

Adaptive Learning Management of the Merdeka Curriculum in an Islamic Boarding School

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Abstract

The urgency of this study lies in aligning the flexibility of Kurikulum Merdeka with the unique system of Islamic boarding schools to create an adaptive and value-based learning model. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic boarding school contexts presents unique managerial and pedagogical challenges due to the need to integrate national education standards with pesantren traditions. However, limited studies have examined how learning management is operationalized within this dual-structure system. This study aims to analyze the learning management practices in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at a pesantren-based junior secondary school. This research employed a qualitative case study design. The participants consisted of the school principal, curriculum coordinator, subject teachers, and tahfidz teacher who were directly involved in curriculum implementation. Data were collected through semi-structured interview guides, classroom observation sheets, and document analysis checklists covering teaching modules, assessment records, and institutional policy documents. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documentation was conducted to ensure credibility and consistency of findings. The findings indicate that curriculum implementation reflects an adaptive learning management model characterized by integrated planning, student-centered and project-based instruction, differentiated learning strategies, and holistic assessment practices. The study highlights how pesantren institutions reinterpret national curriculum reform contextually while maintaining institutional identity, although challenges related to teacher readiness and resource limitations remain evident.

Keywords: *Merdeka Curriculum, Learning Management, Adaptive Curriculum Management, Islamic Boarding School*

Introduction

Educational reform has become a central agenda in many countries as education systems are required to respond to rapid technological development, global interconnectedness, social transformation, and increasingly diverse learner needs (Butler et al., 2018; Rahimi & Oh, 2024). Contemporary curriculum reforms emphasize flexibility, learner-centered pedagogy, differentiated instruction, formative and authentic assessment, and the development of twenty-first-century competencies such as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and character formation (Li & Zhang, 2024; Nwachukwu et al., 2025). Within this evolving landscape, curriculum change is no longer viewed merely as content revision but as a systemic transformation that requires coherent learning management at the institutional and classroom levels (Kandiko Howson & Kingsbury, 2023; Sullanmaa et al., 2024). Effective curriculum implementation therefore depends not only on policy formulation but also on how schools manage planning, instruction, assessment, and evaluation in practice.

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In Indonesia, the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum represents a significant shift in national education policy (Hidayat & Susanti, 2025). This curriculum promotes greater school autonomy, simplified learning content, differentiated instruction based on students' learning stages, and the strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile as a foundation for character development (Hasnahwati et al., 2025; Mansur & Sukirman, 2024). Teachers are expected to design adaptive and contextualized learning experiences, while schools are granted broader authority to regulate instructional planning, implementation, and evaluation (Meidawati & Kusdarini, 2025; Okta & Putra, 2025). The reform signals a move from rigid, centralized curriculum structures toward more flexible and responsive educational practices. However, the effectiveness of this transformation depends largely on how learning management is enacted in specific institutional contexts (Oksari et al., 2022).

Extensive research on curriculum reform indicates that implementation challenges often stem from weak learning management at the school level. Studies consistently report issues related to limited pedagogical readiness, insufficient professional development, inadequate instructional resources, and fragmented collaboration among teachers (Adolfina & Rahmawati, 2025; Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025). Without systematic planning, reflective implementation, and continuous evaluation, curriculum reform risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative (Basir et al., 2021; Weiss et al., 2021). These findings highlight that curriculum reform must be understood as an organizational and managerial process, not merely a pedagogical shift.

Recent studies on the Merdeka Curriculum have explored teacher perceptions, policy implementation processes, and instructional challenges in public schools and madrasahs (Adiyani et al., 2025; Jupitasari & Khairullah, 2025; Putri et al., 2023). While these studies provide valuable insights into curriculum adaptation and teacher responses, they often treat schools as relatively homogeneous institutions and pay limited attention to institutional diversity. As a result, the complex dynamics of curriculum management in unique educational settings remain underexamined (Umar et al., 2024).

This limitation is particularly evident in research concerning Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). Pesantren represent distinctive educational institutions characterized by strong religious traditions, boarding school systems, integrated diniyah and general education, and relatively autonomous curriculum management (Halimah et al., 2024; Hasan, 2025). Historically, pesantren have practiced flexible and context-responsive learning approaches that, in several respects, align with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum (Dhohir et al., 2025; Wasehudin et al., 2023). However, integrating a national curriculum into pesantren-based education is not a simple matter of compliance; it requires careful negotiation between institutional identity, religious values, and national standards.

