

Management Challenges in Implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*

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ABSTRACT: *This study focuses on implementing the Merdeka curriculum from the perspective of its management challenges, exploring the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders related to implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at MAN Jombang and using a qualitative study, interviews, observations, and documentation as data collection techniques. Data analysis used data reduction, coding, and theme identification stages. To ensure data validity, the researcher applied source triangulation. The study findings indicate that implementing the Merdeka Curriculum faces challenges related to technology access and teacher readiness. Technology limitations, including unequal access to devices, hinder effective project-based learning, and administrative staff acknowledge the need for infrastructure improvements. Students appreciate the curriculum's focus on personal interests but need more guidance to navigate independent learning. Teachers have received training in project-based learning, but many teachers need help implementing new methods effectively. Although progress has been made, continued support, increased resources, and collaborative efforts among stakeholders are critical to successfully implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and improving educational outcomes. Limitations of the study include limited observation time and potential bias in participant responses. This study has yet to explore the long-term impacts of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Stakeholder collaboration research can provide deeper insights into practical strategies to address challenges and improve educational outcomes in Islamic education.*

Penelitian ini berfokus pada penerapan kurikulum merdeka dari sudut pandangan tantangan manajemennya, mengeksplorasi pengalaman dan persepsi pemangku kepentingan terkait penerapan Kurikulum Merdeka di

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MAN Jombang. Menggunakan studi kualitatif, dengan memanfaatkan wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi sebagai teknik pengambilan data. Analisis data menggunakan tahapan reduksi data, pengkodean, dan identifikasi tema. Dan untuk memastikan validitas data, peneliti menerapkan triangulasi sumber. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penerapan Kurikulum Merdeka menghadapi tantangan terkait akses teknologi dan kesiapan guru. Keterbatasan teknologi, termasuk akses yang tidak merata ke perangkat, menghambat pembelajaran berbasis proyek yang efektif, dan staf administrasi mengakui perlunya peningkatan infrastruktur. Siswa menghargai fokus kurikulum pada minat pribadi tetapi merasa tidak yakin dalam menavigasi pembelajaran mandiri karena panduan yang tidak memadai. Para guru telah mendapatkan pelatihan dalam pembelajaran berbasis proyek, banyak guru kesulitan menerapkan metode baru secara efektif. Meskipun kemajuan telah dicapai, dukungan berkelanjutan, peningkatan sumber daya, dan upaya kolaboratif di antara para pemangku kepentingan sangat penting untuk keberhasilan penerapan Kurikulum Merdeka dan peningkatan hasil pendidikan. Keterbatasan penelitian meliputi keterbatasan waktu observasi dan potensi bias dalam respons partisipan. Penelitian ini belum mengeksplorasi dampak jangka panjang dari penerapan Kurikulum Merdeka. Penelitian kolaborasi pemangku kepentingan dapat memberikan wawasan yang lebih mendalam tentang strategi praktis untuk mengatasi tantangan dan meningkatkan hasil pendidikan dalam pendidikan Islam.

Keywords: *Merdeka Curriculum, Project-Based Learning, Educational Management, Technology Integration.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia is undergoing a significant transformation with the introduction of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, which aims to provide schools, teachers, and students with greater freedom to determine teaching methods and content tailored to learners' needs and potentials (Susilawati et al., 2024). This initiative addresses various challenges the conventional education system faces, including the demands of the 21st century, global changes, and the necessity to enhance students' critical, independent, and creative thinking skills (Jansen & Merwe, 2015). The *Merdeka Curriculum* emphasises flexibility in learning, enabling students to explore their interests and talents through curricular and extracurricular activities related to real-life contexts (Alfaruki, 2022).

Launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, the *Merdeka Curriculum* is part of broader educational reform efforts in Indonesia. Its core principles include student-centred learning, the reinforcement of the Pancasila Student profile, and the enhancement of student learning outcomes through experiential learning (Ying, 2024). The curriculum allows schools the autonomy to determine subjects, teaching methods, and learning module designs that reflect local characteristics and student needs (Coelho et al., 2023). Consequently, teachers are encouraged to be more creative and innovative in developing relevant and contextual learning experiences (Matthews, 2024).

As a formal Islamic educational institution in Indonesia, Madrasah Aliyah Negeri (MAN) Jombang faces unique challenges in implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* (Wijayanti & Hamami, 2023). As a madrasah that integrates religious and general education, MAN Jombang needs to align this curriculum with the Islamic values inherent in its educational framework (Santoso et al., 2019). This integration raises questions about how the general curriculum within the Independent Learning framework can effectively merge with religious education and how the principles of independent learning can be applied within a more traditional religious context.

