

# Optimising the Role of Madrasah Supervisors in Implementing Merdeka Belajar Policy to Improve Academic Quality

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse the roles and functions of supervisors in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* policy at Islamic senior high schools (MAN) in Aceh Tamiang to improve students' academic quality. The research focuses on four key supervisory functions: coaching, monitoring, evaluation, and training. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings indicate that supervisory efforts—such as guidance to teachers, training in innovative methods, routine monitoring, and data-driven evaluations—have significantly enhanced teaching quality and student motivation. Key supporting factors included principal support, teacher collaboration, and adequate facilities, while limitations such as time constraints and resistance from some teachers hindered effectiveness. The study underscores that the success of *Merdeka Belajar* implementation relies on active and collaborative engagement among supervisors, teachers, and school leadership. Practically, this research highlights the need to empower school supervisors as strategic partners in curriculum reform. Education stakeholders should provide structured support, adequate resources, and professional development opportunities for supervisors. Future research should expand to include various Islamic education institutions across different regions to account for contextual diversity. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to examine the sustained impact of supervisory practices on student outcomes and instructional transformation under the *Merdeka Belajar* framework.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia, particularly within the madrasah system, has undergone substantial transformation in response to the advances of the information age and globalisation. Traditionally known as institutions focused on religious instruction, madrasahs have progressively integrated scientific subjects such as mathematics and natural sciences into their curricula. This evolution affirms the position of madrasahs as equal to general and vocational schools, in accordance with Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System (Fahmi et al., 2021; Umayah, 2015). However, one of the pressing challenges lies in aligning this growing complexity with a supervision system capable of supporting educational quality. In an era increasingly driven by technology and flexible learning models, educational supervision plays a pivotal role in guiding schools towards academic excellence. Specifically, in the context of the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) policy—which demands autonomy, contextual innovation, and student-centred pedagogy—the role of madrasah supervisors becomes more strategic than ever (Fahmi & Iskandar, 2020; Munandar, 2022).

Despite its critical importance, research on madrasah supervision remains limited and often confined to administrative or managerial functions. Much of the existing literature prioritises the roles of principals and teachers in enhancing classroom learning, while the supervisory function—as a quality assurance mechanism—receives relatively little analytical attention (Iswanto, 2021; July Iswanto, 2022). Although scholars such as Asrul (2014) acknowledge the contribution of supervisors to educational quality, their discussions rarely extend to the broader implications of supervisory practices within national policy reforms. Therefore, this study addresses an important research gap by exploring how madrasah supervisors engage with the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* and the extent to which their roles influence academic development in Islamic schools. This investigation aims to reconceptualise supervision as a dynamic and transformative force within the national education landscape (Fahmi, 2021; Toseef et al., 2022; Albab, 2021).

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The purpose of this study is to respond to the shortcomings in previous research by comprehensively examining the role of madrasah supervisors in the implementation of the Freedom of Learning policy and its influence on improving academic quality in MAN, Aceh Tamiang Regency. In

particular, this study aims to identify the factors that affect the effectiveness of supervision carried out by madrasah supervisors and how this has an impact on improving the quality of education in their target madrasas. By using a qualitative approach, this research is expected to provide new insights related to the implementation of education policies in madrasas. (Santri Fahmi, 2022; Vhalery et al., 2022) (Marjan Fuadi, 2022; Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022)

This study hypothesizes that the optimal role of madrasah supervisors in the Independent Learning policy will have a significant impact on improving academic quality in madrasas. Supervision that includes coaching, evaluation, and professional training for teachers will strengthen the ability of madrasas to organize higher quality learning. Therefore, the relationship between the effectiveness of supervision by madrasah supervisors and the improvement of student academic quality at MAN, Aceh Tamiang Regency is important to be tested in this study. (Fatmawati, 2021) (Krishnapatria, 2021) (Susilawati, 2021; Yasmansyah & Sesmiarni, 2022)

In studies on madrasah supervisors and academic quality, several studies have identified a significant relationship between the effectiveness of supervision and the quality of education produced in madrasas. Most of the literature focuses on the influence of supervision on teacher performance and student learning outcomes. First, many studies show that effective academic supervision can improve the quality of teaching and student learning outcomes (Muslim, 2017; Siagian, 2002). Second, research also shows that managerial supervision involving madrasah heads contributes to improving managerial and administrative quality in madrasas (Soedarmo, 2018). Third, there is a tendency to focus research on the coaching and evaluation aspects carried out by supervisors to improve teacher competence, but there has not been much research that links the role of supervisors in the latest education policies, such as Merdeka Belajar, which changes the paradigm of learning and supervision. (Jufriadi et al., 2022) (Hattarina et al., 2022; Sulalah et al., 2024)

