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Management of Islamic Boarding School Based *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum

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Article Information	Abstract
Received: 13 November 2024	<i>This study aimed to examine the implementation and integration process of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Islamic boarding schools to suit their educational needs. This research method uses a qualitative case study approach. Information was collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Data analysis followed three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions or verification. The study results indicate that the management of the Islamic boarding school-based Merdeka Belajar Curriculum focuses on strengthening the morals of students while still using the basic structure of the government. Curriculum adjustments are made based on conditions in the field, such as enhancing character through religious routines, including reading Asmaul Husna and praying Dhuha. Implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum allows students to determine their learning methods, designed to accommodate Islamic boarding schools' unique characteristics. The contribution of this study lies in a deep understanding of the implementation and management of the Islamic boarding school-based Merdeka Belajar curriculum, especially in the context of religious schools. These findings provide an essential contribution to the development of Islamic boarding schools that are adaptive, value-based, and relevant to the needs of students in the era of modern education.</i>
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Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengkaji Kurikulum *Merdeka Belajar* dalam penerapannya dan proses penyatuan di sekolah berbasis pesantren agar sesuai dengan kebutuhan pendidikan di sekolah berbasis pesantren. Metode penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif studi kasus. Informasi dikumpulkan melalui

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observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Analisis data mengikuti tiga tahap, yaitu: reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan simpulan atau verifikasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa manajemen Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar berbasis pesantren berfokus pada penguatan akhlak santri, dengan tetap menggunakan struktur dasar dari pemerintah. Penyesuaian kurikulum dilakukan berdasarkan kondisi riil di lapangan, seperti penguatan karakter melalui rutinitas keagamaan, termasuk pembacaan Asmaul Husna dan shalat dhuha. Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar memberikan keleluasaan kepada santri untuk menentukan cara belajarnya, yang dirancang untuk mengakomodasi karakteristik unik pesantren. Kontribusi penelitian ini terletak pada pemahaman yang mendalam tentang implementasi dan manajemen kurikulum Merdeka Belajar berbasis pesantren, khususnya dalam konteks sekolah agama. Temuan ini memberikan kontribusi penting bagi pengembangan pesantren yang adaptif, berbasis nilai, dan relevan dengan kebutuhan siswa di era pendidikan modern.

I. INTRODUCTION

A curriculum is a set of teaching strategies and resources that guide the educational process (Merisa, 2023). The *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum aims to improve students' reading and numeracy skills. It provides a method for enhancing the curriculum that may be applied gradually and tailored to each school's readiness (Arisanti, 2022). *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum is still not widely implemented in Indonesia because schools' understanding of how to implement it is still limited. The key to successfully implementing this curriculum is freedom for teachers and students. Although the Indonesian government, particularly the Ministry of Culture and Education (Kemendikbud), has instructed all schools in Indonesia to implement the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum as a new curriculum, it is not yet widely implemented (Aida et al., 2023).

The main issue in this research is how the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum is implemented in pesantren and how it is modified to fit the context of pesantren, particularly related to the development of character and competencies of the students.

The management of the pesantren-based *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum is a complex challenge, given the unique characteristics of this Islamic educational institution. The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, presented by the Ministry of Education and Culture in Indonesia, aims to provide autonomy to students in the

educational process and strongly emphasizes character and competency development in line with Pancasila values (Tamamiyah et al., 2023). Managing a pesantren-based curriculum in the context of *Merdeka Belajar* requires synergy between the boarding school's local wisdom and the innovative principles offered by the new curriculum. Boarding school plays a role in the moral and spiritual formation of santri and must prepare them to confront the difficulties of a time that is becoming more complex. Through curriculum adjustments, it is anticipated that pesantren will be able to establish a dynamic learning environment that is adaptive and still rooted in noble Islamic values (Lailiyah & Imami, 2023).

In addition, the management of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in boarding schools must also consider the readiness and understanding of teachers in implementing it. The idea of independent learning must be comprehended, interpreted, and applied by educators, and continue to strive to present enjoyable learning (Faizah et al., 2024). Overall, managing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in pesantren must be done comprehensively, considering pedagogical, psychological, cultural aspects, and human resource readiness. This seeks to raise educational standards and fully realize pupils' potential (Jamilah et al., 2024).