In the context of MAN Jombang, implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* emphasises curriculum adaptation and effective educational management (Abdullahi, 2022). Effective curriculum implementation management is vital for the success of the *Merdeka Curriculum* (Wahyuni, 2016). Key considerations in this management include planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning outcomes (Kang, 2024). Collaboration among the head of the madrasah, teachers, and other management stakeholders is crucial to developing strategies that align with the madrasah's characteristics, the teachers' capabilities, and the students' needs (Alahdal & Al-Ahdal, 2019).

One of the significant challenges in managing the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* at MAN Jombang is the readiness of educators and administrative staff (Rachmawati et al., 2024). Teachers require a solid understanding of the concepts and principles underlying the *Merdeka Curriculum* and the skills to apply them effectively in their teaching practices (Rohana et al., 2023). This includes designing more flexible, project-based learning approaches that focus on developing student competencies (Biazus & Mahtari, 2022). Consequently, professional development and training for teachers are essential to ensure they can adopt innovative and relevant teaching methods (Buabeng et al., 2019).

In addition to teacher readiness, adequate infrastructure and resources are vital for implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* effectively. This curriculum necessitates educational resources such as tailored learning modules, sufficient technology for digital learning, and facilities that support independent and collaborative learning (Sulaiman, 2023). Without the necessary infrastructure, the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* may encounter various obstacles, particularly concerning learning effectiveness (Altawalbeh & Al-Mughrabi, 2024).

Research on managing the *Merdeka Curriculum* at MAN Jombang is crucial for understanding how this implementation unfolds, the challenges encountered, and the strategies employed to address various issues (Anwar et al., 2023). By examining this management process, the study aims to identify effective implementation models that align with national policies while also being relevant to the context of Islamic education in madrasahs (Kosim et al., 2023). Furthermore, the research intends to provide recommendations for enhancing educational management quality at MAN Jombang, particularly regarding the *Merdeka Curriculum*, focusing on improving educational quality and fostering students' character development.

In summary, this study urgently needs in the academic context as it explores a newly implemented policy in Indonesia. The research aims to provide insights into how educational management in madrasahs responds to these changes while offering recommendations for other madrasahs to improve their educational quality, especially in management readiness, infrastructure, and teacher capacity development. The

primary issues addressed in this study include madrasahs' challenges in managing and implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*, such as infrastructure limitations, teacher preparedness, and inadequate technical support. By evaluating how the management at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri Jombang overcomes these challenges, the study assesses the effectiveness of the management strategies employed in implementing the new curriculum. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on combining educational management with the challenges of curriculum implementation, providing valuable insights into optimising the roles of madrasah management and principals in addressing these obstacles.

II. METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the various experiences, views, and perceptions of stakeholders related to the management of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. A qualitative approach is very suitable for this study because it allows a deeper understanding of the phenomena that occur in a natural context and facilitates the analysis of factors that influence the curriculum implementation process from an educational management perspective (Creswell, 2019).

The study was uniquely situated at the State Islamic High School (MAN) Jombang, East Java, an Islamic educational institution that implements the Independent Curriculum within the framework of high school education. This school, with its distinctive combination of general and religious curricula, was chosen as the study's location to provide a comprehensive perspective on the implementation of the Independent Curriculum policy (Sukmadinata, 2016).

The study's subjects, crucial to the research, included key stakeholders such as the head of the school, the deputy head of the school who is responsible for curriculum management, teachers, students, and administrative staff. The head of the school, with their involvement in planning and supervising the curriculum, the deputy head of the school, who coordinates the curriculum's implementation, and the students, the primary beneficiaries of the curriculum, played significant roles in the study (Punch, 2013).

This study uses various techniques for comprehensive data collection, including in-depth interviews, direct observation, and documentation. Interviews with the madrasah principal, vice principal, teachers, and students. In addition, observations of classroom learning processes and managerial activities took place over four sessions over two weeks, each lasting approximately two to three hours. These observations capture how the curriculum is implemented in practice, focusing on the use of technology in learning, the role of teachers as facilitators, and student engagement in project-based learning. Furthermore, documentation techniques include examining the madrasah curriculum, lesson plans, modules, policies, and evaluation reports to support data collected from interviews and observations (Rubin, 2012).

