

## Bridging Educational Reform and Faith: Evaluating *Kurikulum Merdeka*'s Compatibility with Islamic Values in Madrasahs

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**ABSTRACT.** This study explored the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) in Indonesian Islamic schools (Madrasahs) by analyzing the compatibility of its implementation with Islamic educational values and its challenges and opportunities. The primary aims are to determine the alignment between KM principles and Islamic education, examine obstacles and recommend ways to effectively implement it in Madrasahs. This research synthesizes several academic articles, government policy documents, historical texts, and literature on curriculum development based on library research methods. Content analysis is used to uncover underlying themes, comparative analysis is used to assess compatibility with the curriculum, and critical evaluation is used to assess KM's impact on Islamic education. One key finding revealed is that the features of KM, such as student-centred learning, critical thinking and the development of student character, correspond well with the holistic goals of Islamic education. Nevertheless, major obstacles exist, such as a lack of teacher preparation, resource gaps, and tensions between KM's flexible approaches and Madrasah's traditional frameworks. Despite these challenges, KM presents opportunities for integrating secular and religious education, fostering inclusivity, and promoting innovative teaching practices. KM holds transformative potential in Madrasahs as it can integrate national education reforms with basic Islamic concepts. That would necessitate personalized teacher training, collaborative policy development and tailoring of curriculum for local contexts. Future research has the potential to yield a longitudinal insight into adoption across diverse demographics in different Islamic educational contexts.

**Keywords:** *Educational reform, Islamic schools (Madrasahs), Islamic values, "Kurikulum Merdeka" (Merdeka Curriculum)*



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## INTRODUCTION

The *Kurikulum Merdeka* (KM), introduced by Indonesia's Ministry of Education and Culture, represents a transformative approach to education, emphasizing flexibility, student-centred learning, and essential 21st-century skills. KM aims to address challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, including learning loss and traditional rote-based education limitations. It seeks to equip students with critical thinking and creativity to navigate dynamic societal and labour market demands. This reform holds dual implications for Islamic schools (Madrasahs): modernizing educational delivery while integrating deeply rooted religious and ethical principles.

Previous studies have explored the broader implications of *Kurikulum Merdeka* (KM) on Indonesia's education system, particularly its flexibility and emphasis on holistic student development (Azzahra, 2023; Bastian, 2023; Cantika, 2022; Fitria, 2023; Herwanti et al., 2022; Kholisah, 2023; Kurniawati, 2023; Latifa, 2023; Masbukhin, 2023; Muliardi, 2023; Palangda, 2023; Suherman et al., 2021; Tedjokoesoemo et al., 2021; Widiadi et al., 2022; Zarkasyi, 2023). Additionally, research has examined how KM addresses learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic and its role in promoting critical thinking and creativity (Basuki, 2023; Damayanti & Muhroji, 2022; Fazira, 2023; Hasanah et al., 2023; Kuwoto, 2024; Masrura, 2023; Mulabbiyah, 2024; Ni'mah, 2024; Parwati, 2024; Pratikno et al., 2022; Rafiqah et al., 2023; Ramdhani, 2024; Ridwanulloh, 2024; Setyaningsih, 2023; Suranto, 2023; Witraguna, 2024). However, limited attention has been paid to the specific challenges and opportunities associated with implementing KM within Islamic schools (Madrasahs), which operate under distinct cultural, religious, and educational frameworks. While some studies have highlighted the integration of secular and religious education in Madrasahs (Empaldi, 2023; Hasanuddin, 2023; Suparjo & Hidayah, 2023; Washudin et al., 2023; Yunita & Widodo, 2023), there is a lack of focused analysis on how KM aligns or conflicts with the values and objectives of Islamic education. This paper seeks to fill this gap by thoroughly examining KM's implementation in Madrasahs, identifying specific challenges, benefits, and areas for alignment, thereby offering novel insights into the intersection of national curriculum reforms and religiously affiliated educational institutions.

This study serves multiple purposes. First, this study aims to analyze the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* (KM) in Islamic schools in Indonesia, focusing on the alignment and potential conflicts between KM values and the principles of Islamic education. Second, this study discusses the challenges and opportunities of implementing the KM in Islamic schools. Third, it explores the perceived advantages and disadvantages experienced by Madrasahs in adopting this curriculum. Fourth, by examining these dynamics, the study seeks to highlight the operational role of national educational reforms in harmonizing holistic educational goals with the unique characteristics of religiously affiliated institutions. Fifth, the study also aims to fill gaps in previous research that have largely overlooked the subtle interactions between KM and Islamic education. Sixth, while much debate has occurred regarding religiously affiliated schools, few studies have addressed the need for national policies to reflect these underexplored dimensions. Thus, this study seeks to identify how national policies can better align with the needs of Madrasahs, thereby bridging local challenges with inclusivity within a comprehensive educational system.