Implementing effective curriculum management is crucial in managing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in boarding schools. This includes collaboration between the general education curriculum and pesantren education, as well as the addition of subjects according to the needs of the students (Habiburrahman & Marno, 2023). Some strategies that can be applied in managing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in boarding schools include: 1) creating a curriculum that takes into account students' interests and needs, 2) utilizing *PAKEM (Pembelajaran Aktif, Kreatif, Efektif, dan Menyenangkan)* is a practical learning approach to enhance participation and the quality of the teaching and learning process, 3) making use of the surroundings as a resource for learning, 4) Engaging the community and parents in the educational process, and 5) conducting holistic and authentic evaluations (Irawati & Haidar, 2023).

PAKEM is a method that encourages active student engagement through creative and enjoyable activities to enhance their understanding and skills.

Teachers act as facilitators who create practical and relevant learning (Ulger, 2018).

Implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in boarding schools also faces various challenges. One of them is the resistance of pesantren managers to the concept of *Merdeka Belajar*, which is still not fully understood and accepted. To overcome this, more intensive training and socialization of *Merdeka Belajar* principles and how to integrate them into the existing curriculum are needed (Amaliyah et al., 2024). Managing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in boarding schools must also consider technological developments and digitalization in education. By utilizing technology, pesantren can expand access to learning and improve the quality of education (Wansit et al., 2024), This aligns with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum, which are to enhance students' potential, abilities, and skills by taking a more creative and adaptable approach to the needs of the times. (Fathurohim, 2023). Thus the management of the boarding school-based *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum combines religious education and 21st century skills, providing flexibility for pesantren to adapt learning to the needs of students to produce graduates who excel spiritually and practically.

This research will compare previous findings, such as those (Arisanti, 2022). who suggested gradually implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum and learning (Faizah et al., 2024). who emphasized the importance of teachers' understanding in applying the curriculum. The gap identified is the lack of in-depth research on the integration between traditional pesantren curricula and the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum, the utilization of technology in learning, and the development of non-cognitive skills in pesantren. This research aims to fill that gap by providing new insights into how pesantren adapt to the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum within the context of religious values and contemporary needs.

Based on the problem analysis above, *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum management in boarding schools faces challenges in terms of the readiness of educators, who are more focused on traditional religious education than modern methods. Limited facilities, especially technology, also hinder project-based learning. In addition, there are difficulties in adjusting the national curriculum to

the pesantren tradition, while policy support and financing are uneven. The participation of santri in the self-learning method is also an obstacle due to the difference from the traditional pesantren approach.

II. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study type. The research location is MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang because this institution has implemented an independent learning curriculum based on Islamic boarding schools. Data collection in this study involves various techniques that support each other to produce in-depth and contextual information. By effectively utilizing interviews, observations, and documentation, researchers can explore the meaning and better understand the social phenomena studied (Fadli, 2021; Wiraguna et al., 2024). In this study, the type of interview used was a semi-structured interview, where the researcher had a leading question guide but also provided space for informants to offer more in-depth and open answers. The subjects in this study were the principal, the vice principal in charge of the curriculum, and several teachers at MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang. In terms of observation, this study used non-participant observation, namely the researcher only observed activities in the classroom, religious activities such as reading Asmaul Husna and performing the Dhuha prayer, and interactions in the Islamic boarding school environment without being directly involved in these activities.

Qualitative data analysis does not only focus on data processing but also contextual and reflective interpretation (Saefullah, 2024). This study uses the Miles model with the stages of data reduction, data presentation and concluding. The validity of data in research through triangulation techniques, namely comparing data collected from various sources (interviews, observations, and documentation) to ensure consistency and accuracy of information. In addition, member checks are carried out by confirming the findings with informants to ensure that the researcher's interpretation is based on the understanding of the research subjects.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The application of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum is examined first in the study findings, which are based on the observations made. With the characteristics of boarding school-based education, how strategic steps are taken in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum to match the attributes with the needs of students in boarding school, the challenges faced in managing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum and how to solve them, the impact of implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum on the quality of education in boarding school both in terms of academics and non-academics, and curriculum evaluation carried out to ensure the sustainability and relevance of the boarding school-based *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, which is described as follows;

Implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum

Based on an interview with Mr M. Basthoni, deputy head of curriculum at MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang, information was obtained

;

"The main application is the strengthening of morals, for the structures still use the structure of the government" (Basthoni, 2024).

