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# Beyond Policy Rhetoric: Principal's Concerns in Implementing Emancipated Curriculum in a Private Madrasah in South Sumatra

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**ABSTRACT**. The Emancipated Curriculum in Indonesia promotes flexibility and student-centered learning, yet its implementation in private *madrasahs* remains underexplored, particularly from the principal's perspective. While existing studies focus on teacher readiness or public *madrasahs*, little is known about how private *madrasah* principals navigate structural and pedagogical constraints after multiple years of implementation. This qualitative single-case study addresses that gap by examining the implementation of the Emancipated Curriculum and the principal's concerns at one private *madrasah* in South Sumatra. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the principal, who has led the *madrasah* for six years, and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings reveal three key patterns: (1) despite proactive teacher training, formative initial assessments, and differentiated instruction remaining inconsistently applied; (2) the development of the *Madrasah* Operational Curriculum excludes parents and community representatives, reflecting governance isolation; and (3) project-based learning under P5 PPRA is limited to three recurring themes due to resource constraints, and textbooks are unavailable for some subjects. These patterns indicate that structural support, rather than training alone, determines curriculum fidelity. The study contributes a principal-centered, private-*madrasah* perspective to the curriculum reform literature and highlights the need for systemic alignment of resources and inclusive governance in Islamic educational contexts.

**Keywords**: *Curriculum Leadership; Emancipated Curriculum; Madrasah; Principal Concerns; Private Islamic School.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, Indonesian educational policy has placed significant emphasis on curriculum reform to better align with student-centered learning, critical competencies, character formation, and local relevance (Thaariq, 2026; Mufarokah et al., 2025; Mujiburrahman et al., 2025). In the context of Islamic education, the curriculum at *madrasahs*, which must balance general education with religious instruction, presents unique implementation challenges (Buang, 2008; Putra et al., 2022). For instance, *madrasah* teachers and institutions frequently encounter challenges related to readiness, resources, managerial support, and assessment practices (Isnaeni et al., 2025).

The recent educational reform in Indonesia, known as the Emancipated Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*), signifies a paradigm shift from rigid, centralized instruction to a more

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autonomous, context-driven, and student-centered approach (Firmansyah & Anam, 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2024). This initiative enables educational institutions to adapt their curricula to learners' needs and the characteristics of their respective communities, while promoting character education and fundamental competencies. The curriculum is designed to promote independent learning, project-based activities (including the *Proyek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila dan Profil Pelajar Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin*—P5/PPRA), and formative authentic assessment as central components of pedagogical practice (Kumala et al., 2024; Herpiana et al., 2025; Hinnas et al., 2025).

Despite the Emancipated Curriculum's stated intention of flexibility, translation from policy to practice has been uneven. Empirical studies conducted in Indonesian schools and *madrasahs* have identified persistent barriers, including limited teacher training, teacher readiness, inadequate teaching and learning resources, and challenges in implementing authentic assessment practices (Fatmawati, 2024; Syarochil & Abadi, 2023; Tantri et al., 2024). In *madrasah* contexts, these challenges are further compounded by administrative particularities, resource constraints, and the need to integrate religious values with national competency standards (Anas et al., 2023; Wekke, 2015). The Ministry of Religious Affairs (*Kementerian Agama RI*, 2022) promulgated KMA No. 347/2022 as a directive for *madrasahs* to operationalize the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. However, research findings indicate that numerous *madrasahs*-particularly private *madrasahs* outside Java-encounter challenges in drafting the *Madrasah* Operational Curriculum (MOC), effectively implementing P5/PPRA projects, and acquiring adequate textbooks and assessment instruments (Ramah & Rohman, 2023; Wahyudi et al., 2024).