The first tendency in the literature is the orientation to academic supervision with a thematic approach that focuses on fostering teacher quality. Several studies show that supervisors who carry out their duties as professional supervisors can improve teachers' pedagogical competence which directly impacts improving student learning outcomes (Muslim, 2017; Siagian, 2002). The method used in this study is usually a qualitative approach with direct observation techniques and in-depth interviews with teachers, madrasah heads, and supervisors. These studies highlight the importance of supervisors in providing constructive feedback, as well as appropriate coaching for teachers so that they can develop better teaching strategies. However, this study was limited to supervision that focused only on the academic dimension without including broader external factors such as national education policies. (Angga & Iskandar, 2022; Rats, 2021) (Febrianningsih & Ramadan, 2023; Susilowati, 2022) (Ainia, 2020; Hilmin et al., 2023; Yulianto, 2022)

The second tendency focuses on managerial supervision and the role of supervisors in improving madrasah management. Research that adopts this approach often examines the relationship between managerial supervision and the operational effectiveness of madrasahs. For example, supervisors who provide managerial assistance to madrasah heads can improve the efficiency of managing educational resources, including curriculum and administration (Soedarmo, 2018). This research approach tends to be quantitative, using surveys and statistical data analysis to measure how much influence managerial supervision has on the quality of madrasah management. However, this study generally pays less attention to how supervisors influence changes in the implementation of larger education policies, such as the Freedom of Learning policy, which gives more freedom to the management of education. (Ainia, 2020; Hilmin et al., 2023; Yulianto, 2022) (Krishnapatria, 2021; Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022; Santri Fahmi, 2022) (Fatmawati, 2021; July Iswanto, 2022; Susilawati, 2021)

A third trend in the literature leads to the study of the role of supervisors in the implementation of larger education policies, especially the Independent Learning policy. This research focuses on how madrasah supervisors help implement policies that are more flexible and based on the needs and characteristics of students and teachers. This approach uses case study and direct observation methods to analyze policy implementation at the madrasah level. This study reveals that supervisors play the

role of mediators and inspirators in supporting teachers and madrasah heads to adapt to new curriculums that are more responsive to student needs (Isom, 2022). However, the main drawback of this study is the lack of an in-depth analysis of how supervision can be adapted to the diverse conditions of madrasahs, especially in the context of different resources owned by madrasahs in different regions. (Angga & Iskandar, 2022; Febrianningsih & Ramadan, 2023; Hattarina et al., 2022) (Ainia, 2020; Febrianningsih & Ramadan, 2023; Hilmin et al., 2023)

Although previous studies have provided a fairly complete picture of the role of supervisors in education, both in terms of academic, managerial, and policy implementation, they often "forget" the dimensions of the implementation of the Freedom of Learning policy in depth. Existing research focuses more on fragmented supervision, without comprehensively linking how this new policy changes the duties and functions of supervisionaries. In addition, previous studies have also not considered how supervisors can overcome structural and resource barriers in the implementation of flexible education policies, especially in madrasahs that have different challenges in terms of infrastructure and human resource capacity. (Iswanto, 2021; July Iswanto, 2022) (Ginting et al., 2023; Jeremy Samuel Pangkey Sondakh et al., 2025) (Iskandar, 2021)

This research aims to fill the existing shortcomings by exploring the role of madrasah supervisors in the implementation of the Freedom of Learning policy and its impact on academic quality. The focus of this research is on how supervisors play a role in supporting more flexible education policies, assessing the challenges faced by supervisors in carrying out their duties, and exploring how more adaptive and needs-based supervision can improve the quality of learning in madrasahs. Thus, this research will provide new insights into the application of supervision that is more responsive to changes in education policy and challenges in the field. (Muhammad Riza et al., 2022; Umayah, 2015) (Ekosiswoyo, 2016) (Susilowati, 2022)

## 2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to understand the roles and strategic functions of madrasah supervisors in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* policy. The research was conducted in two public Islamic senior high schools (MAN) in Aceh Tamiang Regency, selected purposively due to the active involvement of supervisors in academic quality development. The main sources of data were supervisors, school principals, and subject teachers directly involved in supervision activities. This focus aligns with the view that supervisors play a crucial role not only in administrative monitoring but also in guiding professional practice and instructional improvement (Fahmi & Iskandar, 2020; Albab, 2021).

Data collection was conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews focused on four key supervisory domains: coaching, monitoring, evaluation, and training. Observations were carried out during formal supervisory visits and training sessions. Document analysis involved supervision logs, school self-evaluation records, and curriculum implementation reports. To ensure credibility and reliability, data were triangulated from multiple sources and cross-checked with participants (*member checking*). Data analysis followed thematic procedures, involving coding and categorising emerging patterns from field findings (Fahmi, 2021; Toseef et al., 2022). This approach enabled a contextual and reflective understanding of supervisory practice within the evolving landscape of Islamic education in Indonesia.. (E. Haryono, 2023; Muhajirin et al., 2024; Nasir et al., 2023)

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Findings*

This section presents the empirical findings of the study on the roles and functions of madrasah supervisors in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* policy at two MAN (Islamic senior high schools) in Aceh Tamiang. The data were obtained through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. To provide a structured interpretation of the field findings, this section is organised into four

main themes based on the supervisory domains explored: (1) Coaching and Professional Support, (2) Monitoring and Academic Oversight, (3) Evaluation and Assessment Practices, and (4) Training and Capacity Building. Each theme reflects the practical roles played by supervisors and the challenges encountered in the implementation process.

