

Implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum at Madrasah Tsanawiyah in Aceh Tamiang, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT. This study examines the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes of the *Merdeka* curriculum, with a particular focus on the integration of Arabic language teaching at *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* in Aceh Tamiang, Indonesia. This study utilized a qualitative multi-case approach, focusing on three public *madrasah*'s and one private *madrasah*. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and document analysis, with respondents comprising 20 seventh-grade Arabic and general subject teachers, four *madrasah* principals, four curriculum deputies, and four *madrasah* operators. Findings reveal that the *Merdeka* curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation at *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* in Aceh Tamiang varied across institutions. While some schools demonstrated systematic approaches, disparities emerged in teacher training patterns, readiness for 21st-century skills, and the availability of digital education facilities. These challenges hindered the effective implementation of the curriculum and resulted in the absence of a clear evaluation framework. This study recommends that the government and education policymakers enhance teacher training distribution, improve digital education infrastructure, increase teacher welfare, and establish structured evaluation frameworks to optimize curriculum implementation in addressing global challenges.

Keywords: *Arabic language teaching, curriculum implementation, madrasah tsanawiyah, teacher training*

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INTRODUCTION

The education sector in Indonesia is currently undergoing significant curriculum reforms, with the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzing these changes (Azhari & Fajri, 2022; Yoto et al., 2024; Mukhibat et al., 2024; Rohmah et al., 2024). During the emergency, the government introduced a temporary learning scheme, which later evolved into the *Merdeka* curriculum (Al Yakin et al., 2023; Sari & Sukarno, 2023; Amiruddin et al., 2023). This curriculum emphasizes student autonomy, innovation, and adaptability (Gumilar et al., 2023). However, as noted by Prameswari, the *Merdeka* curriculum is not entirely new; instead, it is an enhancement of the 2013 curriculum. Officially implemented by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2022, it refines the 2013 framework without overhauling it completely (Wahidmurni et al., 2024). According to Zakso (2023), this curriculum aligns with the demands of the 5.0 era by integrating technology into teaching and learning processes, enabling students and educators to utilize digital tools like gadgets effectively. Despite these advancements, many schools are still in the introductory phase, with uncertainty and

confusion regarding its application (Fathurrahman et al., 2022; Rohmah et al., 2024; Yoto et al., 2024).

Initial observations in Aceh Tamiang district reveal that at the *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* level, the implementation is hindered by inadequate preparation from school principals and teachers. Moreover, differentiated teaching methods, particularly among Arabic language teachers, are yet to materialize. Current changes are mostly confined to revising teaching modules, with little impact on classroom learning, assessments, or practicum activities to strengthen *Pancasila* and *Rahmatan lil'alam* student profiles. In some cases, these efforts have stalled altogether due to a lack of understanding of the curriculum's principles and objectives.

Implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum in rural and remote areas with limited educational resources presents significant challenges. Aceh Tamiang, a district actively adopting this curriculum, has 38 junior high schools and 23 *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* spread across 12 sub-districts. Many of these *madrasah's* are located in rural areas far from urban centers, often operating with minimal facilities. This curriculum, a refinement of the 2013 curriculum, is designed to adapt to post-pandemic conditions by emphasizing flexibility, character building, competency development, and creativity (Amiruddin et al., 2023; Hadiastriani & Djarot, 2024; Mufanti et al., 2024; Puspitasari, 2024). Its phased implementation through pilot programs aims to eventually establish the curriculum across all educational units in Indonesia (Mulyasa, 2023). However, the inadequate infrastructure in rural areas and the limited digital literacy among teachers pose significant obstacles to its effective adoption (Sholeh et al., 2024; Mustari et al., 2024). Implementing curriculum reforms is inherently complex, requiring policymakers to address not only the curriculum design but also the strategies and change management necessary to support educators and institutions during the transition (Wahyudin et al., 2024).

Previous studies highlight several challenges teachers face in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum (Mardhatillah, 2024; Sholeh et al., 2024; Mustari et al., 2024). These include limited government outreach regarding the curriculum, inadequate teacher preparation for the transition, and restricted learning resources primarily confined to textbooks and guidebooks (Wantiana & Mellisa, 2023). Despite these challenges, research indicates that the *Merdeka* curriculum is an innovative breakthrough, encouraging teachers and school principals to transform the learning process into more relevant, engaging, and profound (Akhbar et al., 2023). Teachers are required to demonstrate greater creativity in designing teaching modules. However, difficulties often arise in understanding the curriculum structure, particularly in managing intracurricular learning and implementing projects to strengthen the *Pancasila* student profile (Damayanti et al., 2023).