Despite growing research on curriculum reform, most studies have concentrated on public *madrasahs* or general national policy (Pahrudin et al., 2021; Putra et al., 2022). What remains undertheorized is how private *madrasah* principals experience and respond to implementation barriers after the initial adoption phase. Specifically, existing literature has not adequately addressed three gaps: (1) the principal's role as a sense-maker of curriculum policy in resource-constrained private settings; (2) the integration of *Pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) values into the *Madrasah* Operational Curriculum; and (3) the alignment of authentic assessment with the Emancipated Curriculum in private *madrasahs*.

Drawing on Fullan's (2016) curriculum implementation theory as an analytical lens, which emphasizes clarity, resources, and ownership as key determinants of fidelity. This study examines not only whether the curriculum is implemented but also how the principal interprets and navigates persistent concerns. This theoretical framework allows us to move beyond descriptive reporting toward explanatory insight. Additionally, Rogers (1983) Diffusion of Innovation theory is employed to explain why private *madrasahs*, particularly those attached to *Pesantren*, may adopt curriculum changes more slowly than public institutions, due to hierarchical, tradition-bound governance structures. These frameworks together provide a robust analytical foundation for interpreting the principal's concerns. The paradigm shift is exemplified by recent projects such as *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* and *Profil Pelajar Rahmatan Lil Alamin* (P5-PPRA) within the framework of the Emancipated Curriculum. These initiatives underscore a transition toward integrating values, projects, and contexts in *madrasah* settings (Zahrah & Amaliyah, 2024; Zulkarnaen & Ilyas, 2025). However, according to Sekarinasih and Waseso (2025), many *madrasahs* continue to face challenges in operationalizing their *Madrasah* Operational Curriculum, integrating projects, assessments, and instructional resources.

The present study, therefore, asks: (1) How has the Emancipated Curriculum been implemented in a private *madrasah* in South Sumatra? Moreover, (2) What are the principal concerns regarding its implementation? By answering these questions, the study provides a contextually grounded, principal-centered analysis that fills the identified gap in the literature on private Islamic education and curriculum reform. The research aimed to inform the implementation of the Emancipated Curriculum and to address the principal of a private *madrasah's* concerns regarding its

implementation. Since the *madrasah* has been implementing the curriculum for 3 years, it could be a potential resource for this study.

## METHOD

*Research Design*

This study adopted a qualitative single-case study design to explore how the Emancipated Curriculum was implemented within a *pesantren*-based Islamic junior secondary school. A qualitative case study is particularly appropriate for examining contemporary educational phenomena embedded within their real-life contexts, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly distinguishable (Yin, 2018). Rather than seeking statistical generalization, the study aimed to generate analytical insights into curriculum implementation within a unique institutional setting.

The selected case is revelatory because it provides access to a context rarely documented in curriculum reform research: a private *pesantren*-affiliated *madrasah* in South Sumatra that has implemented the Emancipated Curriculum continuously for 3 academic years. The case is bounded institutionally (a private Islamic junior secondary school under *pesantren* governance), geographically (South Sumatra, Indonesia), and temporally (2020–2023), allowing an in-depth examination of how national curriculum reforms are interpreted within traditional Islamic educational governance.

*Research Site and Participant Selection*

Purposive sampling was employed using explicit inclusion criteria to ensure information-rich cases. The selection process was conducted in two stages. First, 12 private *madrasahs* within approximately 30 km of the research site were screened based on their curriculum implementation history. Institutions were included only if they had implemented the Emancipated Curriculum continuously for at least three years. 7 schools were excluded because implementation had lasted less than 3 years, 3 declined to participate, and 1 did not respond. One school (pseudonym: AR *Madrasah*) fulfilled all criteria and agreed to participate.

In the selected case, the principal served as the primary participant due to his central role in curriculum planning, policy interpretation, teacher supervision, and institutional decision-making. To enhance data richness and reduce reliance on a single perspective, a vice-principal responsible for curriculum implementation was also interviewed. Documentary evidence, including the *Madrasah* Operational Curriculum (MOC), two lesson plans, and one P5 PPRA module, was analyzed to triangulate participants' accounts.