The study hypothesizes that the early stage of *Merdeka Curriculum* (KM) implementation in Indonesian Madrasahs is characterized by a tension between KM's flexible, inclusive framework and the traditional religious and cultural foundations of madrasah. It asserts that, although KM is compatible with Islamic educational values and provides room for creativity, structural barriers such as inadequate teacher preparation and lacking resources restrict its effective implementation. It is also suggested that addressing these challenges through personalized support and collaboration among stakeholders can increase the potential of the curriculum to promote holistic student development.

## **METHODS**

This study employs the library research method to examine Islamic schools' insights as well as the implementation of the KM. Library research refers to the systematic collation, exploration, and synthesis of existing information from multiple sources to address the research questions. This approach is highly appropriate for this research as it enables for a detailed theoretical, historical, and policy perspective of the KM and its impacts on Islamic education.

### **Sources of Data**

The data for this study were collected from varied secondary sources. First, academic papers, including peer-reviewed journal articles and conference papers, discuss the principles, implementation strategies, and outcomes of the KM, as well as the literature study discussing Islamic education in Indonesia. These sources provide a list of existing studies and theoretical, methodological, and empirical works relevant to this study. The second data is policy documents such as official government publications, guidelines, and reports from the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture, which deal with the purpose, framework and policy of the curriculum as well as implementation in various educational settings, including within Islamic schools. The third data comes from literary works such as books or academic articles, archival materials, and historical texts associated with the evolution of Islamic education in Indonesia and its response to national educational reforms. Fourth, educational theory and curriculum development literature, foundational texts on educational theories and curriculum development that provide a theoretical framework for analysing the KM's compatibility with the objectives of Islamic education. This literature supports the analytical process by offering concepts and models that can be applied to the data.

### **Analytical Approach**

Data analysis was performed by a systematic review and synthesis of the collected data using three approaches. First, Content Analysis: A qualitative content analysis to reveal the key themes, concepts and patterns of the implementation of the KM within Islamic Schools. In this step, data were coded into categories such as the content of the curriculum, pedagogical practices, and the specific obstacles faced by Islamic school teachers. Second, Comparative Analysis: The research comparison was primarily focused on comparing the KM's principles and Islamic curriculum content so that the comparison could be used to evaluate the values and the compatibility of both to investigate whether alignment is feasible without undermining the core religious and educational values of Islamic schools. Third, Critical Evaluation: The critical evaluation of the impact of the KM on Islamic education has been theoretically and historically interpreted based on existing literature. This assessment draws out the impact of the curriculum on Islamic schools, points to policy and practice recommendations available, and provides actionable recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Overview of the Kurikulum Merdeka***

The KM, launched in 2021, is among the most transformational shifts in the education landscape of Indonesia, centring on principles of student agency, creativity, and holistic development (see Abdurrizal et al., 2022; Rochmat, 2023). This curriculum is prepared in response to emerging issues in a dynamic world and the new normal of global focus on education triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. This section will discuss the principles, objectives, and elements of the KM in more detail.

The primary principle of the KM is student-centred learning. The principle emphasizes the need for education to be tailored to students' individual needs, interests and capabilities. This encourages students to be involved and engaged, as they can take control of their learning experience (Amiruddin, 2023). The curriculum encourages individualised instruction, allows

teachers to act accordingly with their methods and provides a more holistic response to each student's learning experiences. The second principle is flexibility and freedom. The KM allows schools and teachers to craft and deliver curricula responsive to students' specific contexts and demographics. Such flexibility incorporates local knowledge and cultural values into the educational process to make learning more applicable and significant for the students (Wasehudin et al., 2023). It gives schools much room to think outside the box and offers different types of learning methods, producing a new wave of creativity and exploration (Jasiah, 2024). Third, holistic development. It aims to nurture social, emotional, and ethical skills in addition to academic ones. Such a holistic framework also resonates with the values of Ki Hajar Dewantara's (an Indonesian national hero) educational philosophies, which emphasize the development of an individual's quality to be a human being who contributes to society (Hunaepi, 2023). Langoday (2024) adds that the curriculum includes teaching character education and the values of respect, responsibility, and cooperation among students.