According to information from Mr Ahyar, Head of the school;

"the application for adjustments in the field is still looking at the conditions in the field, for example the time of the content will be strengthened with the character in the pesantren. Related to the habits that are often carried out, such as reciting Asmaul Husna in the morning, praying dhuha in congregation" (Ahyar, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Musa, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang teacher;

"for the application can be seen from how the teachers will also be given information to prioritize in the field of character strengthening, as well as teachers exploring the learning material that will be conditioned with existing characters, where the subject is a tool to shape the character of the students, for example in the character of accuracy" (Musa, 2024).

According to information from Mrs Ika, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang teacher;

"the application of this curriculum can integrate general lessons with typical pesantren lessons, such as tafsir, fiqh, and hadith so that students get a

balanced understanding between academic competence and religious values" (Ika, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Sudarno, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang teacher;

"the application starts from utilizing technology to support more modern learning, such as accessing digital books or e-learning modules that facilitate independent learning for students" (Sudarno, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Mustakim, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang teacher;

"Collaboration between religious teachers and general teachers is also important in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum so that teaching remains integrated with Islamic values, such as linking science with concepts in religion" (Mustakim, 2024).

Implementing the Independent Learning Curriculum at MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang shows an innovative and relevant approach to strengthening education based on religious values. Focusing on enhancing students' morals and character, this curriculum integrates academic learning with Islamic values to balance worldly and spiritual needs. Habitual activities such as reading Asmaul Husna, praying Dhuha in the congregation, and strengthening character education through Islamic boarding school traditions reflect the values of Islamic educational institutions.

In addition, applying digital technology to support learning is also a strategic step. In this modern era, technology is an essential tool for improving the quality of education. The use of technology not only allows access to broader learning resources but also enriches students' learning experiences, especially in terms of innovation in technology-based learning and evaluation methods.

Collaboration between religious teachers and general teachers is one of the keys to the success of implementing this curriculum. Religious teachers not only provide Islamic insight but also accompany the integration of spiritual values into general learning. Conversely, general teachers can help provide a methodological and practical approach to the demands of the times. This collaboration allows for the creation of synergy between science and Islamic values so that students have strong academic competence and Islamic character.

However, the successful implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in Islamic boarding schools also faces several challenges. These challenges include limited human resources, facilities, and infrastructure. Adequate training for teachers is essential to ensure that they can implement the curriculum properly. In addition, support from various parties, including the government and the community, is needed to improve facilities and provide technical assistance in using digital technology.

According to Zainuri et al. (2023), the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum has excellent potential to improve Islamic boarding school education standards by giving students autonomy over their learning methods. This allows them to learn according to their respective interests and potentials without ignoring the unique characteristics of Islamic boarding schools that focus on spiritual values and character development.

In the future, implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in Islamic boarding schools can become a holistic education model, covering intellectual, spiritual, and emotional aspects. With the right approach, this curriculum will not only improve the quality of Islamic boarding school education but also produce a young generation that is superior, has character, and can face the challenges of the times without losing its Islamic identity.

Strategic Steps for Implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum

Implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in boarding schools is a strategic step that requires a systematic and planned approach. Drawing from the findings of an interview with the deputy head of the curriculum for MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang;

“in principle there is one simple concept ‘do as needed, report according to the provisions’, the important thing is that students can understand and can do it” (Basthoni, 2024).

According to information from Mr Ahyar, Head of Madrasah MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang;

“The main focus is on strengthening morals and Islamic character values. This step includes the habituation of spiritual activities, such as reciting Asmaul Husna every morning, dhuha prayers in congregation, and halaqah or tahsin activities” (Ahyar, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Musa, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang teacher;

"the first step can be started by combining general lessons with religious values to create a balance between academic competence and Islamic knowledge" (Musa, 2024).

According to information from Mrs. Ika, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang Teacher;

"This pesantren-based Merdeka curriculum can be implemented through project-based learning involving sharia social and economic activities" (Ika, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Sudarno, teacher of MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang;

"strengthening the teachers in the formation of morals, the teachers at MA NU Nurul Huda are directed to make character the main focus of teaching" (Sudarno, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Mustakim, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang teacher;

"collaboration between religious teachers and general teachers collaboration between religious and general teachers is needed so that learning remains in line with Islamic values" (Mustakim, 2024).