Further research on the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum in pilot schools indicates that, despite various shortcomings and challenges, the curriculum has been executed effectively and sustainably in these institutions (Saa, 2024; Pratiwi et al., 2024; Regina et al., 2024; Nadiya et al., 2024). The success of its implementation largely depends on the adaptability of school principals and teachers. Principals, as leaders, play a critical role in guiding and influencing the school's human resources to align with the curriculum's objectives (Rahayu et al., 2022). However, existing studies have yet to explore the effectiveness of implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum at the *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* level, particularly in planning, execution, and evaluation. Specifically, there is limited research on how Arabic language instruction is conducted within the curriculum framework and the obstacles faced by *madrasah's* in rural or remote areas with limited access to educational resources. This study addresses these gaps by providing insights into aspects not covered in previous research.

This study builds upon and refines previous research by focusing on implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum at the *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* level, offering insights into effective planning, execution, evaluation, and Arabic language instruction. This research contributes significantly to its multi-case study approach, involving three state *madrasah's* and one private *madrasah*. This

methodology enriches the understanding of curriculum implementation in diverse settings and enhances the generalizability of the findings. These insights can serve as a foundation for broader applications and inspire further research to generate positive impacts on society and related fields. The primary objective of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of *Merdeka* curriculum implementation at the *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* level in Aceh Tamiang. Specifically, it explores how *madrasah's* plan, implement, and evaluate their educational strategies while investigating the integration of Arabic language teaching within the curriculum framework. Situated in the easternmost region of Aceh province, Aceh Tamiang serves as a critical case for examining the government's commitment to the *Merdeka* curriculum. This study, which uses a field-based research strategy, offers practical insights that help enhance and enlighten policy when improving curriculum implementation at the national and regional levels. Focusing on Aceh as a starting point, the findings contribute to Indonesia's efforts to advance its educational goals and realize its vision of a golden generation.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method with a multi-study case approach to explore the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum in several *madrasah's* in Aceh Tamiang. The selection of qualitative methods is based on the aim of understanding the phenomenon of climate change in a natural social context, according to the opinion of Herdiansyah (2010), who stated that qualitative research aims to understand phenomena in their natural social context through a comprehensive communication process between researchers and subjects studied. The multi-case study approach is used to analyze comparatively in several institutions, hoping to contribute to a broader development theory. As Hasiara (2018) explained, multi-case studies are very suitable when research objects have different characteristics.

Four *madrasah's* were selected as research objects, namely three state *madrasah's* (MTsN 1 Aceh Tamiang, MTsN 2 Aceh Tamiang, and MTsN 3 Aceh Tamiang) and one private *madrasah* (MTsS Al-Ikhlâs), which were the first to implement the *Merdeka* curriculum in Aceh Tamiang. The selection of these *madrasah's* was based on differences in their characteristics and operational contexts, thus providing a more comprehensive picture of the implementation of the curriculum in various types of *madrasah's*. Data collection was carried out through two main sources, namely primary data and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through 12 interviews with various stakeholders, including teachers, *madrasah* principals, vice principals of *madrasah's* for curriculum, and *madrasah* operators. These interviews were conducted using structured and unstructured interview techniques and were carried out in four *madrasah's*, with varying durations according to data needs. In addition, observation techniques were also used to observe the *madrasah* environment's condition, the *madrasah* principals' activities, and the teaching and learning process under the *Merdeka* curriculum framework during the three-month research period.

Secondary data sources were obtained from books, journal articles, and relevant archival documents, such as teaching module documents, *madrasah* operational components, and administrative documents related to implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum. Data analysis was carried out in two stages: case-by-case analysis and cross-case analysis. Case-by-case analysis was carried out separately for each *madrasah* through data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions or verification. Cross-case analysis was carried out to compare and interpret the results from each location by looking for general patterns that apply across *madrasah's* and unique factors that only exist in state or private *madrasah's*. This study adhered to four main validation criteria to guarantee data validity: dependability (by guaranteeing consistency throughout the research process), confirmability (by upholding accountable data objectivity), transferability (by consulting with subject-matter experts), and credibility (by triangulating). The research procedure includes problem identification, literature search, setting objectives, data collection, data analysis, and reporting research results.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Planning

At the planning stage, the curriculum is systematic, although implementation varies between schools, especially in Arabic language teaching and differentiated learning. *Madrasah* planning is generally carried out by the *Merdeka* curriculum implementation guidelines published by the ministry of religion. Widyaiswara accompanies it from the Aceh religious training center and one accompanying lecturer from a university who meets the qualifications. The planning stages carried out by *madrasah's* include initial meetings to discuss *madrasah* readiness, organizing training, forming a curriculum development team, preparing teaching modules, and internal coordination. Meanwhile, the planning carried out by teachers, especially Arabic language teachers, is carried out independently by following training provided by *madrasah's*, taking part in training and discussions through the Arabic subject teachers' deliberation forum, studying independently through various sources including books and online training; and developing teaching modules.