*Data Collection*

Data were collected over four weeks through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Two interview sessions were conducted with the principal (approximately 110 minutes in total), followed by one interview with the vice-principal (45 minutes). An interview guide consisting of twelve open-ended questions explored four interconnected domains: teacher professional development, diagnostic assessment and differentiated instruction, development of the *Madrasah* Operational Curriculum, and implementation of the P5 PPRA project. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded with participants' permission, and transcribed verbatim immediately after each interview. Documentary data were examined to identify consistencies and discrepancies between reported practices and formal curriculum documents, thereby strengthening methodological triangulation.

*Data Analysis*

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts and accompanying field notes to develop familiarity with the data. Initial inductive coding was then

undertaken line-by-line to identify meaningful patterns across participants' narratives and documentary evidence. Codes were subsequently clustered into candidate themes through constant comparison, and the themes were iteratively refined to ensure internal coherence and conceptual distinction.

Although themes emerged inductively from the data, interpretation was informed by two complementary theoretical frameworks. Fullan's (2016) theory of educational change provided an analytical lens for understanding issues related to implementation capacity, institutional ownership, and organizational support, whereas Rogers's (1983) Diffusion of Innovations theory facilitated interpretation of perceived barriers associated with compatibility, complexity, observability, and adoption processes. These frameworks were applied during interpretation rather than predetermined coding, thereby preserving the inductive nature of reflexive thematic analysis.

*Trustworthiness and Researcher Reflexivity*

The trustworthiness of the findings was established following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation across interviews and institutional documents, member checking with the principal, and prolonged engagement during fieldwork. Transferability was supported through a thick description of the institutional context and curriculum implementation processes. Dependability was enhanced by maintaining an audit trail documenting coding decisions, theme development, and analytical memos, which two doctoral researchers independently reviewed during peer debriefing. Confirmability was promoted through systematic reflexive memo writing to document analytical decisions and minimize the influence of researcher assumptions.

Recognizing that the researcher's positionality shapes qualitative interpretation, the first author maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study, acknowledging his professional background as a researcher in Islamic education and continuously reflecting on potential assumptions that might influence data interpretation. Attention was also given to disconfirming evidence by examining instances where curriculum practices diverged from the dominant patterns identified across the data.

*Ethical Considerations*

Ethical principles were observed throughout the study. Participants received detailed information regarding the research objectives, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. All institutional and participant names were replaced with pseudonyms, digital recordings were securely stored using password-protected devices, and only the research team had access to the original data. Where applicable, the study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical approval procedures.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

Three main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) procedural compliance with assessment gaps; (2) governance isolation in curriculum development; and (3) thematic and resource narrowing in project implementation. Table 1 below summarizes these themes, their key findings, and supporting evidence from the principal's interview.

Table 1. Summary of Thematic Findings

| Theme | Key Finding | Supporting Evidence (Principal's Quote) |
|---|---|---|
| *Theme 1:* Procedural compliance but assessment inconsistency | Initial assessments not consistently conducted; differentiated learning not fully implemented despite lesson plan compliance | *"Some teachers are not accustomed to conducting initial assessment, making it difficult for them to conduct differentiated learning"* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Theme 2:* Governance isolation in MOC development | Parents' association and community representatives excluded from MOC development; only the foundation and *pesantren* are involved | *"Our obstacle is that we did not involve the association of students' parents and the community"* |
| *Theme 3:* Thematic and resource narrowing in P5 PPRA projects | Only 3 of 6 P5 themes implemented; textbooks unavailable for English, Indonesian, and other non-science/non-religion subjects | *"We only focused on some themes... We never did other themes,"* and *"Students must buy workbooks for English and Indonesian"* |

