation to madrasahs in achieving student competencies through an operational curriculum at the education unit level.[34, 35] in the Strengthening Implementation of the Independent Curriculum activity. Based on information obtained from respondents, it was stated that the implementation policy of the Independent Curriculum was implemented in stages.

Implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which teachers are also required to be committed to implementing. "Don't let us be committed to implementing the curriculum, but the mindset has not changed," he said. We must continue to practice and hone ourselves. Especially the core of the independent curriculum is how to carry out learning based on children's abilities.

The independent curriculum implemented at the Islamic education unit level takes a broader and more flexible learning approach for students.[36, 37] Consisting of three categories of learning activities, namely : intracurricular, which is organized in a differentiated manner; curricular, which focuses on improving the profile of Pancasila students by using an intradisciplinary approach; and extracurricular activities tailored to students' interests.

In general, based on information from head school, the independent curriculum has not yet been applied to the overall student body. Where curriculum-independent news is applied to grades XI and XII. Temporary class X still applied Curriculum 13. Some factors that cause curriculum independence Not yet can be applied in a way that maximizes the units of the institution. Islamic education is an existing challenge in designing integrated learning values in Islam with a national curriculum that shows the need development material and more specific and contextual training for teachers. Curriculum Independent Focused learning on character development and soft skills is a must, combined with principle Islamic education, to create a comprehensive learning experience for students. Besides that , limitations on source power, such as facilities and teaching materials, become significant obstacles in implementing innovative learning. Because of that, it is necessary to get attention from party schools and the government to provide adequate power so that teachers can apply appropriate learning with the principle of independent study.

Evaluation of effective learning also becomes a challenge for teachers. This indicates that teachers tend to depend on traditional method evaluation, which does not reflect student development

competence in a comprehensive way. Required approach: further formative evaluation based on portfolio so that teachers can evaluate student progress in a more accurate way. Finally, support from school leaders and the availability of sustainable training have proven to be important factors in increasing teacher professionalism. Because of that, it is necessary that there be cooperation between educational institutions and the government to provide relevant and sustainable training programs for teachers so that they can fulfill demands and change the curriculum for the better. Thus, the implementation of independent study in Islamic education units can be more effective and have a positive impact on educational development in Indonesia.

4. Conclusion

This study revealed that the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) in Islamic educational institutions encounters several critical challenges. Teachers often struggle to adapt to project-based and technology-integrated learning approaches, both of which demand substantial shifts in pedagogical mindset and practical competence. Support from school leadership has been identified as a pivotal factor in enhancing teacher motivation and readiness to embrace this curriculum. However, limited institutional resources—such as inadequate facilities and insufficient teaching materials—continue to impede the realization of a more flexible and technology-oriented learning environment. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the necessity of continuous professional development to strengthen teachers' capacity to navigate dynamic curricular changes.

The implications of these findings suggest that educational policy must prioritize both institutional and teacher preparedness for the progressive implementation of *Merdeka Belajar*. The government should extend stronger support through sustained professional training, sufficient infrastructural provision, and improved communication between school leaders and teachers. Such measures will enable educators to overcome prevailing challenges, particularly in developing digital literacy and managing project-based learning effectively. In addition, policy frameworks that are adaptive and responsive to local school contexts will likely accelerate the successful realization of *Merdeka Belajar*.

This study contributes significantly to the discourse on educational reform in Indonesia, particularly in relation to teacher professional development. The findings highlight the critical importance of continuous training and institutional leadership support in ensuring the effective implementation of *Merdeka Belajar*. Moreover, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers regarding the need to enhance school and teacher capacity in responding to curricular transformations. Future research could further explore the design of context-specific, locally grounded training models and examine the impact of technology integration on the quality and sustainability of project-based learning across diverse educational settings.

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