In more detail, the planning stages carried out by the *madrasah* are as follows: (1) The head of the *madrasah*, together with the deputy head of the *madrasah* and representatives of teachers in the field of study, took independent initiative steps by inviting resource persons from the Aceh Tamiang district education office for training activities held at the *madrasah* independently; (2) The head of the *madrasah* holds further training by inviting resource persons from the Aceh education and training center for further training; (3) The selected *madrasah* head involves or sends five *madrasah's* consisting of one *madrasah* head, one *madrasah* supervisor, and three teachers in training activities at the Ministry of Religion of Aceh Tamiang regency; (4) *Madrasahs* form an independent development team for *Madrasah* curriculum implementation; (5) The head of the *Madrasah*, together with the *Madrasah* organizer, submit a proposal online to register as a *Madrasah* that will implement the *Merdeka* curriculum through the PDUM application; and (6) The head of the *madrasah*, together with the deputy head of the *madrasah*, held a meeting attended by *madrasah* residents consisting of all teachers in the field of study and administrative staff to carry out activity plans for preparing *Madrasah* operational components as a guide for implementing teaching and evaluation in the process of implementing the independent curriculum which is currently being implemented.

Judging from the training approach carried out at each *madrasah*, there are differences in applying training patterns. The level of readiness of the *madrasah* initiative of the *madrasah* head also influences the variations in the training approaches carried out. MTsN 1 Aceh Tamiang initiated the training by independently inviting resource persons from school supervisors from the Aceh Tamiang district education office based on a logical reason that the Ministry of Education and Culture first implemented the *Merdeka* curriculum. Then, the head of the *madrasah* re-initiated the second training by inviting Widyaiswara to be a resource person from the Aceh religious education and training center. These two training sessions at the *madrasah* involved all teachers and administrative staff.

Meanwhile, MTsN 2 Aceh Tamiang initiated training only once by inviting resource persons, namely widyaiswara from the Aceh religious education and training center, and carried out at the *madrasah* involving all *madrasah* residents. On the other hand, MTsS Al-Ikhlâs sent four teacher representatives to take part in training organized by the ministry of religion of Aceh Tamiang regency so that these four representatives then passed on the knowledge gained from the training to all teachers in *madrasah's* by holding limited training in *madrasah*. MTsN 3 Aceh Tamiang sent four teacher representatives to take part in training organized by the Ministry of Religion of Aceh Tamiang regency so that these four representatives then passed on the knowledge gained from the training to all teachers in *madrasah's* by holding limited training in *madrasah's*.

There are also differences in *madrasah's* readiness to implement the *Merdeka* curriculum. This level of readiness is reviewed by the teaching human resources at the *madrasah* and the available learning facilities/means. Teaching human resources is very varied. A *madrasah* that carries out more training to increase teacher competency capacity evenly is undoubtedly better prepared to face change than a *madrasah* that only carries out training once and not evenly across all teachers. Similar to the availability of learning resources that can facilitate learning in the digital age, specific *madrasah's* that have more comprehensive digital learning resources—such as computers, laptops, devices, speakers, and enough bandwidth for internet and focus—will be better equipped to handle this curriculum change than *madrasah's* without such resources. Then, the position of *madrasah's* in rural areas or remote areas far from urban areas, making internet access difficult, such as MTsN 3 Aceh Tamiang, also influences readiness for curriculum changes with this new paradigm.

Implementation

Implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum at *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* in Aceh Tamiang district starts in stages, starting from class 7. Activities carried out include implementation in teaching and learning activities, implementation of assessments, and learning activities. The project strengthens the profile of *Pancasila* students and the profile of *Rahmatan lil'alam* students. This implementation is carried out in all subjects in class 7, but the research focus at this stage is directed at teaching Arabic. There are variations in the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum in each *madrasah*, especially for each Arabic language teacher.

In general, differentiated learning, one of the characteristics of the *Merdeka* curriculum, is not realized in classrooms; only a small number of teachers can apply this differentiation to learning spaces. The expected changes only occurred in the teaching module. Likewise, with assessments under the *Merdeka* curriculum framework, which is typical of as learning, for learning and of learning, or what is more familiarly known as diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments, it turns out that in the field, these three types of assessments do not work well. Arabic language teachers from the four *madrasah's* studied, only one *madrasah* implemented these three types of assessment. The other three *madrasah's* tended to focus on assessment of learning or summative assessment.