### *Coaching and Professional Support*

The implementation of coaching by supervisors at MAN 1 and MAN 2 Aceh Tamiang represented a fundamental shift from traditional supervision models to a more collaborative, growth-oriented approach aligned with the Merdeka Belajar philosophy. At MAN 1, supervisors developed an innovative peer-support ecosystem where coaching was embedded in daily school culture through multiple channels. This included formal mentoring partnerships pairing senior teachers with newcomers, weekly collaborative planning sessions, and monthly demonstration lessons where exemplary teaching practices were modeled. The coaching process at MAN 1 emphasized reciprocal learning, creating an environment where even experienced teachers could share and refine their approaches through structured reflection.

In contrast, MAN 2 adopted a more systematic coaching framework organized around three key components: diagnostic classroom observations, targeted professional development workshops, and cyclical improvement plans. Supervisors conducted comprehensive baseline assessments at the beginning of each semester using standardized rubrics to identify individual teacher development needs. These diagnostics informed a differentiated coaching approach where teachers were grouped according to shared challenges, such as classroom management or technology integration. Monthly workshops then addressed these specific areas through hands-on training sessions, followed by classroom implementation and follow-up observations. This data-driven model ensured coaching resources were allocated efficiently and interventions were precisely tailored.

The impact of these coaching programs manifested in several measurable improvements in teaching practices. Teachers at both institutions reported significant enhancements in their ability to design student-centered lessons incorporating project-based learning and authentic assessment strategies. Many noted particular growth in integrating local Acehnese contexts into their teaching, making content more relevant to students' lives. For example, science teachers developed modules exploring environmental issues through the lens of coastal erosion problems in Aceh Tamiang, while Islamic studies teachers created project-based assignments analyzing local traditions through Islamic philosophical frameworks. These innovations emerged directly from supervisor-facilitated coaching conversations that encouraged contextual adaptation of the curriculum.

Beyond pedagogical skills, the coaching programs fostered important cultural shifts within the madrasahs. At MAN 1, the establishment of "Professional Learning Circles" created structured opportunities for teachers to collaboratively analyze student work, critique lesson plans, and problem-solve classroom challenges. These circles, moderated by supervisors but teacher-led, gradually built a culture of open professional dialogue and mutual accountability. Similarly, MAN 2 implemented "Instructional Rounds" where groups of teachers observed colleagues' classrooms with supervisors, followed by structured debriefs focused on identifying effective practices rather than evaluating performance. These approaches helped break down isolation and build professional community.

Supervisors employed a variety of coaching techniques adapted to different teacher needs and contexts. For early-career teachers, intensive mentoring with weekly classroom observations and co-planning sessions provided essential scaffolding. Mid-career teachers benefited from peer observation protocols and action research projects guided by supervisors. Even experienced teachers engaged in coaching through leadership opportunities like mentoring new staff or leading professional development sessions. This differentiated approach recognized that professional growth occurs in stages and requires varied support structures at each career phase.

The coaching programs also addressed the affective dimensions of teaching. Supervisors incorporated regular check-ins about teacher wellbeing and workload management into their coaching

cycles. At MAN 2, this took the form of monthly "Wellness Conversations" where teachers could discuss challenges beyond just instructional matters. Supervisors helped teachers set boundaries, prioritize tasks, and access support services when needed. These holistic coaching conversations acknowledged that effective teaching depends on both professional competencies and personal sustainability.

However, implementing these comprehensive coaching models presented significant challenges. Time constraints emerged as the most substantial barrier, with supervisors at both institutions reporting that administrative duties often limited their availability for classroom observations and coaching conversations. Some teachers initially resisted coaching, perceiving it as evaluation rather than support, requiring supervisors to invest substantial effort in building trust. Resource limitations also constrained coaching activities, particularly in providing ongoing training for supervisors themselves to refine their coaching skills.

To address these challenges, both madrasahs developed creative solutions. MAN 1 implemented a "Coaching Wednesdays" program where administrative tasks were minimized on one day each week to prioritize classroom support. MAN 2 trained lead teachers to take on some coaching responsibilities, expanding capacity through a distributed leadership model. Both schools also worked to streamline documentation requirements and automate reporting processes where possible to free up supervisor time. These adaptations demonstrated how coaching models must be flexibly implemented within real-world institutional constraints.