*Procedural Compliance but Assessment Inconsistency*

MTs AR has been conducting the curriculum for three years. During those three years, almost all the teachers had experience attending workshops and training on implementing the curriculum. The principal mentioned that, after 1 year of implementing the curriculum, only a few new teachers had not received training and workshops on its implementation in the teaching and learning process. The *madrasah* actively participated in workshops and training provided by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Education, and other organizations. At the beginning, the *madrasah* conducted teacher training and workshops independently by inviting competent speakers to the *madrasah*. As stated by the principal, "*During the first year of implementing the curriculum, we conducted training and workshops independently by inviting competent speakers. We also got training from our madrasah supervisor, who actively supervised and did an amazing job in assisting us in implementing this curriculum*. MTs AR teachers also tried their best to conduct the curriculum. The principal stated that the teachers have adjusted their lesson plans in accordance with the curriculum. He stated that "*the teacher has created the lesson plan according to the Emancipated Curriculum. They had designed the lesson plan using every step stated in the curriculum.*"

However, the principal explicitly noted that initial assessments required to enable differentiated instruction were not consistently conducted. He stated: "*We are still in the process of adjusting and perfecting the lesson plan and how to conduct it accordingly, especially in conducting the initial assessment. It is because some teachers are not accustomed to conducting the initial assessment, which makes it difficult for them to implement differentiated learning. Nevertheless, we, as the leaders of the madrasah, try our best to assist them so that they can truly implement the lesson plan based on the Emancipated Curriculum*." This finding indicates a gap between procedural compliance (creating lesson plans) and pedagogical enactment (assessing student readiness).

*Governance Isolation in MOC development*

When asked about the *Madrasah* Operational Curriculum (MOC), the principal mentioned: "*In creating and conducting the MOC, we involved several parties, from the pesantren and the foundation. As our madrasah is attached to the pesantren, we should then involve them to create the MOC, as we should integrate the pesantren values in our curriculum*." Therefore, it can be concluded that the *madrasah* under research did not work alone in creating the MOC. However, the principal then admitted that they did not involve the student-parents' association or the community representative. He said: "*Our obstacle is that in creating the MOC, we did not involve the association of students' parents and the community. The main concern is that because this curriculum is the newest one, our teachers, especially those who recently joined, still require adjustment to implement it in their classroom*." This exclusion reflects a governance pattern in which vertical accountability (to the foundation and *pesantren*) overrides horizontal engagement (with parents and the community), potentially undermining local relevance and ownership.

*Thematic and Resource Narrowing in P5 PPRA Projects*

On the implementation of P5 PPRA, the principal mentioned that the *madrasah* has conducted the projects several times. For instance, he mentioned that the *madrasah* conducted a project named "Suara Demokrasi" where they cooperated with *Komisi Pemilihan Umum Sumatera Selatan* and took the students to visit the office. He stated: "*The students felt excited to visit the office. They could ask questions to the head and staff of the office, and they could take a look at the office. It was a wonderful*

*experience for our students*." The principal also mentioned that, besides visiting the office of Komisi Pemilihan Umum Sumatera Selatan, the *madrasah* also conducted the election for the OSIM head, and the students used the election box as their project. However, the principal acknowledged that the variety of projects was limited. He stated, "*I feel that we did not cover the themes provided for the projects. We only focused on some of them, such as entrepreneurship, sustainable lifestyle, and the democratic voices. We never did other themes than those mentioned*." This means that out of six possible P5 PPRA themes, the *madrasah* consistently implemented only three.

Furthermore, textbook availability emerged as a significant concern. The principal mentioned that the *madrasah* was only supported with books for science, math, and Islamic education subjects. For other subjects, the students should buy student workbooks. "*The students are provided with books from the library in Science and Math subjects and Islamic education subjects. For other subjects, such as English and Indonesian, they should buy the students' workbooks. This is due to the books for other subjects that are not provided in the library,*" he added. This means that for at least four subjects (English, Indonesian, and other non-science/non-religion subjects), no official textbooks aligned with the Emancipated Curriculum were available. The principal also admitted that the support from the *madrasah* supervisor was really appreciated. He said: "*The madrasah supervisor was really helpful. We got input and insight on the implementation of the Emancipated Curriculum in our madrasah. We were provided with training and workshops on how to implement the curriculum, also.*"

## Discussion

This study's findings extend previous research by revealing not only what challenges exist but also why they persist despite proactive leadership. Using Fullan (2016) implementation framework and Rogers' (1983) Diffusion of Innovation theory, we interpret the findings as reflecting three implementation gaps: clarity, ownership, and resources. Table 2 below maps each finding to these theoretical constructs.