Furthermore, the learning activities of the project for strengthening the *Pancasila* student profile and *Rahmatan lil'alam* student profile did not run smoothly. In general, the teachers did not understand the concepts and themes that should be applied in teaching this project. Even in one *madrasah*, they were only running in one phase and stopping in the next phase due to a lack of understanding of the learning themes of this project and adapting them to the characteristics of *madrasah's*.

The learning model in the *Merdeka* curriculum, which is designed to provide freedom and flexibility to teachers and students in the teaching and learning process, with a focus on developing 21st-century skills, has not been implemented well in practice at the *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* in Aceh Tamiang district. In more detail, the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum in teaching Arabic at the *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* Aceh Tamiang will be described as follows: (1) Implementation of Arabic language teaching in a fun way with a project-based learning approach, inquiry learning, discovery learning, production-based training, essential problem learning, teaching factory, and blended learning models for children by creating a fun learning atmosphere implemented by teachers in some *madrasah's* which is uneven; (2) Practicing the use of Arabic in interactions when learning takes place slowly, starting from simple topics, for example, in mentioning surrounding objects such as flowers, trees, tables, and chairs carried out by several teachers in one state *madrasah* and there is no distribution; (3) The use of various learning methods adapting learning in the digital era 5.0, including watching conversation videos and listening directly to Arabic pronunciation (dialogue), implemented by teachers in several state and private *madrasah's*, and there has not been equal distribution; (4) Reading printed books for Arabic lessons and making light conversation

texts for children to practice pronunciation is evenly implemented by teachers in every state and private *madrasah*; (5) Carrying out icebreaking when students start to get bored is implemented by teachers in some state and private *madrasah*'s, but it has not happened evenly in all *madrasah*'s; (6) Collaborating with Indonesian language teachers for speech material given to students who have good Indonesian language skills to be given speech practice in Arabic, implemented by teachers in only one state *madrasah*, and there has not been equal distribution); (7) Collaborating with quran hadith teachers, Islamic religious education teachers, and *Pancasila* and citizenship education teachers on material deemed suitable, implemented in some state *madrasah*'s and there has not been equal distribution; (8) The use of peer tutoring for some students with exceptional abilities in several groups adapted to learning is carried out by some teachers in one state *madrasah*, and there has not been equal distribution; (9) Introducing *Mufradat* only by rote memorization in some public and private *madrasah*'s; and introducing *Mufradat* not just memorizing but also drawing applied by teachers in one state *madrasah*; and (10) Teachers in all *madrasah*'s use Arabic language book learning media, and the use of more varied learning media, such as laptops, computers, speakers, infocus, or sometimes cellphones, is applied in some state and private *madrasah*'s, and there has not been equal distribution.

From field implementation, it is evident that there are differences in how the *Merdeka* curriculum is implemented in each *madrasah* and how each teacher, mainly Arabic language teachers, teaches. This is because different schools have different planning methods and human resource capacities. The facilities and instruction offered by various *madrasah*'s vary, as do their geographic locations.

Evaluation

The *madrasah* and its supervisors conducted poor supervision and lacked a precise evaluation at the evaluation stage. No follow-up procedures were followed to perfect the implementation of this *Merdeka* curriculum; instead, the *madrasah* head, deputy *madrasah* head for curriculum, and the *Merdeka* curriculum implementation team only acknowledged the reality of issues or complaints that arose through brief meetings in the meeting room. In implementing this new curriculum, teachers are trying to clarify misunderstandings. Due to a lack of expertise and knowledge, teachers in the field typically do not comprehend and properly apply this autonomous curriculum; however, these issues do not serve as assessment material for *madrasah*'s to conduct follow-up or feedback to find answers to issues that occurred. *Madrasah* heads generally believe that the central government and each person are solely responsible for the teacher's duty to implement an autonomous curriculum. Hence, the *madrasah*'s actual efforts are limited.

Discussion

Implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum in *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* Aceh Tamiang is characterized by systematic planning, although the implementation varies between schools. Planning is a crucial stage in ensuring that the curriculum matches educational institutions' characteristics and students' needs, especially in Arabic language teaching and integrated learning. Planning is an integral management function that includes determining goals, policies, and strategic steps to achieve desired results (Arifudin et al., 2021). This process also includes aligning available resources with institutional and student needs, as described by Rezende and Nogueira (2010), Yayla and Hu (2012), and Heneman and Milanowski (2014). For example, *madrasah*'s may prioritize integrated learning to accommodate students' diverse abilities or develop Arabic language instruction relevant to cultural and religious contexts. The effectiveness of this planning can only be assessed after the implementation is complete, thus providing a basis for evaluation for further improvement.