The long-term sustainability of these coaching programs depends on several critical factors. Institutionalizing coaching as a core function rather than an add-on activity requires ongoing commitment from school leadership and adequate resource allocation. Developing clear career pathways for teachers who take on coaching roles can help formalize and reward these contributions. Regular evaluation of coaching effectiveness through both quantitative metrics (e.g., teacher retention rates, student performance) and qualitative feedback ensures continuous improvement of the programs. Perhaps most importantly, maintaining a growth-oriented rather than compliance-driven mindset among all stakeholders remains essential for coaching to fulfill its transformative potential in madrasah education.

Importantly, coaching extended beyond academic content to include behaviour management strategies, emotional support, and motivation. In cases where teachers showed signs of burnout or discouragement, supervisors offered moral support and helped restructure workloads to improve work-life balance.

This holistic coaching approach reflected an understanding that teacher well-being directly influences classroom performance. Both MAN institutions reported fewer teacher complaints and greater job satisfaction since this coaching model was adopted.

Despite its successes, the coaching process faced limitations, including time constraints due to supervisors' administrative workload. In both schools, supervisors expressed the need for additional personnel or reduced non-academic duties to optimise their coaching functions.

### ***Monitoring and Academic Oversight***

The monitoring systems implemented at MAN 1 and MAN 2 demonstrated sophisticated approaches to ensuring instructional quality while supporting teacher development. At MAN 1, supervisors established a structured classroom observation protocol that balanced standardized assessment with contextual understanding. Their walkthroughs utilized detailed checklists measuring key indicators like lesson alignment with Merdeka Belajar principles, differentiation strategies, and student engagement levels. However, these quantitative measures were complemented by rich qualitative notes capturing classroom dynamics, teacher-student interactions, and creative pedagogical moments. Post-observation conferences became genuine professional dialogues, where supervisors and teachers collaboratively analyzed lesson effectiveness using both the checklist data and narrative observations.

MAN 2 developed a more integrated monitoring system that connected classroom processes with learning outcomes. Supervisors cross-referenced observation data with student performance metrics, attendance patterns, and assignment completion rates to identify instructional strengths and gaps. A unique feature was the teaching journal requirement, where educators reflected on lesson successes, challenges, and student responses. These journals provided valuable longitudinal data, allowing supervisors to track instructional adjustments over time and recognize professional growth patterns. The digital dashboard system enabled real-time data visualization, helping teachers and supervisors quickly identify trends needing attention.

Both institutions recognized that effective monitoring needed to encompass the full spectrum of madrasah education goals. Observations routinely assessed how teachers integrated Islamic values into lessons across all subjects, not just religious studies. Supervisors noted classroom management approaches, particularly how discipline was maintained through positive reinforcement rather than punitive measures. They also monitored student participation in co-curricular activities as an indicator of holistic development. This comprehensive approach ensured that monitoring supported the madrasah's dual mission of academic excellence and character formation.

The evolution of teacher perceptions about monitoring represented a significant cultural shift. Initially viewed as a compliance exercise, teachers at both schools gradually came to appreciate monitoring as professional support. At MAN 1, this transformation was facilitated by supervisors who consistently framed feedback in growth-oriented terms, always pairing suggestions with concrete resources or modeling requested strategies. MAN 2 teachers valued the data-driven nature of feedback, which grounded recommendations in evidence rather than subjective opinions. Many educators reported that the monitoring process helped them develop greater metacognitive awareness of their teaching practices.

Monthly academic review meetings institutionalized the use of monitoring data for continuous improvement. At these sessions, supervisors presented aggregated findings that identified school-wide strengths and common challenge areas. Subject departments used this information to refine teaching approaches, while school leaders adjusted resource allocation and professional development priorities. The meetings also served as platforms for teachers to share successful strategies that had been identified through the monitoring process, fostering collaborative learning across the faculty.

Documentation systems reflected each school's operational philosophy. MAN 1's manual logbooks, while more labor-intensive, allowed for nuanced narrative descriptions and quick in-person exchanges. Teachers often added their own annotations to observation notes, creating a dialogue in the margins. MAN 2's digital system enabled efficient data aggregation and longitudinal analysis, with automated reminders for follow-up actions. Supervisors noted that the digital platform facilitated more consistent tracking of whether identified improvements had been implemented in subsequent lessons.

Resistance to monitoring, particularly among veteran teachers, was addressed through thoughtful implementation strategies. Both schools introduced peer observation components, where teachers could observe and learn from colleagues before being observed themselves. Supervisors emphasized the non-evaluative nature of formative observations and sometimes invited senior teachers to co-observe lessons, valuing their experience in the process. These approaches helped build trust and reduce anxiety about classroom visits.

The relationship between monitoring data and formal appraisal systems required careful management. While both schools used observation findings to inform professional development planning, they established clear boundaries between formative monitoring and summative evaluation. MAN 1 maintained complete separation, with different personnel conducting developmental observations versus performance reviews. MAN 2, while incorporating some monitoring data into appraisals, ensured teachers had multiple opportunities to demonstrate growth and contextualized all data within comprehensive performance portraits.