Data analysis will be conducted using thematic analysis, which involves data reduction, coding, and identifying themes to understand the meaning and significance of implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*. To ensure the validity of the data, the researcher will apply triangulation of sources and techniques by verifying information from various sources and member checking to confirm the results of interviews with informants. The audit trail will document the entire research process for traceability (Gough et al., 2012). The researcher will compare the findings of the interviews, observations, and document

analysis to ensure the consistency and reliability of the data. If discrepancies arise, further analysis can be conducted to explore the underlying causes, involving additional interviews or more in-depth observations. This cross-verification method increases the accuracy of the findings and provides a holistic view of implementing the Independent Curriculum (Yin, 2018).

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Readiness for the Implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*

MAN Jombang has taken significant steps toward implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* by providing training on project-based learning and differentiated instruction and developing the Pancasila Student Profile. According to the Head of MAN Jombang, these training sessions have improved teachers' understanding of new educational approaches, yet some still struggle with applying these methods. The challenge is transitioning from conventional teaching practices to more flexible approaches. This issue highlights the need for further support in teacher readiness for curriculum changes (Principal, 2023).

The Vice Principal for Curriculum at MAN Jombang emphasised the school's dedication to integrating Pancasila values into every aspect of education. While teachers have begun to grasp the concepts of differentiated learning and project-based instruction, difficulties in changing long-established teaching habits still need to be addressed. Specifically, some teachers are not yet comfortable giving students more autonomy in their learning process. The Vice Principal expressed that while the theoretical foundation has been laid, practical implementation remains challenging for many educators (Vice Principal, 2024).

Teachers have also echoed these sentiments. One teacher explained that while the training provided valuable insights, implementing these approaches in the classroom has proven difficult. The teacher pointed out that giving students more freedom, a core element of project-based learning is particularly challenging for those accustomed to more structured methods. This issue underlines the need for continuous support and adaptation as the *Merdeka Curriculum* takes root in the school (Teacher, 2024).

Students have noticed the shift as well. One student mentioned that the new curriculum provides more opportunities to explore personal interests through projects but needed clarification about the independent learning format. The student noted that while the curriculum promotes autonomy, students still require guidance from their teachers to navigate this new approach (Student, 2023).

From an administrative perspective, implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* has faced technological challenges. Although the school has worked to provide the necessary facilities, limitations in technological infrastructure continue to pose obstacles. Administrative staff have acknowledged these challenges, citing insufficient resources as a significant hurdle supporting project-based learning (Administrative Staff, 2024). While the school is making progress in improving its infrastructure, further efforts are needed to ensure adequate technology is available for both teachers and students.

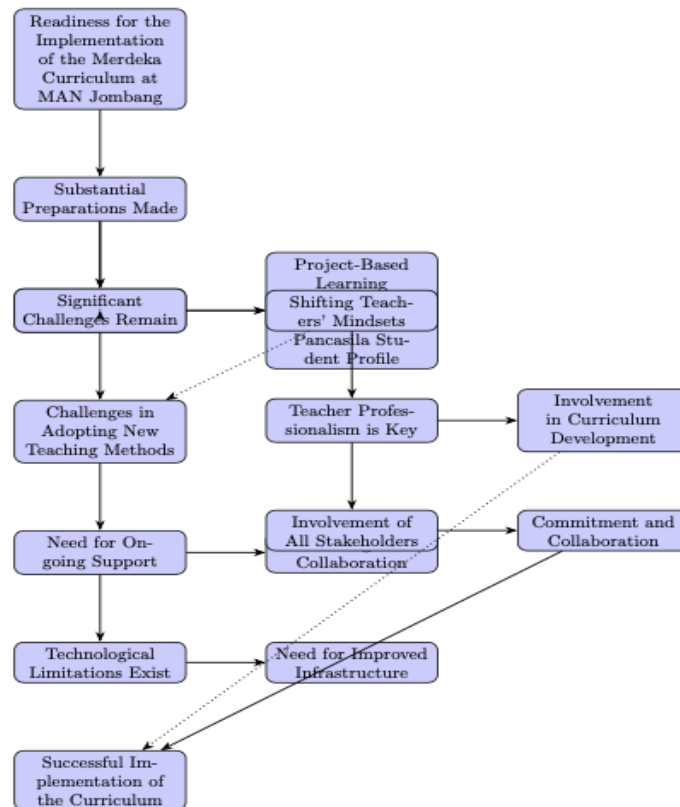


Figure 1. Readiness for the implementation

Challenges in Curriculum Implementation

Despite substantial preparations, significant challenges still need to be addressed in implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2017). However, research by Agnihotri (2024) suggests that such changes often require a shift in teachers' mindsets, which can be a significant barrier. Teachers at MAN Jombang, who are more accustomed to traditional methods, face difficulties adapting to the flexible and creative approaches required by the *Merdeka Curriculum*.