The KM aims to achieve the overarching goals, which cover several aspects. First and foremost is improving learning outcomes. It seeks to improve student learning by allowing students to engage with authentic content and context, and by building the knowledge and skills required to thrive in a rapidly changing world (Ni'mah, 2024). Secondly, to develop critical and creative thinking (Swandana, 2023; Yatim et al., 2023). The curriculum directly responds to 21st-century needs with an emphasis on inquiry-based learning and the resolution of problems, leading students to embrace features like adaptability and ingenuity (Langoday, 2024). Thirdly, to promote lifelong learning through the passion for learning and all the inspiration for long-life learners (Rochmat, 2023; Sari et al., 2023). The KM also expects that learning by seeking and seeing the world together with adults can imprint a curiosity for more inquiries in life, as well as a desire for continuous personal and professional growth.

The curriculum framework includes key competencies and learning outcomes that students are expected to achieve at different levels of education. It contains core competence, subject areas, and core indicators that help the preparation of lesson plans and assessments (Damayanti & Muhroji, 2022). Second, the KM encourages diverse learning that involves students and encourages them to do more classroom activities with collaborative learning. The activities include project-based learning, discussion groups, and practice so that students can then implement their knowledge in real-life (Amiruddin, 2023). Also, the assessment in the KM is intended to be formative and full-scale, not just prioritizing student achievement marks. The assessment encompasses the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains for obtaining a clear picture of a student's development (Damayanti & Muhroji, 2022). The model is designed to provide feedback to students that actually help them grow. Finally, teacher professional development acknowledges the pivotal role of teachers in the successful delivery of the curriculum; the focus is on developing them continuously. Teachers are encouraged to engage in training and joint study events to enhance their pedagogy and successfully adjust to the current curriculum (Sepiawardani, 2023).

In conclusion, the KM could be interpreted as an ideal vision to transform education in Indonesia based on the stage of Merdeka, which should have the spirit of Merdeka — freedom, autonomy, flexibility, and whole student development. This new curriculum, which is designed with an emphasis and focus on the learning outcomes, prepares the students to become critical thinkers and lifelong learners required in a globalizing and rapidly changing world, giving an edge over the traditional methods.

### ***Historical context and development of Islamic education in Indonesia***

Islamic education in Indonesia has undergone a substantial shift over the centuries due to various socio-political, cultural, as well as colonial influences. Islam was brought to Indonesia in the 13th century through trade and was initially informal Quranic teaching in mosques until its formal system, such as *pesantren* (Islamic boarding house), was founded in the 15th century, which

focused on memorisation of religious texts (Nurdiyanto, 2024; Rusli, 2023; Setiawan, 2024). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, madrasahs appeared, integrating traditional Islamic and western models of education that taught religious and secular subjects (Maryati, 2023).

Policies in the colonial era pushed aside Islamic education, but organizations like Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama made it modern with integrated curricula (Kholil, 2024; Nurhayati, 2013). However, the focal point for education in Indonesia came in a joint decree issued in 1975, which declared madrasahs to be equivalent to public schools that became part of the national education system and thus improved their quality significantly (Syarif, 2020). Islamic education continued to evolve after independence, integrating Islam with inclusivity and accommodating multicultural perspectives in the national education framework (Nurhayati, 2013), which demonstrated the historical status of Islam in Indonesia.

Modern reforms such as the 2013 Curriculum and Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) develop student-centered learning and integrate Islamic and general subjects to overcome modern challenges (Hikmawati, 2024). Though challenges persist, including the relevance of curriculum and teacher training, opportunities such as incorporating Islamic values into broader systems, alongside the potential of digital technology (see Amalia, 2020), reveal footprints of positive growth (Nurdin, 2021). Overall, the historical trajectory of Islamic education reflects a dynamic interplay of tradition and modernity, continuing to shape Indonesia's cultural and religious identity.

### ***The structure and goals of Islamic schools (Madrasahs) and its relationship with the implementation of KM***

Islamic schools or Madrasahs are part of the educational ecosystem in Indonesia, with their own structures, goals, and distinct features. These institutions serve as a religious learning source and, in turn, also hope to educate holistic individuals endowed with both religious and secular knowledge. This section discusses Madrasahs' organisation and educational objectives, especially under the KM.