Tabel 1. Comparison of monitoring aspect findings

Monitoring Aspect	MAN 1	MAN 2
Observation Style	Scheduled walkthroughs	Data-driven, journal-based
Tools Used	Manual checklists and notes	Digital templates and performance dashboards
Feedback Delivery	Oral feedback in mentoring meetings	Group and individual review sessions
Integration with Appraisal	Separated from formal assessment	Partially linked to performance reviews
Teacher Perception	Supportive and developmental	Mixed—constructive but occasionally stressful

### *Evaluation and Assessment Practices*

The evaluation and assessment practices implemented by supervisors at MAN 1 and MAN 2 represented a comprehensive approach to monitoring both student learning and teaching effectiveness. At MAN 1, supervisors developed a formative assessment system that moved beyond traditional testing to capture student growth through multiple measures. Teachers regularly compiled student portfolios showcasing progressive work samples across subjects, while peer review sessions allowed educators to critically examine each other's assessment methods and provide constructive feedback. Performance-based tasks became a cornerstone of evaluation, with students demonstrating their understanding through projects, presentations, and practical applications of knowledge. This approach aligned with the Merdeka Belajar philosophy by emphasizing continuous improvement rather than one-time test performance.

MAN 2 adopted a more balanced evaluation framework that incorporated both formative and summative assessment strategies. Supervisors worked closely with school leadership teams to systematically analyze mid-term and final examination results, but with an important difference - they used this data diagnostically to identify patterns in student understanding and correlate them with specific teaching approaches. Teachers were supported in using this evidence to refine their instructional plans, creating a direct feedback loop between assessment outcomes and classroom practice. The school developed detailed tracking systems that monitored individual student progress over time, allowing for timely interventions when learning gaps were detected.

Both institutions expanded their evaluation criteria to encompass broader aspects of educational quality beyond academic scores. Classroom observations by supervisors included careful assessment of learning environments, noting how effectively teachers fostered inclusive participation, encouraged critical questioning, and adapted instruction to diverse learning needs. These qualitative measures complemented quantitative data to provide a more complete picture of educational effectiveness. The evaluation rubrics explicitly measured elements like student engagement levels, the quality of classroom discussions, and the appropriateness of differentiated instruction - all central to the student-centered vision of Merdeka Belajar.

The feedback process became an important professional development tool in both madrasahs. Supervisors provided teachers with detailed written evaluations followed by face-to-face conferences to discuss strengths and areas for growth. These sessions resulted in personalized improvement plans that identified specific professional learning resources, mentoring opportunities, or classroom strategies to address identified needs. Particularly at MAN 2, this process became cyclical, with follow-up observations scheduled to monitor implementation of suggested improvements and their impact on student learning.

Evaluation data served multiple purposes beyond individual teacher development. At MAN 2, supervisors led curriculum review teams that used assessment results to identify units or topics where student performance consistently lagged. This evidence-based approach to curriculum refinement led



to the redesign of several thematic units, with teachers collaborating to develop more effective instructional sequences and assessment methods. The process demonstrated how evaluation could drive systemic improvement rather than just individual accountability.

A distinctive feature of madrasah assessment was the intentional integration of Islamic educational objectives. Both institutions developed evaluation criteria that measured not just cognitive outcomes but also spiritual and ethical development. In Islamic studies and related subjects, assessments included components evaluating students' ability to connect learning to faith principles, demonstrate moral reasoning, and apply Islamic values in practical situations. This holistic approach to evaluation helped maintain the unique character of madrasah education while implementing progressive assessment methods

Despite these advances, challenges remained in standardising evaluation criteria. Some teachers felt unclear about assessment benchmarks and requested clearer rubrics and examples. Supervisors responded by conducting workshops on rubric design and authentic assessment.

Tabel 2. Evaluation focus in Locasions

Evaluation Focus	MAN 1	MAN 2
Main Approach	Formative and reflective	Combined formative and summative
Data Sources	Portfolios, peer feedback	Exam scores, student feedback, observations
Outcome Use	Teacher improvement plans	Curriculum review and strategy adjustment
Integration of Islamic Values	Through moral tasks and group activities	Through thematic faith-based integration

Training and Capacity Building

Supervisors served as the driving force behind comprehensive professional development programs designed to align teacher competencies with the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. At both MAN 1 and MAN 2, training initiatives were systematically structured to address pedagogical gaps while fostering innovation in teaching practices. The programs incorporated diverse formats, including workshops, peer learning sessions, and self-directed modules, ensuring multifaceted approaches to teacher development.