The Independent Learning Curriculum at MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang demonstrates an educational approach that emphasizes strengthening morals, habituating spiritual activities, and integrating general subjects with religious values. This approach is designed to create a balance between the development of academic competence and Islamic character. Project-based learning is one of the methods used to encourage students to develop critical, creative, and collaborative thinking skills in the context of Islamic values. In addition, collaboration between religious and general teachers is essential in maintaining the integration of knowledge with Islamic principles (Nurisman et al., 2023).

To support this curriculum's success, several strategic steps need to be taken. One of them is organizing training and mentoring for educators. Workshops focusing on an in-depth understanding of the Independent Curriculum concept and relevant teaching techniques can help teachers prepare to face changes in the learning paradigm. This training can include project-based classroom management

and digital technology to support learning. With adequate training, teachers will be better prepared to implement the curriculum effectively in learning management and evaluation of learning outcomes (Wasehudin et al., 2023).

The development of educational resources that are relevant to the context of Islamic boarding schools is also an important step. The teaching materials must reflect Islamic values, both in content and presentation approach. This aims to ensure that students understand the lessons meaningfully while strengthening their understanding of Islamic teachings. Learning modules specifically designed to meet the needs of Islamic boarding schools can support the achievement of this goal so that the learning process is oriented towards academic achievement and the development of Islamic character (Maisyaroh et al., 2024).

In addition, collaboration with other educational institutions, including universities, can provide additional support in curriculum development and implementation. Universities can be strategic partners in providing training, compiling teaching materials, and providing technical support to evaluate and improve the curriculum. This collaboration also opens up opportunities for Islamic boarding schools to adopt the best educational practices relevant to their needs.

However, the Independent Learning Curriculum in Islamic boarding schools is not free from challenges. Some of the challenges that are often faced include synchronization between curriculum implementation and reporting, limited facilities, and the diverse abilities of educators in adopting new approaches. Therefore, careful planning, ongoing mentoring, and support from various parties, including the government and the community, are needed to overcome these obstacles.

Overall, strategic steps such as teacher training, development of Islamic-based teaching materials, and collaboration with other educational institutions can support the successful implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum in Islamic boarding schools. With the right approach, this curriculum can improve the quality of Islamic boarding school education and strengthen the Islamic identity of students in facing the challenges of the modern era.

Challenges of Managing *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum

According to the findings of an interview conducted with Mr. M. Basthoni, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang's Deputy Head of Curriculum;

"The challenge may be because not all teachers are boarding school-based, so they must be able to unite the vision of educational goals" (Basthoni, 2024).

According to information from Mr Ahyar, Head of Madrasah MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang;

"the main challenge is in the teacher, from the concept of teachers 'digugu and ditiru' the teacher must start first, so all the rules in the madrasah must start from the teacher first" (Ahyar, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Musa, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang teacher;

"The challenge may be in the readiness of teachers to implement a character-based curriculum that must prioritize character education in every lesson" (Musa, 2024).

According to information from Mrs Ika, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang teacher;

"strengthening character and *akhak* in the midst of this flexible curriculum, especially in maintaining the habituation of daily spiritual activities" (Ika, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Sudarno, a teacher at MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang;

"the management of this pesantren-based independent learning curriculum is a challenge in adapting the curriculum, which previously used the K-13/kurtilas curriculum to an independent curriculum" (Sudarno, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Mustakim, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang teacher;

"Cooperation between religious and general teachers to integrate Islamic values in general subjects can be a challenge" (Mustakim, 2024).