Adopting project-based learning, in particular, has proven difficult for many teachers. Versteijlen & Wals (2023) emphasise that teachers need time and practice to implement active learning methods effectively. At MAN Jombang, the ongoing struggle to apply project-based learning in daily teaching suggests the need for more extensive support to build teachers' confidence and competence.

Moreover, the involvement of teachers in curriculum development is crucial to their sense of ownership and empowerment during the implementation process. Research by Kontovourki et al. (2018) highlights the importance of teacher professionalism and engagement in curriculum changes, which can enhance their motivation and understanding. Involving teachers in the ongoing development of the *Merdeka Curriculum* at MAN Jombang could help overcome resistance to new methods and foster a more profound commitment to its principles.

Technological and Stakeholder Involvement

Technological limitations also present a significant challenge in implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* at MAN Jombang. According to Noorhapizah & Amhar (2020), the success of technology-based learning is contingent on adequate infrastructure and

technical support. Although the school has made efforts to provide some technological resources, the uneven access to technology among students continues to impede the full integration of project-based learning.

The success of the *Merdeka Curriculum* at MAN Jombang ultimately depends on the readiness and involvement of all stakeholders, including teachers, students, and administrative staff. Penuel et al. (2014) argue that the commitment and collaboration of all parties are essential for successful curriculum implementation. At MAN Jombang, the ongoing effort to improve facilities and provide continuous support for educators and students will be critical in ensuring the *Merdeka Curriculum*'s long-term success.

MAN Jombang has shown a solid commitment to implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*, yet challenges persist in shifting teachers' mindsets, applying new instructional methods, and overcoming technological barriers. Achieving the desired outcomes of the curriculum requires continuous efforts from all stakeholders, including targeted support and infrastructure improvements. Research on the readiness for implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* at MAN Jombang contributes significantly to the discussion on Islamic education. The findings highlight that despite training focused on project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and the development of the Pancasila Student Profile, there are still significant challenges, particularly concerning human resource readiness and teachers' mindset shifts. In Islamic education, emphasising Pancasila values is integral, strengthening the foundation of Islamic education by focusing on cognitive aspects and character development (Bird & Gornall, 2015; Sowell, 2015).

These findings enrich the discussion on the importance of continuous support, both in the form of intensive training and coaching, to assist teachers in applying more flexible and creative teaching methods. Islamic education curricula, often centred on traditional approaches, must evolve to incorporate more active learning strategies, such as project-based learning, which emphasises mastery of religious content and fosters critical thinking, collaboration, and learner independence. Additionally, the technological infrastructure challenges faced by MAN Jombang underscore the need for better technology integration into Islamic education curricula to enhance learning effectiveness.

Thus, this research provides valuable insights into the challenges and needs faced by Islamic schools in implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*. It emphasises the importance of teacher readiness, technological support, and collaborative approaches to ensure a holistic educational transformation aligned with Islamic values.

The Role of Management in Curriculum Implementation

The head of MAN Jombang acknowledged that student access remains limited despite the school's provision of technological tools. Many students do not possess personal devices such as laptops or tablets, essential for supporting technology-based learning (Principal, 2023). Field observations confirmed that although technological devices are available, their distribution among students is uneven. From the teachers' perspective, many express concerns regarding the scarcity of digital resources needed to support the *Merdeka Curriculum*. One teacher mentioned that while they have access to some technological devices, digital resources like e-learning platforms and online modules remain restricted, hindering the integration of technology into classroom instruction (Teacher, 2024).

The challenges extend to the students as well. One student shared that the lack of personal devices limits their ability to fully participate in technology-based learning (Student, 2023). Due to these technological gaps, some students need help accessing online learning materials or engaging in digital activities. Documentation on classroom technology usage shows that while efforts have been made to leverage technology, the absence of personal devices remains a significant barrier for students. The administrative staff acknowledged these limitations, stating that while the infrastructure is being improved, more resources and time are required to fully support technology-based learning (Administrative Staff, 2024).