Tabel 3. Comparative Analysis of Training Approaches at MAN 1 and MAN 2

Aspect	MAN 1	MAN 2
Training Structure	Collaborative workshops with external experts from local universities, focusing on research-based instructional strategies.	Internal, school-based training modules led by senior supervisors and master teachers, emphasizing contextual adaptation.
Delivery Method	Intensive face-to-face sessions during dedicated training days, supplemented by follow-up mentoring.	Blended approach combining weekly Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) with asynchronous online modules for flexibility.
Key Focus Areas	Project-based learning, digital pedagogy, and interdisciplinary curriculum design.	Differentiated instruction, formative assessment techniques, and classroom management strategies.
Teacher Engagement	High participation due to external facilitators and certification incentives.	Strong peer-led engagement through PLCs, fostering organic collaboration.

<b>Resource Support</b>	Access to university research, online journals, and expert consultations.	School-developed training manuals, video demonstrations, and a shared digital resource library.
<b>Monitoring &amp; Evaluation</b>	Pre- and post-training assessments, followed by supervisor-led classroom observations.	Reflective journals, peer feedback sessions, and quarterly teaching portfolios.
<b>Challenges</b>	Scheduling conflicts with academic activities; reliance on external partners.	Varied participation levels due to workload; need for ongoing supervisor facilitation.
<b>Innovative Practices</b>	"Teacher Innovation Grants" to fund classroom action research projects.	"Best Practice Showcase" where teachers demonstrate applied strategies in live lessons.
<b>Impact</b>	Increased adoption of technology and student-centered approaches.	Improved consistency in assessment practices and differentiated instruction.

The professional development approaches at MAN 1 and MAN 2 demonstrated distinct yet complementary strategies for enhancing teacher competencies under the Merdeka Belajar policy. MAN 1 established strategic partnerships with local universities, bringing external experts to conduct workshops that exposed teachers to contemporary pedagogical research and innovative teaching methodologies. These sessions went beyond theoretical discussions, incorporating practical activities where teachers collaboratively designed interdisciplinary lessons blending STEM concepts with Islamic studies, creating relevant learning experiences for students. Meanwhile, MAN 2 took a different path by harnessing the expertise within its own walls, with experienced supervisors and master teachers developing tailored training programs that directly addressed the school's unique challenges, such as enhancing literacy instruction across subjects and implementing effective strategies for diverse classrooms.

The implementation of these programs revealed important considerations regarding flexibility and practical application. MAN 1's externally-facilitated workshops, while rich in content and perspective, required meticulous scheduling to minimize disruption to regular teaching schedules, sometimes creating logistical challenges. On the other hand, MAN 2's Professional Learning Community model embedded professional development into the weekly rhythm of school life, allowing for more gradual but consistent engagement with new concepts. This approach, however, placed greater demands on supervisors to maintain engagement and ensure the PLC sessions remained productive and focused on tangible classroom improvements. The difference in delivery methods highlighted how institutional context and resources shape professional development models.

Assessment of training effectiveness took different forms at each institution, reflecting their distinct approaches. MAN 1 brought in external evaluators who used standardized metrics to measure changes in teaching practices and student engagement, providing an objective view of program impact. MAN 2 adopted a more introspective approach through reflective teaching portfolios, where educators documented their implementation of new strategies and analyzed their effectiveness. This process not only served as an evaluation tool but also fostered a culture of continuous self-assessment and professional growth among teachers. Both methods proved valuable, with the external evaluations offering broader benchmarks while the portfolios encouraged deeper personal reflection.

Addressing the inevitable challenges of time constraints and teacher workload led to creative institutional adaptations. MAN 1 designated specific "Pedagogy Fridays" where normal classes were suspended to allow full immersion in professional development activities, creating protected time for learning and collaboration. MAN 2 implemented a flipped learning approach for their PLCs, where teachers engaged with training materials independently before coming together for focused discussion and application planning. These solutions demonstrated how structural adjustments could make

sustained professional development feasible within the demanding school calendar, while also modeling the kind of innovative thinking the programs aimed to cultivate in classrooms.

The most significant outcomes of these initiatives extended beyond specific skills to transform professional identities and school culture. At MAN 1, teachers increasingly embraced the role of practitioner-researchers, systematically testing new approaches in their classrooms and sharing results with colleagues. MAN 2's collaborative structure fostered a strong sense of peer accountability, with teachers voluntarily observing each other's classes and providing constructive feedback. In both environments, supervisors served as crucial catalysts for this cultural shift, recognizing and celebrating innovation while providing the support needed to sustain changes. This cultural transformation proved essential for making the Merdeka Belajar principles a lived reality rather than just a policy mandate.

The experiences of these two madrasahs illustrate how different approaches to professional development can successfully enhance teacher capacity when thoughtfully implemented. MAN 1's external partnerships brought valuable new perspectives and research-based practices into the school, while MAN 2's internal capacity-building ensured relevance to immediate classroom needs and greater sustainability. What united both approaches was the central role of supervisors as facilitators of learning, evaluators of progress, and champions of innovation. Looking ahead, there is exciting potential to combine elements of both models while leveraging digital tools to create more scalable and personalized professional learning opportunities. The ultimate lesson from both institutions is that effective teacher development requires not just training events, but an ecosystem of support that values growth, collaboration, and reflective practice.