There are several types of Madrasah, such as Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) as an elementary school, focusing on elementary Islamic teachings and general subjects; Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) that is similar to a junior high school, with a more advanced curriculum that includes religious and secular subjects; and Madrasah Aliyah (MA), as a senior high school, providing a general education curriculum that prepares students for college or vocational training (Dirjen Pendis, 2021). Madrasah curricula aim to integrate Islamic education with national education standards. This comprises Islamic studies, Arabic language and even general education subjects like mathematics, science, and social studies.

Madrasahs' primary goal is to instil a good sense of morality and ethics into the minds of students. This includes promoting responsibility, respect for others, and a responsibility to serve. Character education is an integral part of the curriculum, which must be instilled in students so they can become responsible citizens (Mi'raj, 2023; Rochmat, 2023). Madrasahs also seek to provide a high-quality education that equips students with the knowledge and skills necessary for future education and success in the workplace. This curriculum aims to cultivate critical, problem-solving, and creative thinking skills (Asfiati, 2023; Wantini, 2023). By prioritising both academic and religious education, students are equipped to meet the challenges of the contemporary world while remaining rooted in their Islamic identity. Moreover, Madrasahs are useful for the conservation and dissemination of Islam and the Islamic tradition more generally in Indonesian society. Through the incorporation of local wisdom and cultural aspects in the curriculum, Madrasahs establish a sense of identity and belonging for the students (Ar et al., 2021; Rochmat, 2023). This is even more so in a diverse society like Indonesia that needs to cultivate mutual respect amongst all cultural as well as religious groups.

The goals of madrasahs and the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) are mostly compatible, especially in terms of character education. Through KM, madrasahs could become

exemplary institutions as they emphasize the implementation of morality, ethics, responsibility, and respect through the Profil Pelajar Pancasila component. This aspect of KM focuses on building character by incorporating local, national, and religious values within the learning content to develop responsible and ethical citizens (Ningsih, 2023; Rahayu et al., 2022; Riskianto, 2023). Consequently, the Madrasah's emphasis on moral and ethical education aligns well with KM's goal. A second common goal is to develop critical and creative thinking skills. KM aims to meet the educational needs of the 21st century, focusing on inquiry-based learning, problem-solving, and creativity, among others. Such goals also perfectly align with Madrasahs' desire to provide students with a quality education that strives to prepare them for future academic and professional endeavours. Thus, through KM, which upholds ways of thinking critically and solving problems, Madrasahs have the opportunity to advance their learning strategy in accordance with current educational needs.

Madrasahs also promote a balanced approach that combines religion with academic education allowing students to be grounded in their Islamic identity while also being equipped to respond to modern-day challenges (Mulyana & Izzati, 2022). KM's versatility facilitates the integration of religious teachings across the curriculum, allowing Madrasahs to continue their twin pillars of academic success and spiritual development. This alignment enables KM and Madrasahs to complement each other in terms of students' holistic development. In addition, KM's focus on integrating local wisdom and cultural elements resonates with the role of Madrasahs in maintaining and promoting Islamic traditions in Indonesian society. In Indonesia's pluralistic context, KM is particularly relevant because it promotes respect for diversity and encourages mutual understanding between different cultures and religious groups. This synergy makes it easier for Madrasahs to implement the process of instilling identity and a sense of belonging to students and contributes to the preservation of Islamic values.

## ANALYSIS

### ***Compatibility of the KM with Islamic Educational Values***

The KM aims to create a more flexible and student-oriented education, focusing on meeting students' learning needs, developing competencies, and preparing graduates with the skills required to thrive in a rapidly changing world. The curriculum incorporates autonomy, creativity, and well-rounded individuals. The question is whether these are in line with or contradict Islamic educational values and purposes. The following discusses how these principles work in conjunction with Islamic values of education values based on related research.

The concept of KM closely fits with some elements of Islamic education, focusing on student autonomy and personalized learning, aligning with Islamic principles of nurturing individual potential and promoting critical thinking. The KM encourages students to learn and grow independently in accordance with the Islamic educational philosophy of building character and intellect (Hunaepi, 2023). Furthermore, its focus on total development, including moral and ethical development combined with academics, is consistent with Islamic objectives of developing balanced personalities with integrity and ethical conduct. From this base information, (Empaldi, 2023) asserts that the future goal of the curriculum is to direct students toward spirituality and morality, which is the goal of Islamic education at the basic stage. The flexibility of the KM also provides an opportunity for schools to integrate local wisdom and values as practiced by Islamic boarding school (*Pesantren*) which have implemented values to accommodate their community needs (Wasehudin et al., 2023). Such flexibility is crucial for Islamic lifeworld schools to retain their religious character in a changing educational landscape. Additionally, the emphasis of character education in the curriculum reflects Islamic goals through moral values and social responsibility, such as sympathy and tolerance, which are also core values of Islam (Rochmat, 2023).