Existing research on pesantren education predominantly focuses on curriculum integration, character education, leadership transformation, or institutional modernization (Iskandar et al., 2024; Zainuddin et al., 2025). Although these studies enrich understanding of pesantren dynamics, only a limited number conceptualize learning management as a systematic and holistic process encompassing instructional planning, classroom implementation, differentiated strategies, assessment practices, and reflective evaluation. Furthermore, empirical studies specifically investigating how the Merdeka Curriculum is managed in pesantren contexts remain scarce. Consequently, there is limited understanding of how faith-based boarding schools reinterpret and operationalize national curriculum reform within their distinctive socio-cultural frameworks.

This gap indicates a need for research that moves beyond policy analysis and perception studies toward an in-depth exploration of learning management practices in context. Understanding how pesantren-based schools plan, implement, and evaluate the Merdeka Curriculum is essential for ensuring that curriculum reform is not only adopted administratively but also translated meaningfully into classroom practices that align with institutional values. Responding to this gap, the present study explores how the Merdeka Curriculum is managed in an Islamic boarding school, focusing on instructional planning, implementation strategies, evaluation practices, and contextual challenges. Using a qualitative case study approach at Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Bungadidi, this research provides a contextualized analysis of curriculum reform within a pesantren-based educational environment.

The novelty of this study lies in its conceptualization of adaptive curriculum management in pesantren-based education. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine policy implementation or curriculum integration in general terms, this research positions learning management as a dynamic and context-sensitive process through which pesantren reinterpret national curriculum reform without compromising their institutional identity. By articulating adaptive curriculum management as a mediating framework between national standards and religious educational culture, this study contributes a conceptual perspective that extends curriculum implementation theory into faith-based boarding school contexts. This contribution is particularly significant given the limited international scholarship addressing curriculum reform in Islamic educational institutions. Through this approach, the study seeks to contribute both theoretically and practically by offering insights into context-responsive curriculum management strategies that support sustainable reform across diverse educational settings.

Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the management of learning in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum within an Islamic boarding school context (Gregory, 2020). A qualitative case study was selected because it enables an in-depth examination of complex educational processes situated within their real-life institutional setting. The focus of this research was not to generalize findings statistically but to generate a contextualized and interpretative understanding of how curriculum reform is managed in a pesantren-based educational environment. The study was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Bungadidi, an Islamic boarding school that integrates formal national education with diniyah and tahfidz programs. This institution was selected because it actively implements the Merdeka Curriculum while maintaining a strong pesantren tradition, making it a relevant context for examining adaptive learning management practices.

The research subjects consisted of eight participants who were directly involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the Merdeka Curriculum. These included the school principal (1), vice principal for curriculum affairs (1), the P5 program coordinator (1), three subject teachers (3), and two tahfidz teachers (2). Participants were selected based on specific criteria: (1) active involvement in curriculum implementation, (2) direct responsibility for instructional planning or evaluation, and (3) a minimum of one year of experience in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the institution. These criteria ensured that the participants possessed sufficient experience and institutional knowledge to provide rich and relevant data regarding learning management practices.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. The use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation

and strengthened the depth of analysis. The interview instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore four main aspects: (1) instructional planning under the Merdeka Curriculum, (2) classroom implementation strategies, (3) assessment and evaluation practices, and (4) perceived challenges and adaptive strategies. Open-ended questions were developed to allow participants to elaborate on their experiences and reflections. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent before being transcribed verbatim.

Classroom observations were conducted using a structured observation protocol developed based on key principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, including student-centered learning, differentiated instruction, project-based learning, classroom interaction patterns, and assessment practices. The observation sheet included descriptive field notes sections to capture instructional activities, teacher–student interactions, learning resources used, and integration of religious values within academic instruction. Observations were conducted across both general subject classes and tahfidz sessions to obtain a comprehensive understanding of instructional management.