Additionally, there is a need for technical guidance for teachers in preparing and implementing lesson plans that align with the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) emphasised the importance of continuous training and support for teachers to ensure successful policy implementation. With adequate guidance, teachers may be able to adopt teaching methods aligned with the curriculum's vision. The availability of educational resources is another challenge. Although madrasah leaders have tried to provide tools and materials, research shows that existing resources remain limited and may not meet the dynamic learning needs of students (Bolick et al., 2024).

Addressing these issues requires ongoing madrasah principals, management, and administrative staff support. Kwietniewski (2017) found that successful curriculum implementation is highly dependent on structural solid support, including continued teacher training, infrastructure development, and adequate resources. Leadership at MAN Jombang, particularly from the principal and management, is critical to aligning stakeholders and ensuring the curriculum is effectively integrated into the learning process. Effective leadership has been shown to positively influence educational outcomes, as Cruickshank (2017) highlighted the role of school leadership in driving curriculum success and improving student achievement. Similarly, Birhasani emphasises the link between instructional leadership, teacher performance, and job satisfaction, which are crucial for successful curriculum implementation (Birhasani, 2022; Garza, Jr et al., 2014; Shulhan, 2018).

Despite these efforts, challenges in coordination between management and teachers remain, often impeding the curriculum's effective implementation. The principal is key in fostering collaboration and understanding among all parties involved. According to Putri et al., involving multiple stakeholders in the planning process enhances commitment and facilitates a deeper understanding of curriculum goals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Stott & Murphy, 2020). Thus, while challenges related to technical guidance and resource availability persist, with continued support and strong leadership, the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* at MAN Jombang can achieve its intended outcomes (Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Mogas et al., 2022).

Implementation of Project-Based Learning

At MAN Jombang, implementing Project-Based Learning (PBL) has become a primary focus in curriculum innovation. Teachers at this madrasah are facilitators, designing learning processes integrating projects relevant to local contexts and religious values. To enhance student engagement, These projects encompass Islamic studies, environmental studies, and technology. According to a teacher, they encourage students to actively seek information, engage in discussions, and present their project outcomes while ensuring that projects are aligned with local contexts and religious values (Teacher, 2024).

Classroom observations show that while teachers have started implementing various student-centred projects, documentation of project execution indicates that not all projects provide students with full autonomy to design or modify them based on their interests. One student commented that although projects are assigned, they often feel overly structured, limiting their ability to fully express their creativity and critical thinking skills (Student, 2023). Despite the collaborative and interactive nature of the projects, some students feel that they do not adequately support the development of their critical thinking skills.

The head of MAN Jombang acknowledged these challenges, emphasising the need for innovation in applying project-based learning as part of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. While efforts have been made to integrate projects that reflect local and religious contexts, there are still difficulties in granting students full autonomy (Principal, 2023). He further explained that the school continues to refine its approach, focusing on projects that engage students and support the development of critical thinking skills.

Documentation and observational results indicate that the leadership at MAN Jombang is actively involved in designing and evaluating projects. The administrative staff play a crucial role in supporting the implementation of PBL by providing the necessary facilities and infrastructure. However, one staff member noted that while they strive to offer the necessary support, there is still a need to improve the quality of materials and facilities supporting these projects (Administrative Staff, 2024). Observations confirm that although there have been improvements in administrative support, there still needs to be improvement in the resources available to support the execution of projects optimally.

Research indicates that project-based learning can enhance student engagement by providing authentic and relevant learning experiences (Tatsar et al., 2022). In the context of Islamic studies and environmental issues, such projects allow students to apply their knowledge in real-world situations, aligning with the principles of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, which promotes contextual and relevant learning (Nurhidayah, 2024). Teachers in a PBL model act as facilitators, guiding students without overly directing them, which is essential for fostering student exploration and creativity (Bohara, 2024; Pan et al., 2020). However, challenges persist when teachers need help to give students complete freedom in designing their projects. Further training is necessary to help teachers adopt more flexible pedagogical approaches (Fazilla et al., 2023).

A gradual shift towards granting students autonomy in PBL can be effective without compromising learning outcomes. According to Rubrica (2019), teachers can start with more structured projects and gradually increase students' autonomy, allowing them to take more responsibility for their learning. This aligns with the self-determination theory, which suggests that fostering student autonomy enhances intrinsic motivation and creativity (Zaremohzzabieh et al., 2023). The "scaffolded autonomy" strategy, where students are gradually given more control over their projects, has proven effective in helping students develop self-management skills while maintaining the teacher's guidance over learning outcomes (Baltaci & Ucan, 2022).