However, there are some principles in the KM that contradict Islamic educational values. Though the curriculum tends to promote independence among the students, not all educators

are on the same page regarding this independence in Islamic education as some even worry that students have too much freedom, which can take them away from the core of Islamic teachings. This is a possible tension point revealed between the constitutionality of freedom that the KM offers through independent learning and the structure of Islamic education that tends to be rigid in following the rule (Hasanuddin, 2023). Besides that, the focus of the KM on integration with subjects that are secular in nature needs to be re-evaluated again with Islamic schools that may prioritize the dominant value of religious education that must be kept as enforced through KM (Kuwoto, 2024). The importance of this question lies at the core of Islamic schools' mission, which is how they can realise the KM fully, yet not leave behind the faith-based education aspect.

KM requires teachers to adapt to new styles and content to succeed in its implementation. That all said, there are probably not many teachers in Islamic schools who have had training in this regard, to truly understand the philosophy of the curriculum, which makes its implementation problematic. The lack of teacher preparation is one of the factors that can hinder the implementation of the curriculum in Islamic education (Asfiati, 2023). In addition, the multicultural and inclusion-oriented nature of the curriculum may make it even more challenging to sustain the distinctive character of Islamic education. An example is a study by Pamuji and Mawardi (2023), who emphasize the significance of carefully embedding multicultural values into the Islamic education curriculum in order not to diminish their religious content.

To sum up, the KM has features that offer opportunities and challenges in Islamic education in Indonesia. Although much common ground exists regarding concepts like student-centred learning, holistic development, and emphasis on character education, conflicts might arise with respect to autonomy, curriculum content, teacher preparedness, and across regions regarding cultural respect or sensitivity. In dealing with these complexities, Islamic schools need to continuously discuss and contemplate and then implement the KM that aligns with their values and objectives.

### ***Comparative analysis of the content and pedagogical approaches in the KM versus traditional Islamic school curricula***

KM is flexible and adaptable by design, encouraging schools to align content to the needs and interests of their students. This highlights the importance of learning, which focuses on providing core subjects, character development, local wisdom and cultural value (Ni'mah, 2024; Yunitasari et al., 2023). The multi-disciplinary approach envisioned in the curriculum ensures that the subjects are well-linked to facilitate a holistic understanding of knowledge. By comparison, the curricula of most traditional Islamic schools centre around religious education, emphasizing Islamic studies, Quran memorization, and Arabic language skills. The regular content is generally based on classical books and religious principles, whereas secular subjects or contemporary issues are not incorporated as much (Hamamah, 2023). It may lead to a rather fixed curriculum that may not fulfil students' needs in a dynamic world.

The KM adopts a student-centred pedagogy that promotes active learning, critical thinking, and creativity. Innovative approaches are expected from the teachers to engage the students to learn more independently and in a self-directed manner (Adelia, 2023; Hadi, 2023). This fits well with modern theories of education, which aim to develop 21st-century skills. By contrast, classical Islamic education is usually teacher-centred, with the teacher as the main source of knowledge. The instruction still heavily leans on memorization and rote learning, and little emphasis on critical thinking skills and engaging the students (Şahin, 2018). This serves to keep the religious knowledge intact, but it is not sufficient to prepare students for the needs of contemporary society.

Assessment in the KM is formative and holistic, focusing on the all-round development of students rather than mere academic performance. It assesses all three domains of education (cognitive, affective and psychomotor), which provide a complete picture of the overall progress

of students (Yunitasari, 2023). The idea is to give constructive feedback that encourages learning and development. On the other hand, conventional assessment practices implemented in Islamic schools usually rely on standardized tests and exams, that focus on rote memorization instead of understanding and applying what they have learned. Such a high-stakes environment does not reflect the real potential of a student (Abdurrohim, 2024), as priorities will shift towards grades rather than an extensive learning process and less character building.

The KM is based on flexibility, inclusiveness, local relevance to students and their lives as it tries to create a learning space that respects differences so that everyone has the same opportunity to learn (Ni'mah, 2024; Yunitasari, 2023). It encourages some of the current trends of student-centred approach and student well-being. The educational philosophy in traditional Islamic schools, on the other hand, tends to focus more on transmitting religious knowledge as well as moral education. Though such values are fundamental, traditional curricula are rigidly planned, which could restrict students from following their interest in the study and critical thinking aspects (Hadi, 2023; Hamamah, 2023). Such emphasis on religious learning might sometimes drown the need for an equally balanced approach where worldly knowledge and basic skills also find a place.