Document analysis was carried out using a document review checklist covering lesson plans (teaching modules), curriculum planning documents, P5 project documentation, assessment records, and school policy guidelines related to curriculum implementation. These documents were analyzed to identify alignment between formal curriculum planning and classroom practice. Data analysis was conducted thematically following an iterative process of data condensation, coding, categorization, and interpretation. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary evidence were read repeatedly to identify meaningful units of data. Initial codes were generated inductively and subsequently grouped into broader thematic categories related to instructional planning, implementation strategies, evaluation practices, integration of pesantren values, and contextual challenges.

Constant comparison across data sources was applied to ensure coherence and analytical depth. Several validation strategies were implemented to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents, as well as prolonged engagement in the research setting. Member checking was conducted by sharing interview summaries with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Transferability was supported by providing thick description of the institutional context, participants, and instructional practices, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar settings.

Dependability was maintained through systematic documentation of research procedures, coding processes, and analytic decisions. Confirmability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail consisting of raw data, field notes, coding schemes, and reflective memos to minimize researcher bias and enhance transparency. Through these methodological procedures, the study sought to generate a rigorous, credible, and context-sensitive understanding of adaptive learning management in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum within pesantren-based education.

Results

The analysis of this study employed the interactive model of data analysis consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. After organizing and coding the interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary materials, the researcher identified recurring patterns related to instructional planning, implementation strategies, evaluation mechanisms,

and institutional challenges. These categories were refined into several interconnected indicators representing the learning management practices in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum within the pesantren context. The reduced data are presented below according to each source of evidence.

Table 1. Interview Findings

Indicators	Representative Statements
Integrated Planning	"We integrate these two systems with a balanced schedule. However, pesantren values remain present in every general subject." (Principal)
Evaluation Management	"We evaluate two forms: administrative evaluation and field evaluation." (Principal)
Student-Centered Learning	"Our learning activities are no longer teacher-centered. I mainly act as a facilitator." (Subject Teacher)
Project-Based Learning	"The students look enthusiastic because project activities differ from classroom learning." (P5 Coordinator)
Holistic Assessment	"Our assessment is not only based on memorization but also tajwid accuracy and understanding." (Tahfidz Teacher)
Implementation Challenges	"The biggest challenge is the readiness of human resources in understanding the concept of the Merdeka Curriculum." (Principal)

The interview findings demonstrate that curriculum implementation is interpreted by school stakeholders as an adaptive integration process rather than a structural replacement of existing practices. The principal emphasized the importance of balancing national curriculum demands with pesantren traditions, suggesting that institutional identity remains central in decision-making. Teachers, meanwhile, highlighted pedagogical shifts toward facilitative roles and project-based engagement, indicating internalization of student-centered principles embedded in the Merdeka Curriculum. Moreover, interview data reveal that assessment practices extend beyond academic measurement to encompass spiritual and character dimensions. At the same time, participants acknowledged human resource readiness as a significant constraint, implying that curriculum transformation requires continuous professional development. These narratives collectively reflect both commitment to reform and awareness of contextual limitations.

Table 2. Observation Findings

Indicators	Observational Evidence
Integration of Values	Teachers connected academic material with Islamic ethical values
Student Engagement	Students actively participated in discussions and presentations
Project Implementation	Students engaged in entrepreneurship and collaborative projects
Differentiated Instruction	Varied assignments based on students' readiness levels
Reflective Practice	Use of learning journals and self-assessment activities
Classroom Constraints	Occasional reliance on lecture methods due to limited resources

Classroom observations substantiate the interview data by providing direct evidence of instructional practices. The integration of Islamic ethical values into general subjects was consistently observed, confirming that curriculum adaptation occurs at the pedagogical level. Students were actively involved in discussions, presentations, and collaborative projects, indicating that student-centered learning was not merely conceptual but visibly practiced. However, observations also revealed moments where teachers reverted to lecture-based instruction due to time constraints or limited instructional resources. This finding illustrates the dynamic and sometimes uneven nature of curriculum implementation, where progressive approaches coexist with conventional methods. The presence of differentiated tasks and reflective activities further suggests efforts to accommodate diverse student needs within the boarding school environment.