Based on informant statements at MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang, the main obstacles in managing the Islamic boarding school-based *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum include several essential aspects. One is the lack of a shared vision among teachers, mainly because not all teachers have an Islamic boarding school background. This creates a challenge in aligning understanding and approaches in

implementing a curriculum based on Islamic boarding school values. The readiness of teachers to prioritize character education is also a crucial issue, considering the importance of teachers as role models in the concept of "digugu and ditiru." In this context, teacher exemplary behaviour includes professional attitudes and personal integrity reflecting Islamic values. In addition, the adaptation of the previous curriculum to the Islamic boarding school-based *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum requires a process that is not easy. Collaboration between religious and general teachers in integrating Islamic values into general lessons is one of the significant challenges. This process requires a shared understanding of how to align academic material with Islamic values that are relevant to students. According to (Mohune et al., 2022), integrating the more contemporary national and traditional curricula is often a significant obstacle in implementing pesantren-based education.

Managing the pesantren-based *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum also faces various complex and diverse challenges. One of them is the development of students' non-cognitive skills or soft skills through different learning activities. This curriculum encourages the development of these aspects, but many pesantren still focus on teaching yellow books and cognitive elements. As a result, skills such as leadership, communication, and cooperation receive less attention. Maulana et al. (2022) noted that the yellow book-based education approach is often the main priority so non-cognitive aspects tend to be neglected.

Other challenges involve infrastructure and classroom management. Many pesantren, especially those in remote areas, face limited facilities that support the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. These limitations include a lack of access to digital technology, adequate learning spaces, and teaching materials by the new curriculum. Kusumawati & Nurfuadi (2024) emphasized that collaboration between the government, Islamic boarding school managers, and educators is essential to create a better learning environment relevant to the times' needs.

To overcome these challenges, several strategic steps can be taken. First, intensive training is needed for educators to align their vision and improve their

understanding of the Islamic boarding school-based Independent Learning Curriculum. This training can help teachers understand how to integrate Islamic values into various subjects and manage project-based learning relevant to Islamic boarding schools' context. Second, the government and educational institutions must provide support by developing teaching materials that integrate Islamic values and modern academic competencies. Third, developing adequate infrastructure, including access to digital technology, is also a priority to ensure learning effectiveness.

Collaboration between the government, Islamic boarding school managers, and educators is essential to support optimal curriculum management. In addition, Islamic boarding schools can partner with other educational institutions, including universities, to obtain input, technical support, and the resources needed. Thus, Islamic boarding schools cannot only face challenges but can also continue to improve the quality of education according to the needs of the times, as expressed by Kusumawati & Nurfuadi (2024).

Challenges in managing the Islamic boarding school-based Independent Learning Curriculum can be overcome through planned and collaborative efforts. Thus, Islamic boarding schools can continue to play an essential role in producing a generation with Islamic characters who are intelligent and ready to face global challenges.

The Impact of Implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum on the Quality of Education

According to the findings of an interview conducted with MA NU Nurul Semarang's deputy head of curriculum;

“The application of this *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum has a variety of effects, including, it opens up many opportunities for students to develop skills, such as creativity, critical thinking skills, which may have been lacking attention from boarding school” (Basthoni, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Ahyar, Head of Madrasah MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang;

“one of the impacts is on strengthening the character of students this curriculum strengthens character education through habituation of spiritual activities and Islamic values” (Ahyar, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Musa, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang teacher;

“By combining general and religious subjects, students can understand academic knowledge and Islamic values in a balanced way. It helps students to see science from a religious perspective” (Musa, 2024).

According to information from Mrs. Ika, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang Teacher;

“in the Merdeka Curriculum, Students are allowed to pursue their education in accordance with their skills and interests, so they can focus on self-development and increase learning motivation” (Ika, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Sudarno, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang teacher;

“the most visible impact is on the collaboration between religious and general teachers helping to create more holistic and integrated learning, so that students can learn scientific concepts in an Islamic context” (Sudarno, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Mustakim, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang teacher;

“it has an impact on improving the quality of education by developing a balance between intellectual intelligence and strengthening student character” (Mustakim, 2024).

The results of interviews with several education personnel at MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang show that the Independent Learning Curriculum provides excellent opportunities for students to develop critical thinking skills and prepare to face the times' challenges. This curriculum opens up space for students to learn more relevant and contextualistically, allowing them to explore their interests and talents while adhering to Islamic values. Through this approach, students learn to understand science and apply it in everyday life while maintaining a balance between character development and intellectual capacity.