Planning in *Madrasah* aims to achieve effective and efficient results. Nurdin (2019) states that education planning functions to (1) draft decisions that authorized officials approve at the national level, (2) provide a structured pattern of activities for policy implementation work units, (3) ensure

the validity of relevant facts to be accepted by stakeholders; (4) determine future-oriented steps; and (5) convince stakeholders through logical and rational arguments. In line with this, Mardiyah et al. (2023) emphasized that planning provides benefits such as (1) guides and rules for implementing activities, (2) predicts and provides an initial overview of the implementation of activities, and (3) provides options for implementers to choose the best steps for optimal results. Suhada (2020) adds that planning acts as (1) guidelines in the implementation of education, (2) a controlling tool for the implementation of education, (3) education quality assurance, (4) a means of achieving goals effectively and efficiently; (5) a tool to ensure the smooth running of the education process; (6) a means of clarifying the vision, mission and strategy of education; and (7) a logical and systematic approach to improving the education system. Thus, planning is a strategic step that provides structure and direction and systematically ensures education's success.

Madrasah Tsanawiyah Aceh Tamiang district have shown optimal readiness in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum through structured and systematic planning. The steps taken include training human resources, forming *Madrasah* development teams, submitting proposals through the *Madrasah* exam database application, and preparing *madrasah* operational component documents. Teachers, especially Arabic language teachers, also showed high initiative by participating in internal *madrasah* training, discussions in the subject teacher consultative forum, and utilizing self-learning materials, such as books and online training, to develop teaching modules. It is consistent with the guidelines for implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum as outlined by Ramdhani and Isom (2022), which underline the importance of independent preparation by *madrasah's* before the proposal is verified by the provincial office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Directorate General of Islamic Education. Once established as a *Merdeka* curriculum implementer, *madrasah's* must strengthen the capacity of educators through socialization, technical guidance, and training, with gradual assistance from the Ministry of Religious Affairs at the central, provincial, and district. This process is monitored regularly and evaluated to ensure optimal implementation and improved education quality. The planning strategy implemented by *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* Aceh Tamiang reflects the implementation of this guideline, which ensures not only the administrators' readiness but also the teachers' capacity.

The diverse training approach patterns, teacher resource readiness for 21st-century skills, and limited digital education facilities at *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* in Aceh Tamiang regency significantly impact the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum. This condition shows that learning based on the *Merdeka* curriculum has yet to be implemented optimally, indicating structural and systemic challenges regarding human resources and educational facilities. Compared to developed countries such as Japan, striking differences can be observed. The Japanese education system, as stated by Eguchi (2016), Cai and Gut (2020), and Prakoso et al. (2023), has long been supported by adequate infrastructure and educators who are skilled in integrating 21st-century skills into the learning process. This comparison confirms that the inequality in the quality and readiness of education in Aceh Tamiang is a significant obstacle to the success of the *Merdeka* curriculum. Therefore, strategic steps are needed, which include equalizing the quality of human resources and improving educational infrastructure in Aceh Tamiang and other regions in Indonesia. The success of the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum is highly dependent on the government's ability to address these disparities through data-based, innovative, and sustainable policies (Schildkamp & Kuiper, 2010; Yoto et al., 2024; Mufanti et al., 2024).

The *Merdeka* curriculum at *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* Aceh Tamiang regency was implemented in stages, starting from grade 7. However, variations in implementation among teachers and *madrasah's* showed that implementing this curriculum could have been more optimal. Differentiation of learning, one of this curriculum's characteristics, has yet to be fully realized. At the same time, the assessment and implementation of the Pancasila student profile and *rahmatan lil'alam* student profile improvement projects have yet to go as expected. The *Merdeka* curriculum is a response to the weaknesses of the 2013 curriculum, which is considered less flexible and needs to be more

adaptive to the needs of society and the world of education. According to Badrudin et al. (2021), Azhari and Fajri (2022), and Anggadwita et al. (2024), the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought a global crisis, has affected almost all aspects of life, including the education system. Therefore, the *Merdeka* curriculum is designed to provide flexibility and opportunities for innovation in dealing with global change.

However, the effectiveness of this curriculum is still a significant challenge (Ndari & Mahmudah, 2023; Asfiati, 2023; Sholeh et al., 2024; Yafie et al., 2024; Wahidmurni et al., 2024). The main obstacles faced in the field include the readiness of *madrasah's* (Sholeh et al., 2024), limited teacher resources (Asfiati, 2023), and minimal supporting facilities (Bakti & Sari, 2023). Significant differences can be found when compared to the education systems in developed countries, such as Finland or South Korea, which have a high level of readiness to implement curriculum reform. These countries have succeeded in integrating flexibility and innovation into their education systems through infrastructure support and the development of educator competencies. Therefore, strategic efforts are needed to increase the capacity of *madrasah's* in Indonesia, including equalizing resources and providing adequate facilities, to ensure that the *Merdeka* curriculum can be implemented effectively and positively impact the quality of education.