Despite these efforts, some students still feel that the projects are too instructive and do not give them enough freedom to innovate. Rosiyanah & Wijayati (2019) argue that effective PBL should cultivate students' critical thinking skills and creativity. The

structured nature of the projects at MAN Jombang indicates room for improvement in allowing students more flexibility and autonomy to develop these skills better.

The principal and administrative staff at MAN Jombang are committed to improving the PBL approach by enhancing available support and facilities. Research highlights the importance of management support in successfully implementing innovative learning approaches, including providing adequate resources and ongoing teacher training (Albritton & Stacks, 2016). Ensuring that teachers receive the necessary professional development and that students have access to better infrastructure and digital resources will be crucial to fostering more interactive and engaging learning experiences.

The successful implementation of PBL at MAN Jombang depends on teachers' readiness to adapt to new teaching methods. Continuous training and professional development are essential to ensure teachers can effectively facilitate project-based learning (Mulyono et al., 2024). Additional support is needed to boost teachers' confidence in granting students greater freedom, encouraging creativity, and enhancing critical thinking. By addressing these challenges, MAN Jombang can refine its approach to PBL, delivering a more enriching educational experience that aligns with local and religious values.

Use of Technology and Learning Resources

The head of MAN Jombang acknowledges that limitations in technological infrastructure pose a significant challenge in implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Although the madrasah is equipped with essential technological devices such as computers and projectors, student access to technology remains uneven. The head explained that, despite some technological devices, many students still need to get personal devices like laptops or tablets, which are necessary to support technology-based learning (Principal, 2023). This represents one of the significant challenges in the curriculum's implementation, as access to technology is crucial for students to engage in modern, flexible learning fully.

Field observations reinforce these concerns, revealing that, despite the availability of devices, their distribution and accessibility are not equitable among students. Teachers have expressed difficulties locating or developing digital resources that align with the flexible nature of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. One teacher noted that while some technological tools are available, the lack of digital content, such as e-learning platforms or online modules, hinders optimal technology use in learning (Teacher, 2024). These challenges limit the curriculum's effectiveness, as technology integration into learning is not fully realised.

Students also face technological barriers that limit their ability to participate in technology-based learning. Many students reported difficulties accessing online materials and participating in digital activities, with one explaining that a lack of personal devices like laptops or tablets restricts their learning opportunities (Student, 2023). This inequity in access prevents students from fully engaging with the curriculum's innovative teaching methods, which rely on digital resources.

The administrative staff at MAN Jombang plays a role in providing technological infrastructure but acknowledges the existing limitations. One staff member explained that improvements are underway but noted that additional time and resources are needed to ensure all facilities function optimally (Administrative Staff, 2024). Observations further demonstrate that, despite efforts to utilise technology in the classroom, the lack

of personal devices remains a significant barrier. The administrative staff is actively improving infrastructure, though this process is still in development and requires further support.