Strengthening character is one of the main focuses of the Independent Learning Curriculum at MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang. Spiritual activities such as getting used to reading Asmaul Husana, praying Dhuha in the congregation, and religious studies help build the foundation of students' morals. This aligns with the values of Islamic boarding schools that prioritize Islamic character education. In addition, integrating religious and general subjects provides students with a

holistic understanding, where knowledge is studied as a theory and internalized through an Islamic perspective. This process is supported by collaboration between religious and general teachers who complement each other in delivering learning materials.

The freedom to learn provided in the Independent Learning Curriculum is one of the main attractions for students. They can choose a learning method that suits their interests and talents, increasing their motivation and joy in learning. This creates a more inclusive and empowering learning atmosphere, where students are passive recipients of information and actively participate in the learning process. According to Rusli et al. (2022), the active involvement of students in the learning process is one of the most obvious benefits of implementing the Independent Learning Curriculum. The ability to choose learning strategies according to their interests and skills positively impacts their learning motivation.

In addition to the benefits felt by students, the Independent Learning Curriculum also positively impacts the overall quality of education. Collaboration between religious and general teachers creates a more integrative and relevant learning approach. Religious teachers provide spiritual guidance and ethical values, while general teachers bring an applied modern scientific perspective. This combination enhances students' understanding and creates harmony between academic mastery and character development. Thus, the education offered becomes more holistic and oriented toward future needs.

However, this curriculum also demands high readiness from educators. Teachers need to be trained to understand and implement the curriculum effectively. According to Rusli et al. (2022), continuous training and mentoring for educators are key factors in ensuring the success of curriculum implementation. Teachers must also be supported with adequate educational resources, including relevant teaching materials and supportive learning facilities.

The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in Islamic boarding schools such as MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang benefits students and opens up opportunities to improve the quality of education in the Islamic boarding school environment. With an

approach that focuses on skills development, character strengthening, and interest-based learning, this curriculum can help create a generation that is intellectually superior and has strong moral integrity. Good collaboration between educators, Islamic boarding school managers, and related parties is the key to optimizing the potential of the Independent Learning Curriculum in supporting education based on Islamic values.

Curriculum Evaluation for Sustainability and Relevance of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum

According to the findings of an interview conducted with MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang, the deputy head of curriculum;

“it must be adjusted to the needs, the rules of the game from the government are usually not necessarily with the needs. Therefore we must make adaptations. The main target is towards students, how students can be served well according to their respective abilities, whatever is done must be student-based” (Basthoni, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Ahyar, Head of Madrasah MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang;

“by integrating religious values and general skills, such as faith, morals, with general skills that are prioritized in the Merdeka Curriculum” (Ahyar, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Musa, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang Teacher;

“maybe it can be by implementing active and contextual learning based on life in boarding school” (Musa, 2024).

According to information from Mrs. Ika, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang Teacher;

“conducting a comprehensive assessment and evaluation, whether the assessment in this curriculum can cover academic aspects and religious values in a balanced manner” (Ika, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Sudarno, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang Teacher;

“by providing meaningful feedback in the context of boarding school, which combines aspects of general learning and religious values” (Sudarno, 2024).

According to information from Mr. Mustakim, MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang Teacher;

“Assessing the extent to which the curriculum can adapt to social and technological changes in the long term” (Mustakim, 2024).

Based on the interview results, modification of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic boarding schools is essential to meet the needs of students while maintaining the uniqueness of the Islamic boarding school education system. One of the main focuses is student-based learning, which places students as the main subjects in the learning process. This approach allows them to explore their interests, talents, and personal potential in depth to make learning more meaningful and relevant to their lives. In the context of Islamic boarding schools, this learning must also integrate religious values with general skills, providing a balance between spiritual and intellectual development.

Implementing active learning contextualized according to Islamic boarding school life is one strategy that can strengthen the relevance of this curriculum. Project-based learning methods, for example, can be designed to include religious values, daily life practices in Islamic boarding schools, and skills that are relevant to future demands. According to Rusli et al. (2022), this project-based learning approach allows students to understand the material through direct experience better, improve critical thinking skills, and develop the ability to work together in teams.

In addition, comprehensive assessment is also considered necessary in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic boarding schools. This assessment covers academic aspects and assesses the extent to which students internalize religious values in their daily lives. Feedback provided through the assessment process must be meaningful and can encourage students to continue developing intellectually and spiritually. This approach is to the objectives of Islamic boarding school education, which are oriented towards academic results and the formation of Islamic character.