### ***The challenges and opportunities of implementing the KM in Islamic schools***

The implementation of the KM in Islamic schools (Madrasahs) has enormous obstacles to tackle, but at the same time, opening a big opportunity as well. One of the major challenges is the lack of experience or comfort among teachers with the new curriculum framework. There are a lot of complaints from teachers regarding their capacity to adjust to the new curriculum, which is still recent, and the transition from traditional to innovative student-centred teaching is still a challenge (Asfiati, 2023; Rohimah, 2024). Moving from traditional practices that prioritize rote memorization and standardized assessments (Asfiati, 2023; Jasiah, 2024) can be intimidating for teachers. Moreover, many Islamic schools face resource and infrastructure constraints that may hinder the effective implementation of the curriculum. Factors like low funds, inadequate training, lack of access to up-to-date materials and teaching tools (see Amalia, 2022; Masruroh et al., 2019), low funds, often make proper implementation of the curriculum difficult. Additionally, if Islamic schools react differently to the curriculum and have different levels of readiness, disparities in educational quality will emerge (Sormin, 2023), which not only contradict the aims of the national curriculum with respect to equity and inclusivity (Ndari et al., 2023; Sormin, 2023) but also weaken the nation's character.

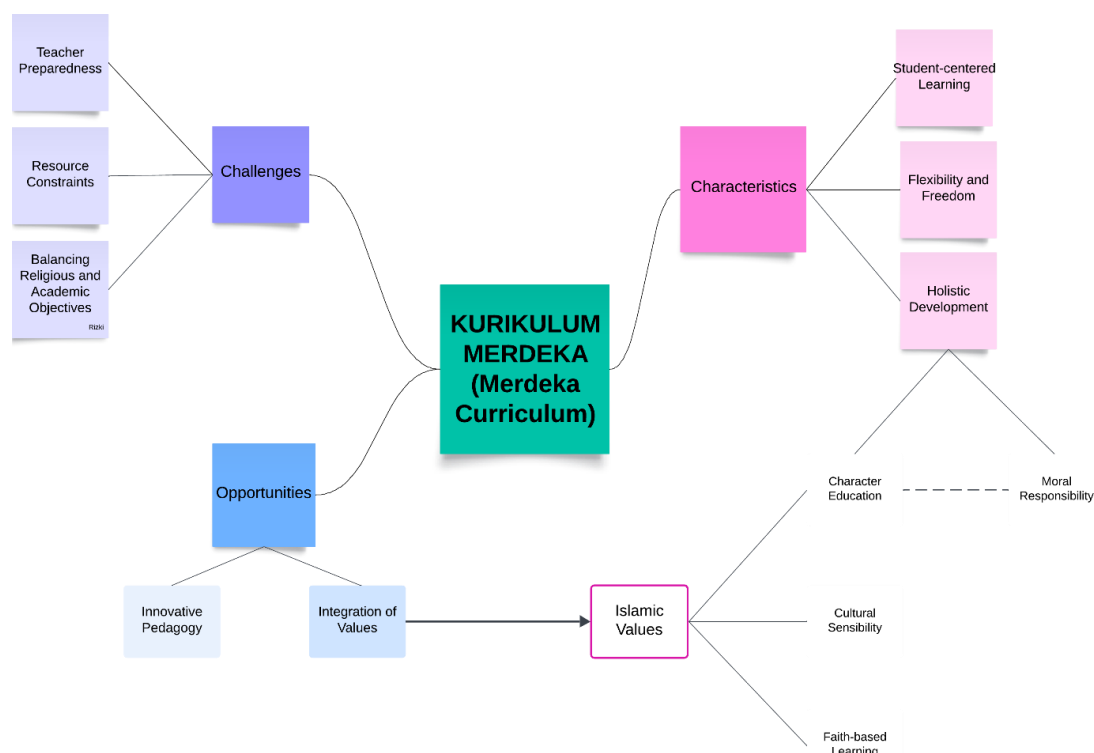
Despite these challenges, the curriculum provides Islamic schools with opportunities for enhancing their educational practices. It has clear benefits in creativity, critical thinking, and student-centred learning (Sirait, 2024; Wasehudin et al., 2023), which are similar to many Islamic school's philosophies. Because of this flexibility, Islamic schools are able to compile their own curricula according to the needs and interests of students, which creates a more engaging and meaningful learning experience (Sirait, 2024). Furthermore, the incorporation of Islamic education within a wider academic context fosters a holistic model, allowing for the combination of religious and secular learning that equips students for the complexities of contemporary life without compromising their faith (Empaldi, 2023; Pratiwi, 2024).