According to Leu (2022), the *Merdeka* curriculum has three main characteristics: (1) this curriculum emphasizes essential material, allowing teachers to focus more on the student learning process and supporting in-depth learning; (2) there is special attention to strengthening student character through the allocation of particular time for the Pancasila student profile project, and (3) this curriculum provides flexibility to schools and teachers in designing operational curricula that are appropriate to students' abilities and conditions. However, the challenge that arises is the need for more understanding of teachers regarding the main principles of the *Merdeka* curriculum (Rozak et al., 2024; Prahastina et al., 2024; Syahrir et al., 2024). The findings of this study indicate that many teachers still need help implementing this curriculum effectively (Marsh, 2009), so its implementation tends to be less than optimal and seems rushed.

Arabic language teaching at *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* Aceh Tamiang shows variations in its implementation at the teacher and *madrasah* levels. Differentiated learning, which is one of the main characteristics of the *Merdeka* curriculum (Kurniawan et al., 2023; Hunaepi et al., 2024; Hidayat et al., 2024), has not been fully implemented in the classroom and so far has been seen more in learning modules. Only a few teachers can integrate this approach into the teaching process. In theory, differentiated learning is designed to meet students' learning needs by paying attention to individual characteristics and facilitating those needs (Roiha, 2014; Brevik et al., 2018; Strogilos et al., 2018). Good collaboration between teachers and students and an appropriate approach to student differences will create more active and practical learning (Liana et al., 2024).

Teachers must be able to implement learning that integrates 21st-century skills by the objectives of the *Merdeka* curriculum, which gives teachers and students freedom in the teaching and learning process. This curriculum focuses on developing 21st-century skills and implementing differentiated learning, which allows teaching to be tailored to individual students' needs, interests, and abilities. However, this application has not been optimal in practice at *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* Aceh Tamiang district. *Merdeka's* curriculum is student-oriented, encouraging them to be more active and comfortable in learning (Zendrato & Agatha, 2023). Differentiated learning does not mean providing different tasks for each student but instead aligning learning approaches with individual needs without disrupting the classroom structure (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019).

Differentiated learning identifies and teaches students according to their unique learning preferences and aptitudes (Brevik et al., 2018; Boelens et al., 2018; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). Given that each student has different needs (Boelens et al., 2018), teachers must customize teaching approaches to meet these needs. According to Mukhibat (2023), the characteristics of differentiated learning include an engaging learning environment, a curriculum with clear objectives, continuous

evaluation, attention to student needs, and efficient classroom management. Modern technologies like artificial intelligence, robots, machine learning, and data analytics must be incorporated into education to improve their efficacy and provide a more engaging and dynamic learning environment (Alharbi, 2023).

Assessment in the *Merdeka* curriculum framework includes diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments (Yulianto, 2022). However, in the field, the three types of assessment still need to be adequately implemented. Of the four *madrasah*'s studied, only one implemented all three, while the other three focused more on summative assessment. In addition, implementing the *Pancasila* student profile and *rahmatan lil'alam* student profile strengthening project needs to be fixed. Teachers generally need to understand the concepts and themes that should be applied in teaching this project. In one *madrasah*, the project was only implemented in one phase and stopped due to a lack of understanding of the themes and difficulties in adapting the project to the characteristics of the *madrasah*.

The ratification of the *Merdeka* curriculum in Indonesia aims to create meaningful and practical learning, which can increase faith, piety, and noble character and develop students' creativity, taste, and spirit as lifelong learners characterized by *Pancasila* (Wahyudin et al., 2024). The concept of learners characterized by *Pancasila* is elaborated in the *Pancasila* learner profile, which consists of six dimensions: faith and devotion to God Almighty, noble character, cooperation, critical reasoning, global diversity, independence, and creativity. This profile is based on changes in the global context, including the world of work, social, cultural, and political changes, and national interests related to culture, nationality, and development mandated by the 1945 constitution and *Pancasila*. The curriculum structure in the *Merdeka* curriculum includes three types of learning: intracurricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular, which are adjusted to the characteristics of each school (Wahyudin et al., 2024). However, according to Safitri et al. (2024), one of the main obstacles in implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum is *madrasah* human resources, where a weak understanding of digital learning is a new challenge in the success of the *Merdeka* curriculum, especially in the implementation of the *Pancasila* student profile strengthening project and the *rahmatan lil'alam* student profile.