To face the challenges of the times, the curriculum must also be able to adapt to social and technological changes. Digital literacy is one of the competencies that must be instilled in learning, considering the rapid development of technology that affects various aspects of life. This digital literacy ability includes technical skills and the ability to use technology wisely according to

Islamic values. Kusumawati & Nurfuadi (2024) emphasized that a future-oriented curriculum must consist of mastery of technology to prepare for the demands of the ever-changing world of work.

In addition to digital literacy, critical thinking skills are an essential indicator that must be accommodated in the Independent Curriculum. Students must be trained to analyze information, solve problems creatively, and make wise decisions. According to (Mohune et al., 2022), developing critical thinking skills can be done through project-based learning that provides opportunities for students to be involved in solving real problems.

The sustainability of curriculum implementation also depends heavily on ongoing teacher training. Teachers must receive relevant training to understand and apply project-based learning and be able to develop contextual learning materials that are appropriate to the needs of Islamic boarding school students. This training must also include mastery of educational technology to support more interactive and practical learning. According to Maulana et al. (2022), ongoing training improves teacher competence and gives them the confidence to carry out innovative learning.

With the proper modifications, the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic boarding schools such as MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang can be a solution to creating education that is relevant to the times while maintaining Islamic values. A holistic approach, including developing digital skills, character building, and ongoing teacher training, is the key to achieving better educational goals. Support from various parties, including the government and the community, is also needed to implement this curriculum optimally in Islamic boarding school environments.

The *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum has a lot of potential to raise the standard of education in Pesantren, according to observations made about its implementation at MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang. However, planned and systematic strategic steps are needed to achieve these goals. Effective curriculum implementation requires the involvement of all stakeholders, including teachers, principals, and parents (Istiqomah & Fauziah, 2024). In this context, it is essential to carry out a thorough examination of the particular circumstances and needs of MA NU Nurul Huda so

that the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum can be tailored to the characteristics and potential of the students (Wahyudi & Ariyani, 2023).

Emphasis on strengthening morals is at the core of curriculum implementation. This is very relevant to boarding school-based education characteristics that prioritize spiritual values. By integrating these values into the curriculum structure, boarding school education concentrates not only on academic elements but also on the character-building of students. Habituation of activities such as reciting Asmaul Husna and dhuha prayers at MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang also strengthens the expected character. Implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum requires a systematic approach, especially in terms of training and mentoring for educators. As stated, training that focuses on understanding the curriculum and teaching techniques is essential to ensure that teachers can deliver material effectively. In addition, creating educational resources pertinent to the pesantren context will help students learn more meaningfully (Utomo & Rizqa, 2022). Kiai's leadership in the development of education in boarding schools is crucial. As a leader, kiai is responsible for ensuring that education is organized according to the community's needs and the times.

Therefore, it is essential to develop teaching materials involving Kiai and pesantren administrators to be relevant and acceptable to students and the community (Halili, 2023). The main challenges faced were unifying the educational vision among teachers from different backgrounds and combining the more contemporary national curriculum with the traditional curriculum. This creates a mismatch between implementation and reporting, requiring careful adaptation. Cooperation between the government, pesantren managers, and educators is crucial to building a better learning environment (Mohune et al., 2022). MA NU Nurul Huda must ensure its facilities and resources support innovative and interactive learning processes. Research shows a supportive learning environment can improve student learning outcomes (Halili, 2023).

Overall, implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum at MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang shows the great possibility of raising the education standard based on boarding school. However, the existing challenges require attention and

collaboration from various parties to ensure that the curriculum can be implemented effectively and sustainably.

IV. CONCLUSION

Merdeka Belajar Curriculum Management at MA NU Nurul Huda Semarang can improve the quality of education in boarding schools by allowing students to determine how to study while emphasizing strengthening character and spiritual values. The main focus of implementing this curriculum is to improve the morals and character of students through routine activities such as reading Asmaul Husna and praying dhuha which form the expected character. The management of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in boarding schools must be structured by considering the characteristics of boarding school education. Cooperation between the government, pesantren managers, and educators is very important to implement this curriculum effectively and sustainably, resulting in graduates who excel academically and in character.

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