Table 3. Documentation Findings

Document Type	Key Evidence
Teaching Modules	Objectives aligned with Merdeka Curriculum principles
P5 Project Documentation	Evidence of experiential and collaborative learning
Assessment Records	Use of formative and authentic assessment formats
School Policy Documents	Structured balance between national curriculum and diniyah programs

The document analysis reinforces the credibility of interview and observation findings. Teaching modules demonstrate explicit alignment with Merdeka Curriculum competencies, including inquiry-based objectives and differentiated learning outcomes. This indicates that curriculum adaptation has been institutionalized within formal planning documents rather than implemented informally. Additionally, assessment records show the use of formative and authentic evaluation tools, supporting claims of holistic assessment practices. Policy documents outlining balanced scheduling between national subjects and diniyah programs further confirm that integration occurs at the structural level. Together, these documents validate that adaptive curriculum management is embedded in both planning and implementation processes. Triangulation was conducted by comparing evidence from interviews, observations, and documentation across each identified indicators to ensure analytical rigor.

Table 4. Triangulation of Findings

Indicators	Interview Evidence	Observation Evidence	Documentation Evidence
Integrated Planning	Balanced scheduling statement	Integration of Islamic values observed	Curriculum planning documents
Student-Centered Learning	Teacher as facilitator	Active discussions and presentations	Inquiry-based lesson modules
Project-Based Learning	Enthusiasm toward projects	Entrepreneurship projects observed	P5 documentation
Differentiated Instruction	Adjusted tasks reported	Varied assignments observed	Differentiated objectives in lesson plans
Holistic Assessment	Multidimensional evaluation described	Reflective journals observed	Formative assessment formats
Implementation Challenges	HR readiness issues	Occasional lecture reliance	Limited PD documentation

The triangulation matrix demonstrates consistency across the three data sources, strengthening the trustworthiness of the findings. Each subtheme is supported by converging evidence, indicating that adaptive curriculum management in this pesantren context operates at multiple levels: structural, pedagogical, and evaluative. The alignment across data sources confirms that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is both context-sensitive and institutionally grounded, despite ongoing challenges related to professional capacity and resource constraints.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the learning management of the Merdeka Curriculum at Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Bungadidi operates through an adaptive and integrative model that aligns national curriculum principles with the institutional culture of pesantren-based education. It confirms the argument that curriculum implementation is not a linear process of policy transmission, but a context-dependent practice shaped by institutional values, organizational capacity, and instructional traditions (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2017; Wahlström, 2023). From a theoretical perspective, this finding supports curriculum implementation theory, which emphasizes the importance of local adaptation and teacher agency in translating curriculum policy into classroom practice (Alvunger, 2018; King, 2024).

The integration of general and religious learning identified in this study reflects an adaptive curriculum management approach, where curriculum coherence is achieved not through uniformity but through contextual alignment. It aligns with curriculum alignment theory, which posits that effective learning occurs when curriculum goals, instructional practices, and assessment strategies are meaningfully connected within a specific educational context (Ali, 2018; Anderson, 2002). In the pesantren setting, alignment is achieved by embedding national curriculum objectives within religious values and daily boarding school routines, rather than treating them as separate or competing systems. This finding extends previous studies that discuss curriculum integration in Islamic education by highlighting learning management as a strategic process rather than merely a curricular structure (Nurfaisal et al., 2024; Surahman & Nayla, 2025).

The emphasis on student-centered learning and project-based activities observed in this study is consistent with constructivist learning theory, which views learners as active participants in knowledge construction (Efgivia et al., 2021; Wibowo et al., 2025). The implementation of project-based learning through the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) program reflects the application of experiential learning principles, where students engage in authentic tasks that foster critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity. Similar findings have been reported in studies on competency-based curricula, which suggest that student-centered instructional strategies enhance learner engagement and promote deeper understanding (Arkananta & Rahman, 2024; Nsyengula et al., 2024). However, this study adds a contextual dimension by demonstrating how such approaches are adapted within pesantren environments that traditionally emphasize discipline and structured routines.