Table 2. Theoretical Interpretation of Findings

| Theme | Fullan's Construct | Rogers' Construct | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Assessment inconsistency | Clarity gap | Complexity of innovation | Teachers understand *what* to do (lesson plan), but not *why* assessment precedes differentiation. |
| Governance isolation | Ownership gap | Compatibility with values | *Pesantren's* hierarchical governance resists participatory MOC development |
| Thematic/resource narrowing | Resource gap | Observability & trialability | Limited access to materials reduces the ability to trial new themes; only observable/repeatable themes are implemented. |

Regarding the inconsistency in initial assessments (Theme 1), the findings align with those of Tantri et al. (2024) and Fatmawati (2024), who reported similar difficulties in implementing authentic assessment. However, our study adds a new dimension: the problem is not due solely to a lack of training. Unlike the research conducted by Syarochil and Abadi (2023), which found that a lack of teacher training was one of the main problems in implementing a new curriculum, this *madrasah's* principal was proactive in providing training. The principal's proactiveness is highly commendable. Nevertheless, the problem persisted. This reflects what Fullan (2016) terms a clarity gap: teachers understand the curriculum's structure but not the pedagogical logic linking assessment to differentiation. Training emphasized form (lesson plan format) over function (diagnostic teaching). From Rogers (1983) perspective, the innovation's complexity, specifically the multi-step process of conducting initial assessment, then designing differentiated instruction based on results, may exceed teachers' current readiness, despite their willingness. The *madrasah* under research was actually proactive in teacher training, unlike the research result conducted by Syarochil and Abadi (2023). However, the problem faced by the *madrasah* was in the implementation of the curriculum in the lesson plan. Due to the new system, the teachers could not implement

differentiated learning because they did not follow the rule requiring an initial assessment as the basis for implementing it.

The exclusion of parents and the community from MOC development (Theme 2) aligns with Wahyudi et al. (2024), who, in their policy analysis of the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka in *madrasahs*, identified that private *madrasahs*, particularly those outside Java, face distinct governance challenges in drafting the *Madrasah* Operational Curriculum. Similarly, Wahyuni et al. (2024) found that the participatory demands of the Emancipated Curriculum often clash with the hierarchical decision-making structures prevalent in private *madrasah* settings. However, our findings further show that this is not merely a technical oversight but an ownership gap: the principal's loyalty to the *Pesantren* foundation overrides broader stakeholder involvement. The principal mentioned that he involved teachers from the *pesantren* and some foundation heads, but did not involve the parents' association or the community. This contrasts with public *madrasahs*, where parent associations are typically mandated. The private nature of the institution, especially one attached to a *pesantren*, thus creates distinct governance dynamics that have not been previously theorized in the curriculum implementation literature. Rogers (1983) concept of compatibility is instructive here: the *Pesantren*'s hierarchical, tradition-bound governance structure may be incompatible with the participatory, flexible ethos of the Emancipated Curriculum. This compatibility gap slows the diffusion of the innovation within the *madrasah*. The principal's concern about the MOC development process is therefore not merely administrative but cultural and structural.