According to Inayati (2022), intracurricular learning is implemented differently, where teachers design appropriate and meaningful learning experiences for each student without differentiating them. Teachers value and recognize differences, allowing students to develop according to their abilities (Correa et al., 2008; Messiou & Ainscow, 2015; Brevik et al., 2018). Meanwhile, co-curricular learning is presented to strengthen the *Pancasila* student profile with an interdisciplinary approach to develop students' character and general competencies. Extracurricular learning is tailored to students' interests and talents (Stearns & Glennie, 2010; Noskova et al., 2015; Feraco et al., 2022), as well as considering the characteristics and capabilities of the school in implementing it (Darling et al., 2005; Rahayu & Dong, (2023).

Implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum, especially in Arabic language learning, still needs a variety of models, which can weaken hopes for the success of the curriculum. Arabic teachers should be able to use various models, methods, and approaches to create engaging and exciting learning for students. Research shows that diverse models, methods, and approaches can improve student learning outcomes (Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008; Duque & Weeks, 2010). Some variations that can be applied within the framework of the *Merdeka* curriculum include (1) internet-based Arabic language learning, (2) genre pedagogy approach, and (3) project learning with puzzle media.

Technology and information advances have changed how people work and learn (Facer, 2011; Cascio & Montealegre, 2016), including in Arabic language learning. Using internet-based technology facilitates the implementation of Arabic language learning that is more integrated and comprehensive and according to the characteristics of today's students. Various Arabic language materials, such as *Mufradat* and *Mahfudzot*, can now be accessed online, making it easier for

educators and students. *Mufradat*, according to the al-Maurid dictionary by Munir Baalbaki, is a vocabulary that has two meanings: *first*, a collection of words in a language, and *second*, words used and applied by speakers of that language. Meanwhile, *mahfudzot* is a collection of vocabulary in the form of beautiful sentences containing pearls of wisdom, poetry, wisdom, and philosophy of life, taken from sources such as poets, scholars, and the Prophet Muhammad SAW (Bismi et al., 2020). Vocabulary learning aims to enable students to listen and correctly pronounce Arabic words to communicate in Arabic. Therefore, teachers must choose a suitable model or method to achieve this goal (Zulhendra, 2021). Learning Arabic through social media such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube is increasingly popular, offering high flexibility and accessibility. These platforms present learning materials as concise and attractive microblogs, allowing learning access anytime and anywhere. Several Instagram accounts, including @Arabiyahtalks and @nahwu_pedia, offer educational resources about *mufradat*, *mahfudzot*, and YouTube channels Makwi and Mumtaz.id also cover Arabic. Thanks to social media, teachers and students now have more engaging and effective ways to enhance their Arabic language proficiency.

Arabic language teachers can apply the genre pedagogy approach to learning the *Merdeka* curriculum. This model consists of four steps: building knowledge, modeling, combined construction, and independent construction. Teachers must understand each step well as an operational procedure and an effective process of conveying information to students to ensure correct understanding. It allows students to experience complex learning, starting with building students' initial understanding of the material, which is obtained through exposure, observation, and guided and independent practice experiences (Nuraeni, 2023).

Project-based learning in this study used puzzle media. After dividing the groups, the teacher explained the project, the rules of the puzzle media game, and the time that had been determined (Ma'wa et al., 2024). In addition to the three variations of models and approaches mentioned, teachers can innovate by using various methods in teaching Arabic within the *Merdeka* curriculum framework. Teachers can integrate Arabic language learning more flexibly, combining methods, materials, and techniques that are adaptive and responsive to students' needs and conditions. This approach allows Arabic language teaching to be adjusted to formal and informal contexts and students' learning styles. This flexibility includes using technology, such as language learning applications and online platforms, and interactive teaching methods, such as group discussions, role plays, and collaborative projects. In this way, students can learn Arabic through conventional methods and practical experiences relevant to everyday life. This approach aims to make Arabic language learning more enjoyable, effective, and meaningful for students.

The implementation of differentiation, assessment as learning, for learning, and from learning, as well as strengthening the profile of *Pancasila* and *Rahmatan lil'alam* students, has yet to run optimally, especially in Arabic language learning. This is due to differences in training approaches, the quality of human resources for educators, the inequality of educational facilities, and the varying geographical conditions of *madrasah's*. As a result, implementing learning within the *Merdeka* curriculum framework has yet to be by the government's expectations. Building a solid technological foundation is very important for national development, especially in realizing inclusiveness and quality of education. Academic learning can reach its maximum potential if technology and education are combined, producing quality candidates ready to meet market needs. Therefore, it is essential to reorganize the academic process, considering the increasingly sophisticated educational development methodology and the need for solid digital support. Traditional classrooms are now considered outdated, with the role of teachers as facilitators who help students adapt to technology. The philosophy of education has changed, and renewal of the academic sector through curriculum and policies, including Education 5.0, is urgently needed.