The differentiated instruction practices identified in this study further support differentiated learning theory, which argues that instructional effectiveness increases when the content, processes, and products of instruction are adjusted to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Gheysens et al., 2022; Tomlinson, 2017; Wong et al., 2023). In the pesantren context, differentiation is not only an academic necessity but also a practical response to students' dual responsibilities in formal education and religious learning. This finding resonates with previous research indicating that differentiated instruction becomes more feasible and meaningful when grounded in students' lived experiences (Brevik et al., 2018; Hasanah et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the challenges teachers face in implementing differentiation underscore the need for continuous professional development and institutional support, as emphasized in the teacher capacity-building literature.

The evaluation practices observed in this study reflect principles of authentic and formative assessment, which prioritize continuous feedback, performance-based tasks, and holistic measurement of learning outcomes (Inman & Roberts, 2021; Villarroel et al., 2020). The inclusion of spiritual growth, character development, and collaborative skills in assessment aligns with holistic education theory, which advocates integrating the cognitive, affective, and moral dimensions of learning (Mahmoudi & Author, 2012; Miller, 2018). This approach contrasts with conventional assessment models that focus primarily on cognitive achievement, thereby highlighting the potential of the Merdeka Curriculum to support comprehensive student development when managed adaptively.

Despite these strengths, the challenges identified—particularly related to teachers' readiness, limited resources, and varying levels of curriculum understanding—are consistent with findings from previous studies on curriculum reform. Research on large-scale curriculum change frequently reports that insufficient professional training and weak institutional support

hinder effective implementation (Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025; Weiss et al., 2021). In this study, such challenges are intensified by the pesantren context, where teachers must navigate both national curriculum demands and religious instructional responsibilities. It reinforces the argument that curriculum reform requires not only policy alignment but also sustained investment in human resource development.

The novelty of this study lies in its articulation of adaptive curriculum management in pesantren-based education. Unlike previous research that often frames pesantren as either resistant to change or merely compliant with national policy, this study demonstrates that pesantren actively reinterpret and manage curriculum reform through contextual adaptation. Adaptive curriculum management, as identified in this study, involves flexible scheduling, integration of values, differentiated instruction, and holistic evaluation, all of which are strategically aligned with pesantren culture. This concept contributes to curriculum management theory by illustrating how institutional identity can function as a mediating factor rather than a barrier in curriculum implementation.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the literature by extending curriculum implementation and learning management theories into faith-based and boarding school contexts, which remain underrepresented in international research. It highlights the need to reconceptualize curriculum management as a dynamic and culturally responsive process, particularly in diverse educational systems. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, school leaders, and educators by demonstrating that effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires flexibility, contextual sensitivity, and continuous professional support. For pesantren leaders, the study provides a practical model for managing curriculum reform without compromising institutional values, while for policymakers, it underscores the importance of differentiated implementation strategies across educational contexts.

This study overall affirms that the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in pesantren-based education depends not on uniform compliance, but on adaptive learning management that bridges national policy and local educational culture. Such an approach not only enhances instructional effectiveness but also strengthens the relevance and sustainability of curriculum reform in diverse educational settings.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the pesantren context reflects an adaptive and integrative learning management model. Curriculum planning is not merely administrative compliance but represents a deliberate effort to harmonize national education standards with pesantren values. Instructional implementation demonstrates a shift toward student-centered and project-based learning, supported by differentiated instructional strategies and holistic assessment practices. The integration of religious values within general subjects further indicates that curriculum reform is interpreted contextually rather than adopted uniformly. Despite these positive developments, challenges remain, particularly in terms of teacher readiness, professional development continuity, and resource limitations that occasionally influence instructional consistency.

However, this study has several limitations. First, it was conducted within a single pesantren-based educational institution, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other contexts with different organizational cultures. Second, the data relied primarily on interviews, observations, and institutional documents without incorporating quantitative measures of learning outcomes. Third, the study focused on managerial and pedagogical processes rather

than long-term student achievement impact. These limitations suggest the need for cautious interpretation when extending the findings to broader educational settings. Future research is recommended to involve multiple pesantren institutions to enable comparative analysis and broader contextual understanding. Further studies may also integrate mixed-method approaches to examine the relationship between adaptive curriculum management and measurable student outcomes. Additionally, longitudinal research could provide deeper insights into the sustainability of Merdeka Curriculum implementation within Islamic boarding school environments.

Aknowledgment

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