The thematic narrowing and textbook scarcity (Theme 3) confirm the findings of Sekarinasih and Waseso (2025) and Wahyuni et al. (2024), who noted that *madrasahs* often struggle to integrate projects and acquire adequate textbooks. Regarding the implementation of P5-PPRA projects, the principal disclosed that although the *madrasah* regularly conducted projects every semester, they still could not cover all the project themes. They only conducted several themes. The result also aligned with the research by Sekarinasih and Waseso (2025), which found that *madrasahs* often struggled to integrate projects. However, our study reveals a resource gap that is not merely financial but structural: the library's collection was determined before the Emancipated Curriculum was introduced, and no budget was allocated for new acquisitions. The principal's concern about limited project options further indicates that even when projects are conducted, they are repeated not by choice but by necessity, because only those themes have accessible community partners (e.g., the election commission). As the principal mentioned, the books available to students did not cover all subjects. Therefore, students had to buy workbooks, which may not have supported the implementation of the Emancipated Curriculum. This result was similar to the findings of research conducted by Wahyudi et al. (2024), Wahyuni et al. (2024), and Sekarinasih and Waseso (2025), which found that adequate textbooks and instructional resources were among the principal's main concerns when implementing the curriculum. From Rogers (1983) perspective, the observability and trialability of the innovation are severely limited: teachers cannot observe diverse project implementations (only three themes are visible) and cannot easily trial new themes without resources and community partnerships.

A distinctive contribution of this study is its location within a *Pesantren*-affiliated private *madrasah*. *Pesantrens* are traditional Islamic boarding schools with hierarchical, lineage-based governance structures (Wekke, 2015; Wekke et al., 2018). This context matters because the Emancipated Curriculum's participatory, student-centered philosophy may conflict with *Pesantren*'s authoritative pedagogical traditions. The principal's concerns, particularly the exclusion of parents and the community from the MOC development process, reflect this tension. Unlike public schools or non-*Pesantren* private schools, where curriculum decisions may be more open to stakeholder input, *Pesantren*-affiliated *madrasahs* operate within a bounded authority structure where the foundation and religious leaders hold final decision-making power. This structural constraint has

not been adequately theorized in previous curriculum implementation research, which has predominantly studied public institutions.

Synthesizing these three gaps, this study's unique contribution is to show that in a private *madrasah* attached to a *Pesantren*, the principal acts as a bricoleur, assembling available resources (training from the ministry, support from the foundation, projects from local partners), but cannot overcome structural constraints without systemic policy alignment. This finding challenges the assumption that principal proactiveness alone determines implementation success. The principal's concerns included the type of assessment that had not been conducted thoroughly by the teachers, the process of creating the *Madrasah* Operational Curriculum, the limited project options conducted in the *madrasah* related to P5 PPRA, and the availability of books supporting the implementation of the Emancipated Curriculum. To conclude, the private *madrasah* under research has attempted to implement the curriculum fully, despite limited resources.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that, after three years of implementing the Emancipated Curriculum, the private madrasah under study has achieved procedural compliance but continues to face persistent gaps in assessment fidelity, governance inclusivity, and resource alignment. Using Fullan's (2016) framework, these gaps are interpreted as clarity gaps (teachers understand lesson plan formats but not the pedagogical logic linking initial assessment to differentiated instruction), ownership gaps (exclusion of parents and community from MOC development due to *Pesantren*'s hierarchical governance), and resource gaps (only three of six P5 PPRA themes implemented; textbooks unavailable for most subjects). The study's main contribution is a principal-centered, theoretically grounded model of implementation challenges in *Pesantren*-affiliated private *madrasahs*, revealing that structural constraints, not merely training or principal proactiveness, determine curriculum fidelity. Limitations include a single-case, single-informant design; findings may not generalize to non-*Pesantren* private *madrasahs*. In practice, the Ministry of Religious Affairs should mandate in-class coaching for initial assessment, require parent association involvement in MOC development, and allocate textbook budgets for all subjects. *Madrasah* leadership should establish a semester-based parent forum for curriculum governance and prioritize expanding P5 PPRA themes through low-cost community partnerships. Future research should conduct comparative studies between *Pesantren*-affiliated and non-*Pesantren* private *madrasahs* to isolate the effect of traditional governance structures on curriculum implementation and include teacher and student perspectives through longitudinal observation.

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