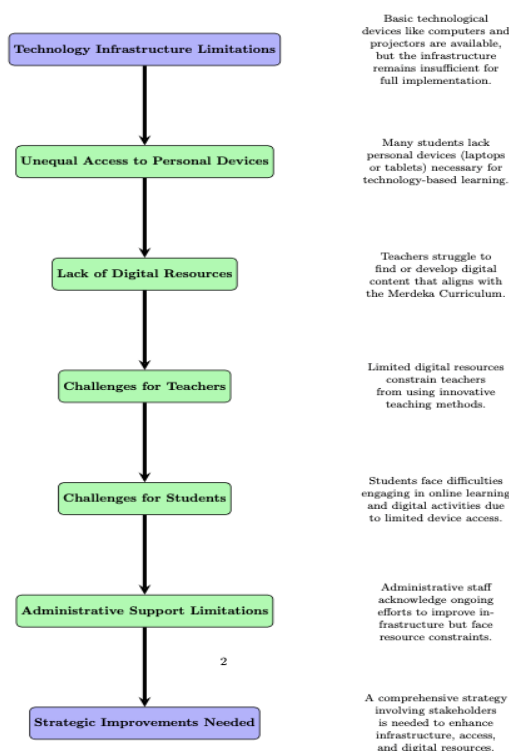


Figure 2. Technology and learning resources

Challenges in Technological Infrastructure and Learning Resources

Research indicates that adequate infrastructure is crucial to supporting technology-based learning (Widianto, 2021). At MAN Jombang, despite efforts to provide essential technological tools, infrastructure limitations remain one of the main challenges in implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*. These challenges involve hardware, software, and internet connectivity, creating disparities in access that affect students' ability to engage in technology-based learning. Studies suggest that students without adequate technological access risk missing opportunities to develop the relevant skills needed in the digital era (Lai & Bower, 2020). Unequal access to personal technology among students at MAN Jombang presents a serious issue, as those without devices face more significant difficulties in mastering content and participating fully in learning activities (Tawfik et al., 2016).

Teachers also need more digital resources aligned with the *Merdeka Curriculum*. The availability of quality digital content is essential to support effective learning, yet many teachers struggle to find or develop materials that foster student engagement and creativity (Alberola-Mulet et al., 2021). This limits teachers' ability to design lessons reflecting the curriculum's flexible approach, which aims to cultivate students' critical thinking, collaboration, and independence (Flores-Chacón et al., 2023). With the necessary digital tools, teachers are able to utilise innovative methods to motivate and engage students in learning.

From the students' perspective, limited access to technology further exacerbates their challenges. Research shows that students with better access to technology have better

learning outcomes, whereas those lacking devices face difficulties understanding and participating in their lessons Hu (2017). The technological disparities at MAN Jombang contribute to unequal academic performance, where students with limited access are often left behind in technology-based learning environments.

Administrative Efforts and Future Directions

The school's administrative staff is working to improve technological infrastructure, though this process requires additional time and resources. Research underscores the importance of administrative solid support in successfully integrating technology into education (Cloete, 2017). While the staff at MAN Jombang has initiated efforts to enhance infrastructure, limitations in both human and financial resources present ongoing challenges. Strategic planning is necessary to ensure that the madrasah can meet technical and pedagogical needs, thus enabling more effective use of technology in the learning environment.

Addressing the challenges at MAN Jombang requires a comprehensive strategy to improve infrastructure, expand access to technology, and develop digital resources aligned with the *Merdeka Curriculum*. These efforts must involve all stakeholders, including management, teachers, and administrative staff, to ensure the successful integration of technology in education. By addressing these barriers, MAN Jombang can better support the goals of the *Merdeka Curriculum* and provide students with the digital tools they need to succeed in today's learning landscape.

Evaluation and Feedback on the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

At MAN Jombang, the *Merdeka Curriculum's* implementation is evaluated periodically through coordination meetings and group discussions involving key stakeholders, including teachers, management, and administrative staff. The head of the madrasah emphasised the importance of obtaining feedback from teachers and students to assess learning effectiveness and identify challenges faced during implementation. While feedback is highly valued, there is a recognised need for a more structured and systematic evaluation system that can comprehensively measure the curriculum's progress, encompassing academic achievements and student character development (Principal, 2023).

Observations indicate that although various stakeholders are involved in these coordination meetings, the development of a more structured evaluation system remains an ongoing process. Teachers at MAN Jombang acknowledge that feedback from students is invaluable in improving their teaching methods. They report that this feedback gives them critical insights into how students respond to project-based learning and other instructional methodologies. However, many teachers emphasise the importance of implementing a more systematic evaluation framework to comprehensively assess the progress of the *Merdeka Curriculum* (Teacher, 2024).

From the students' perspective, they express appreciation for the opportunity to provide feedback, which enhances their learning experience. However, some students note that their feedback does not always lead to immediate changes in teaching practices. One student shared that while teachers acknowledge their feedback, they sometimes feel it does not result in tangible adjustments to teaching methods (Student, 2023).

Administrative staff at MAN Jombang also play a critical role in supporting the evaluation process by collecting data and preparing reports on the curriculum's implementation. Despite their efforts, the staff recognises that the existing evaluation

system requires further development to provide a more comprehensive overview of curriculum implementation. One staff member remarked that while they contribute data and reports to assist in the evaluation, a more advanced system is needed to understand better the curriculum's progress (Administrative Staff, 2024).

Structured Evaluation and Systematic Feedback

The documentation shows that while student feedback is regularly collected and discussed during coordination meetings, its application in modifying teaching methods needs to be more consistent. Teachers and administrative staff acknowledge the benefits of student feedback. However, they also highlight the need for a fully structured and integrated evaluation system, which limits the ability to measure the curriculum's progress comprehensively.