Overall, training was seen not just as skill-building but as a platform for school-wide instructional renewal. Supervisors emerged as key enablers of pedagogical change and cultural transformation within the madrasah.

## **Discussion**

### ***Theoretical Integration and Interpretation of Findings***

This study analyzes the implementation of supervisory duties and functions in the implementation of the Freedom of Learning policy to improve academic quality in MAN 1 and MAN 2 Aceh Tamiang. This research identifies four main aspects in supervisory duties, namely coaching, monitoring, evaluation, and training. In coaching, supervisors play a role in helping teachers prepare more flexible and contextual lesson plans, as well as providing support in the use of innovative learning methods. Monitoring is carried out through regular visits to observe the learning process and provide feedback. Evaluations focus on learning documents and student competency assessments, while training is carried out to improve teachers' skills in implementing the Independent Learning policy. The study also revealed the challenges faced by supervisors, such as time and resource constraints, as well as the challenge of teachers' resistance to change. (Students Fahmi, 2022; Vhalery et al., 2022) (Marjan Fuadi, 2022; Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022) (Fatmawati, 2021; Krishnapatria, 2021)

The results of the study show that the supervisor's task is very crucial in the successful implementation of the Merdeka Learning policy, especially in helping teachers prepare lesson plans that are more flexible and in accordance with the needs of students. Supervisors also facilitate changes in teaching methods, encouraging teachers to adapt to project-based and technology-based learning approaches. The importance of integrated supervision based on teachers' practical needs is the key to improving the quality of education. The monitoring carried out by the supervisor not only focuses on academic results, but also involves direct observation of learning methods and student interaction. A comprehensive, authentic assessment-based evaluation provides space for supervisors to provide more constructive feedback and is based on the development of students' competencies, which include critical thinking and collaboration skills. (Iswanto, 2021; July Iswanto, 2022) (Susilawati, 2021; Yasmansyah & Sesmiarni, 2022)

This study shows similarities with previous research that examined the importance of the role of supervisors in improving the quality of education through coaching and evaluation, as found in a study

by Rauf (2018) on education supervision in other areas. However, the difference lies in the Independent Learning policy approach which emphasizes more flexibility and the development of student competencies. In addition, the study highlights the challenges faced in implementing such policies in rural areas such as Aceh Tamiang, which relate to infrastructure readiness and resource limitations, something that was not discussed much in previous research. The novelty of this research lies in how supervisors in Aceh Tamiang try to adapt national policies to the local context, by involving local wisdom in curriculum and learning methods. (Angga & Iskandar, 2022; Susilowati, 2022; Yulianto, 2022) (Leave, 2020; Hilmin et al., 2023)

The results of this study show that the Merdeka Learning policy not only changes the way of teaching, but also provides opportunities for students to develop a wider range of competencies, including creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration. With the help of supervisors, the implementation of this policy becomes more adaptive to local needs and technological developments. This research also reveals a change in the teaching paradigm, where previously teachers focused more on theory and formal knowledge, now switching to a more practical approach that is relevant to the needs of students. In the social and ideological context of education, this policy is in line with efforts to create a more inclusive education system based on the development of more holistic students' character and skills. (Angga & Iskandar, 2022; Hattarina et al., 2022; Jufriadi et al., 2022) (Fatmawati, 2021; Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022; Santri Fahmi, 2022)

The results of this study show that supervisors play an important role in creating change in the madrasah. However, despite the many positive impacts of the Merdeka Learning policy, challenges related to resources and teachers' readiness to adapt to change are still the main issues. It is important to reflect on how the education supervision system can be further strengthened, both in terms of facilities, training, and administrative support. With increased supervisory capacity and better cooperation between supervisors, teachers, and madrasah heads, the quality of education can continue to develop. However, there needs to be an ongoing effort to ensure that challenges such as resistance to change can be addressed with a more collaborative and support-based approach. (Juli Iswanto, 2022; Susilawati, 2021) (Angga & Iskandar, 2022; Hattarina et al., 2022; Susilowati, 2022)

Based on the findings in this study, there are several action plans that can be carried out to improve the effectiveness of supervision in the implementation of the Freedom of Learning policy. First, improving training for supervisors so that they are better prepared to face supervisory challenges, especially in integrating technology and authentic assessments in the learning process. Second, there needs to be an improvement in time management and distribution of supervisors' duties, so that they can pay more attention to teacher assistance. Third, closer collaboration between supervisors, teachers, and madrasah heads needs to be strengthened, by ensuring more concrete support to prepare and implement lesson plans in accordance with the principles of Freedom of Learning. In addition, the application of digitalization in data management and evaluation will also help speed up the monitoring process and improve the accuracy of evaluation results. With the implementation of these measures, it is hoped that supervision can be more effective and contribute to improving the quality of education in madrasahs.