The Pancasila Student Profile, a framework within the curriculum, serves as a guide to develop students' character and competencies based on the values of Pancasila, Indonesia's state ideology. This profile is particularly relevant in the context of Indonesia's diverse society, as it helps foster national identity and values while promoting inclusivity (Pratiwi, 2024; Yunita & Widodo, 2023). By integrating these principles, Madrasahs can align their educational goals with national objectives, reinforcing the significance of Islamic education within the broader framework of Indonesian diversity.

Furthermore, the KM provides a platform for enhancing teacher professionalism. Cooperative curriculum design and creative learning approaches empower teachers to increase



their competencies while providing flexibility in implementing changes (Asfiati, 2023; Rohimah, 2024). This professional development not only boosts teachers' confidence but also correlates strongly with improved student outcomes, as skilled teachers are better equipped to create meaningful learning experiences (Jasiah, 2024; Pamuji & Mawardi, 2023).



**Figure 1.** Mapping the Framework of Kurikulum Merdeka (Merdeka Curriculum)

In summary, while the KM poses challenges for Islamic schools, it is also an opportunity to improve the quality and relevance of education. Islamic schools are uniquely and tangentially positioned to prepare to contribute to the future of the Indonesian nation in the education sector. Addressing these challenges and overcoming these obstacles within the curriculum will allow these Islamic schools to harness their strengths and position themselves as leading contributors to shaping future education in Indonesia.

## DISCUSSION

The strong emphasis on character education of the Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) is built into the core competencies of the curriculum, seeking to establish character as the foundation. This approach highlights the inseparability of moral and ethical behaviour in the student's learning process, ensuring that they develop not only their intellectual skills but also their moral competence (Ningrum, 2023). This concisely aligns with the philosophy and mission of Islamic education. Such a focus resonates deeply with the objectives of Islamic education, which prioritize the holistic development of students by nurturing their spiritual, moral, and ethical values. Islamic education emphasizes virtues such as honesty, respect, empathy, and a sense of social responsibility, all of which are reinforced within the KM framework. Through the promotion of KM values, the KM also contributes to shaping individuals who are holistically developed and are prepared to provide value for society while being aware of their religious beliefs (Azizah & Mardiana, 2024; Rasidin et al., 2024). This is evident in the importance KM places on developing character, thus aligning with the broader and higher objectives of Islamic education, which is to produce ethically conscious leaders in society.

Research indicates that the KM encourages creativity and innovation among teachers in Islamic schools (Asfiati, 2023), as they are more encouraged to create an innovative lesson plan combined with Islamic values and modern teaching methods. This approach has fostered a more vibrant academic atmosphere, enhancing student engagement and participation. Moreover, the flexibility of the curriculum offers an opportunity for Islamisation in a modern learning environment, where students can relate their values to existing societal problems and implement Islam in their daily lives (Empaldi, 2023). This relevance is the core of the need to maintain the quality of the concept of Islamic education that is applied in accordance with the demands of contemporary education.

A significant challenge identified in the literature is the lack of preparedness among teachers to implement the KM effectively. Jasiah (2024) review highlights that many Islamic teachers struggle with balancing religious education and broader curriculum requirements. This challenge underscores the need for targeted professional development and training initiatives to equip teachers with the essential skills and knowledge. The shift towards formative and holistic assessment practices poses challenges for traditional Islamic schools that are accustomed to standardized testing. Damayanti and Muhroji (2022) emphasize the need for assessments that reflect the diverse competencies outlined in the KM, including cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Developing new assessment tools that align with these goals is essential for accurately measuring student progress (Arif et al., 2025; Ma`arif et al., 2023, 2024).

The success of the KM also depends heavily on community support and engagement. (Hasibuan, 2024) notes that resistance from some community members who favour traditional educational practices can obstruct the curriculum's acceptance. Establishing strong partnerships with parents and community stakeholders is essential to foster a collaborative approach to education. Nevertheless, community support represents only one facet of a larger challenge: integrating secular subjects while ensuring a solid foundation in religious education.