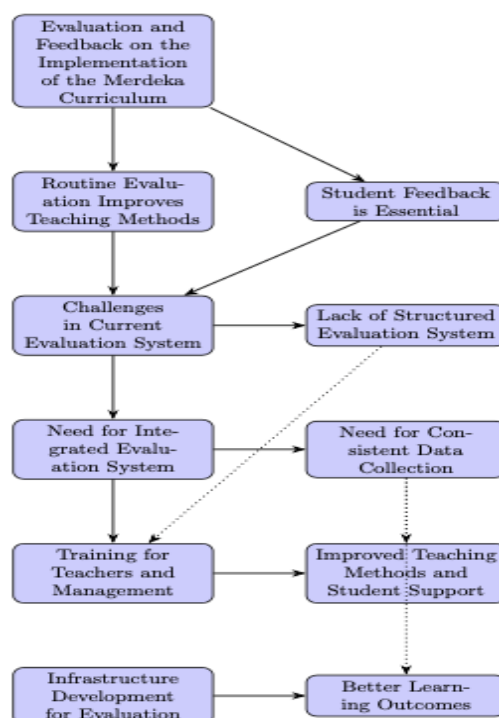


Figure 3. *Evaluation and feedback on the implementation*

According to research, student feedback can offer valuable insights for improving teaching practices, as it provides a direct perspective on the effectiveness of new learning approaches (Yelland et al., 2018). Periodic evaluations also identify shortcomings in curriculum implementation, facilitating timely adjustments (Dahlan et al., 2024). However, a systematic evaluation process is essential to measure the curriculum's full impact. Constantinou & Wijnen-Meijer (2022) emphasise that a structured evaluation system is crucial for consistent data collection and analysis, supporting continuous improvement in curriculum and instruction. Buabeng et al. (2019) similarly argue that without an integrated system, it becomes challenging to assess overall progress effectively and make necessary improvements.

Advancing the Evaluation System at MAN Jombang

There is a clear need to develop a more structured and systematic evaluation system at MAN Jombang to address these challenges. While feedback from teachers and students is being collected, its use in improving teaching methods has not been fully effective.

Research by Ford & Hewitt (2020) suggests that integrating feedback into a more comprehensive evaluation system is necessary to monitor progress and identify improvement areas.

A practical evaluation system should incorporate continuous and structured assessments that evaluate academic performance and character development. Andayani & Madani (2023) highlight the importance of including both formative and summative assessments and providing constructive feedback to help teachers adjust their methods to meet students' needs better. Moreover, efforts to enhance the evaluation system must involve additional training for both teachers and management, focused on systematically collecting and analysing evaluation data. Dolin et al. (2018) point out that training to improve evaluation skills can help teachers make more informed and accurate assessments.

Technological data collection and analysis support is another critical aspect of advancing the evaluation system. Popham (2022) asserts that technology is vital in supporting evaluation processes, offering tools for more precise and responsive assessments. At MAN Jombang, improving the technological infrastructure is essential to support a more effective and efficient evaluation process.

The evaluation and feedback mechanisms at MAN Jombang have highlighted the positive impact of the current evaluation process while also revealing the need for a more structured and systematic system. Efforts to develop a practical evaluation framework must involve additional training for educators and administrators and infrastructure improvements. By fully integrating feedback and leveraging evaluation data for continuous improvement, MAN Jombang can enhance the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* and achieve better learning outcomes for its students (Sholeh et al., 2023).

IV. CONCLUSION

Implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* at MAN Jombang reflects progress and significant challenges. Training in project-based learning (PBL) and differentiated instruction has enhanced teachers' understanding, yet many struggle with practical application, particularly in fostering student autonomy and integrating *Pancasila* values. Students appreciate focusing on personal interests but express confusion navigating independent learning formats without sufficient guidance. Technological disparities further hinder engagement, as unequal access to devices limits participation in technology-based learning. The findings emphasise the need for ongoing professional development, improved technological infrastructure, and a structured evaluation system to support teachers and students effectively. Collaborating among stakeholders is essential to address these challenges and promote a successful transition to the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Implications for Islamic education include integrating character development with cognitive growth, enhancing teacher readiness, and utilising technology to foster collaborative learning environments. By addressing these areas, MAN Jombang can align its educational practices with Islamic values while cultivating critical thinking and creativity among students, ultimately enriching the learning experience and contributing to the holistic development of learners in an Islamic context.

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