According to research, students' creativity and skill development are the most critical aspects of education (Asfiati, 2023; Hidayat et al., 2024). A concentrated and powerful effort is required to lessen students' worry about the most recent information. The use of digital tools to increase

educational efficiency, or "education 5.0," is becoming increasingly significant. Furthermore, scientific research is crucial for producing fresh concepts that raise educational standards (Alharbi, 2023). The fundamental difference between education in Japan and Indonesia lies in the international approach to education, character, ethics, and discipline (Prakoso et al., 2023). As a developed country, Japan has successfully established a structured education pattern, while Indonesia, as a developing country, is still trying to find a curriculum pattern that suits global demands and reflects Indonesian values to achieve Golden Indonesia.

Madrasah Tsanawiyah Aceh Tamiang district has yet to conduct structured monitoring and evaluation of the *Merdeka* curriculum. In general, the conditions of public and private *madrasah's* in this area are similar, with a need for more control over the monitoring and evaluation process of the *Merdeka* curriculum. The mentoring is done remotely through Zoom or WhatsApp by the Aceh religious education and training center, and if possible, a one-time visit to the *madrasah*. An appointed lecturer does the mentoring for six months. However, teachers and *madrasah's* felt that the mentoring could have been more optimal due to different perceptions and understandings from the resource person, which confused teachers. As a result, this has resulted in a loss of control in the implementation of evaluation, which should be very important.

Evaluation is an integral part of assessing the effectiveness of an activity and measuring the achievement of specific standards as a basis for improvement. According to Putrianingsih et al. (2021), learning is a system or process designed to teach students in a planned, implemented, and evaluated systematically to achieve learning objectives effectively and efficiently. Samsinar (2020) also stated that a systematic process is needed to provide learning resources that support effective learning for students. Evaluation carried out by teacher's aims to provide information about the extent to which an activity is achieved, compare achievements with specific standards, and evaluate the benefits obtained compared to the expectations to be achieved.

Evaluation of learning within the framework of the *Merdeka* curriculum in *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* Aceh Tamiang is mainly carried out concerning formative and summative assessments, i.e., assessments carried out during and at the end of learning. However, diagnostic assessment, which should be the basis for determining learning, has yet to be consistently applied. The application of complete assessment is critical in learning evaluation. According to Yulianto (2022), there are three types of assessments in the *Merdeka* curriculum: formative, summative, and diagnostic. These assessments are conducted at flexible times: diagnostic at the beginning, formative during learning, and summative at the end of learning to measure the achievement of material objectives. Monitoring and evaluation is a crucial part of the education process as it provides feedback for improvement. Education quality improvement is a continuous effort to improve students' academic achievement, skills, and learning experiences, as well as the effectiveness of teachers, curriculum, and school management.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia's *Merdeka* curriculum implementation guide emphasizes the importance of evaluation to test the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, and feasibility of curriculum design, implementation, and learning in *madrasah's* implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum. The results of this evaluation serve as a reference for improvement and follow-up in the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum. Monitoring and evaluation are carried out on implementing the curriculum in *madrasah* and the mentoring process by mentors (Ramdhani & Isom, 2022). The experience of developed countries in improving the qualifications of teaching staff, such as the US, UK, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Finland, can be a reference for improving the quality of education in Indonesia. Adopting the patterns applied in these countries, such as equality in international education, character, ethics, and discipline, as well as improving teacher welfare, facilitates the best contribution from educators. Equitable education provision in schools managed by the Ministry of Education and Culture and in *madrasah's* under the Ministry of Religious Affairs is essential to create equal opportunities for every nation's child. This step is crucial in building an effective curriculum policy in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

Implementing the *Merdeka* curriculum at *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* Aceh Tamiang, Indonesia, under the auspices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, requires various obstacles. Most teachers, including Arabic language teachers and teachers of other subjects, still need to implement differentiated learning, digital learning, and assessments per the *Merdeka* curriculum framework. In addition, applying a suitable theme for the learning project to strengthen the profile of *Pancasila* and *Rahmatan lil'alam* students could have been more optimal. In terms of planning, there needs to be more training opportunities for teachers, which causes differences in understanding the curriculum. *Madrasah's* in remote areas, which experience obstacles to internet access and minimal digital facilities, also need help implementing digital learning. In addition, the lack of structured evaluation from *madrasah's* and the Ministry of Religious Affairs is a significant factor in the ineffective implementation of this curriculum. Therefore, serious attention is needed from the government to improve the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum, including by adopting best practices from developed countries, such as equalizing international standard education, character education, ethics, and discipline. It is also essential to improve the economic welfare of teachers so that they can focus more on making the best contribution to education. Equalization of coaching and sustainability of education in *madrasah's*, in addition to schools managed by the Ministry of Education and Culture, supports equal education throughout Indonesia. The implementation of effective curriculum policies throughout the country is crucial to improving the quality of education.

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