The integration of secular subjects in KM offers the opportunity to enhance Islamic education; however, careful effort must be taken with a strong focus on religious studies. According to Pamuji and Mawardi (2023), a careful incorporation of multicultural and secular values into the curriculum that is synergistic with Islamic education is critical. The balance maintains that Madrasahs meet modern educational priorities without losing sight of their spiritual mandate (Anggraeni & Purnomo, 2023; Hakim & Abidin, 2024). Rather than causing division, this integration may lead to a more holistic vision of education, one where religious and secular components are integrated to achieve the intellectual, moral, and spiritual development of the students (Istiyani et al., 2024; Kustati et al., 2024; Mahmud et al., 2024). Currently, the training of innovative approaches in the curriculum in line with the goals of Islamic education, as it ensures practical strategies to achieve positive student learning outcomes.

Innovative teaching practices to improve students' learning outcomes are promoted in the KM. Therefore, the findings on differentiated learning (Wantini, 2023) imply that differentiated learning, which is in the form of differentiated instructional strategies, has a positive influence on learning achievement in Islamic education. Promoting adaptation of these standard approaches is critical for supporting the multiple needs of students. However, ongoing evaluation and feedback will be key to ensuring these new practices and curriculum adjustments produce the desired outcomes over the longer term (Bisri et al., 2023; Munawir et al., 2024).

Continuous evaluation and feedback processes should be included in the implementation of the curriculum to assess its implementation and impact as necessary. It is vital that the assessment or evaluation tools that are developed align with the new paradigm (Kasman & Lubis, 2022). In the long run, one of the keys to the success of the KM will be the extent to which the effects of this curriculum on student learning and character development are subject to continuous assessment (Basri & Abdullah, 2024; Kaspin et al., 2024).

The present research offers findings that differ from prior studies in several ways. The present research delves deeper into the contextual adaptability of KM within Islamic educational institutions, specifically Madrasahs, uncovering a nuanced understanding of how KM aligns with Islamic values. Unlike previous studies that broadly assessed KM's implementation, this research uniquely highlights the dual challenge of maintaining religious identity while embracing modern pedagogical approaches. A particularly surprising result is the demonstrated feasibility of integrating character education and Islamic values into project-based and differentiated learning, which was previously seen as challenging due to the rigid structure of traditional Islamic curricula. Furthermore, the study reveals an unanticipated gap in teacher preparedness, even among experienced educators, emphasizing the necessity for tailored professional development. These findings underscore the importance of a balanced framework that harmonizes KM's secular focus with the distinct needs of religious institutions, offering new perspectives and practical solutions for a previously underexplored aspect of curriculum implementation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study uncovers that in its implementation, the Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) in Indonesian Madrasahs finds a correlation with the values instilled through the principles of Islamic education, namely by practising character building, student-centred learning, as well as the flexibility of the curriculum to tailor the local culture. However, its implementation also faces challenges in terms of lack of teacher training, constrained resources, and tensions between KM's flexible framework and the conventional cultural and religious base of Madrasahs. These tensions highlight the importance of local-level adjustments and capacity-building efforts to support effective curriculum adoption. Nevertheless, this study emphasizes that KM holds great potential to promote holistic student development if these challenges are addressed through personalized support, active stakeholder involvement, and policy revisions that account for the unique needs of Madrasahs. By balancing national education reform goals with the religious characteristics of faith-based institutions, KM can serve as a tool to advance inclusive and relevant education in Indonesia. The study also underscores the need for further research to explore the nuanced interactions between national education policies and local practices in Madrasahs.

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature regarding the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) in Islamic schools in Indonesia; however, several limitations impact the generalizability and comprehensiveness of its findings. The literature review was constrained by the limited availability of academic references on KM in Islamic education, potentially excluding relevant studies due to the curriculum's novelty. The findings are context-specific and may not generalize across diverse regional educational policies, socio-cultural contexts, school facilities, and teacher competencies within Indonesia's Islamic schools. Furthermore, the study includes limited case studies, focusing primarily on specific schools without a broader representation of the varying institutional types and challenges. It also lacks analysis across different levels of education and does not account for demographic variables such as gender and age, which are critical for understanding KM's impact on diverse student populations. Methodologically, the study relies heavily on secondary data, precluding the use of mixed methods or primary data collection that could provide richer insights into real-time implementation dynamics. To address these limitations, future research should adopt longitudinal designs incorporating primary data collection across multiple case studies and regions, analyze KM's impact on various educational levels, and explore demographic factors like gender and age. A mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses, would also offer a deeper and more comprehensive understanding to inform evidence-based policies for Islamic education in Indonesia.

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