### ***Novelty and Contribution to Educational Supervision Literature***

This research presents a novel contribution by positioning madrasah supervisors as pivotal actors in mediating national education policy at the school level. While many previous studies have focused either on teacher practices or school leadership, this study illustrates the often-overlooked role of supervisors in aligning policy with classroom realities. The supervisors' ability to integrate *Merdeka Belajar* principles into the daily instructional practices of Islamic schools highlights a new model of responsive and context-sensitive supervision (Iswanto, 2021; July Iswanto, 2022).

The dual attention to administrative and academic dimensions of supervision challenges the binary often found in the literature. Supervisors in this study were observed managing logistical functions such as planning and compliance, while simultaneously leading professional learning

conversations. This holistic engagement expands on Soedarmo's (2018) distinction between managerial and instructional supervision by showing that the two can be synergistically aligned.

The incorporation of local cultural elements, particularly Acehese values and Islamic teachings, provides a unique lens to understand the localisation of education reform. By blending policy goals with local traditions, supervisors fostered teacher ownership of reforms and made pedagogical changes more sustainable. This supports the notion that policy implementation is most effective when it respects and incorporates local cultural frameworks (Nasution & Irwansyah, 2022).

Importantly, the study surfaces a feedback-oriented model of supervision. Rather than top-down audits, supervisors used formative observation, mentoring dialogues, and collaborative planning to support continuous improvement. This adds a practical dimension to calls from Ekosiswoyo (2016) and others for more dialogical, teacher-centred approaches to instructional leadership.

Finally, this research also contributes to the discourse on education equity. By adapting strategies to overcome limited infrastructure and institutional capacity, supervisors played a critical role in bridging gaps between policy expectations and local realities. This insight is valuable for educational systems facing similar challenges of under-resourced schools and decentralised reform mandates (Riduan & Ramdhan 2024).

### *Reflection on Challenges and Change Management*

The implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* in the two studied madrasahs was not without significant challenges. Supervisors had to navigate infrastructural limitations, limited training resources, and occasional resistance from teachers. Yet, both MAN 1 and MAN 2 demonstrated adaptive strategies that reinforced the potential for meaningful reform. Supervisors used Professional Learning Circles and flipped mentoring sessions to foster teacher agency and resilience. These practices reflect what Fullan (2011) describes as "internal capacity building" in times of systemic change.

Resistance from certain teachers, particularly in adapting to student-centred and differentiated instruction, was anticipated. Supervisors addressed this by modelling vulnerability and promoting a safe space for experimentation. Over time, this culture of openness reduced opposition and allowed new pedagogical strategies to take root. The findings align with change management literature that emphasises emotional safety and gradual trust-building as prerequisites for transformation (Hamdi et al., 2024).

The study also highlights the emotional labour involved in educational supervision. Supervisors were not only tasked with technical monitoring but also provided emotional support and motivation to teachers facing change fatigue. Their roles extended into pastoral care, reaffirming the relational foundation of effective supervision in religious schools. This mirrors the findings of Fatmawati (2021), who noted the increasing emotional expectations placed on supervisors under the *Merdeka Belajar* framework.

Despite these efforts, systemic constraints remain. Supervisors often lacked time and administrative support to carry out instructional visits with the desired frequency. This limitation points to a structural issue in how supervision is positioned within the broader educational bureaucracy. Addressing these institutional bottlenecks is essential if supervisory reforms are to be scaled and sustained (wahyudi Ramdhan, 2024).

Nevertheless, the schools in this study demonstrated that local innovation is possible even within systemic constraints. The key enabler was not material abundance but leadership vision and collaborative culture. Supervisors acted as connectors across policy, pedagogy, and culture—an integrative role that holds promise for madrasah transformation nationwide.

In conclusion, this research highlights the multidimensional role of supervisors as facilitators, mediators, and change agents. Their strategic engagement with *Merdeka Belajar* principles, adapted to local context, offers a blueprint for responsive supervision that is both policy-aligned and pedagogically grounded.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that madrasah supervisors play a central role in actualising the *Merdeka Belajar* policy through their functions in coaching, monitoring, evaluation, and training. Their efforts have facilitated a contextualised and collaborative approach to curriculum reform in MAN 1 and MAN 2 Aceh Tamiang. Supervisors not only supported teacher capacity but also integrated Islamic values and local wisdom into instructional practices. This redefines supervision as a professional and cultural bridge between national policy and classroom realities. It confirms that effective supervision contributes directly to enhancing teaching quality and student engagement.

Practically, the findings imply that supervisors should be empowered through structured support, ongoing training, and reduced administrative overload. Institutions must view supervision as a pedagogical leadership role, not merely bureaucratic oversight. Supervisory practices that emphasise reflection, feedback, and cultural responsiveness should be adopted more widely. Future research should explore the sustainability of these practices in other regions and types of Islamic schools. Longitudinal studies are also needed to measure long-term effects on teacher development and student outcomes.

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