

# Implementation of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Traditional Islamic Education Institutions: A Multisite Study on Dayah in Aceh Tamiang

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Merdeka Learning Curriculum;  
Dayah Babul Huda;  
Dayah Ibdaul Islam;  
differentiated learning;  
local wisdom

### Article history:

Received 2024-09-20

Revised 2024-11-23

Accepted 2024-12-31

## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Learning Curriculum in two Islamic boarding schools in Aceh Tamiang District, namely Dayah Babul Huda and Dayah Ibdaul Islam. The study identifies the processes of curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation, as well as the supporting factors and challenges faced. A multisite study with a qualitative approach was employed. The results show that both boarding schools implemented the Merdeka Learning Curriculum through collaboration between school leaders and teachers, with adjustments to Islamic values and local wisdom of Aceh. At Dayah Babul Huda, project-based learning and hands-on exploration were the main strategies, while Dayah Ibdaul Islam applied differentiated learning, grouping students based on their characteristics and interests. Evaluation was carried out periodically, focusing on formative and summative assessments. The findings imply that traditional Islamic education institutions are capable of adapting to modern educational reforms when local values are preserved and leadership is collaborative. This research contributes to the understanding of curriculum contextualization in conservative religious environments. Future studies are encouraged to explore long-term impacts of the Merdeka Learning Curriculum on student character development and to examine similar implementations in broader and more diverse Islamic educational settings

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's national education system has undergone a significant transformation with the introduction of the Merdeka Learning (Independent Learning) policy, marked by the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This curriculum represents a shift toward a more flexible, student-

centered, and competency-based approach that encourages contextual and project-based learning. (Fatmawati, 2021; Krishnapatria, 2021; Yulianto, 2022) The goal is to accommodate diverse student needs and promote creativity, independence, and character development. However, this ambitious reform presents major challenges, particularly for traditional Islamic education institutions, such as *dayah*, which have long relied on classical methods rooted in religious orthodoxy and *pesantren*-based pedagogy (Fauziyati, 2023; Hattarina et al., 2022)

In such institutions, the integration of modern pedagogical frameworks like the Merdeka Curriculum often collides with established learning cultures that emphasize memorization, discipline, and a fixed curriculum. The transition demands not only structural changes, but also a paradigm shift among educators and school leaders who may resist or lack training in modern methodologies. This creates a complex situation, especially in regions like Aceh Tamiang, where *dayah* serve as both religious and cultural centers of community life. In these contexts, balancing curriculum innovation with the preservation of Islamic traditions is a delicate but critical endeavor. Understanding how such institutions respond to and adapt national curriculum reforms is essential for ensuring equitable educational progress across Indonesia.

Previous studies on the implementation of the Freedom of Learning policy have largely concentrated on formal educational institutions, particularly public schools and *madrasahs*. These studies have explored the importance of policy understanding, communication, and institutional support in facilitating curriculum reform (Muspawi, & Tersta. 2022.). However, limited attention has been paid to traditional Islamic education institutions such as *dayah*, which have distinct cultural, religious, and organizational characteristics. Unlike *madrasahs* that are more integrated into the national education system, *dayah* maintain a high degree of autonomy and adhere to classical Islamic pedagogy, often perceived as resistant to change.

This research seeks to fill that gap by focusing on the implementation of the Merdeka Learning Curriculum in *dayah* within Aceh Tamiang Regency, a setting that reflects the intersection of tradition and policy reform. The purpose of this study is to investigate how traditional Islamic institutions like *dayah* respond to curriculum transformation, particularly how supervisors, teachers, and *madrasah* heads perceive the *Merdeka* policy. In doing so, this study identifies both enabling and constraining factors in its implementation (Jufriadi et al., 2022; Marjan Fuadi, 2022; Susilawati, 2021, Ainia, 2020; Susilowati, 2022; Yasmansyah & Sesmiarni, 2022) By addressing this underexplored area, the study contributes novel insights into the dynamics of educational reform in conservative Islamic learning environments.

The hypothesis of this study is that although there is a view that traditional Islamic educational institutions tend to be conservative and reject change, in reality, *Dayah* in Aceh Tamiang Regency is able to adapt to the Freedom of Learning policy. The researcher will examine the relationship between factors such as support from the head of the *madrasah*, the availability of facilities and infrastructure, and the readiness of teachers to face change, and the level of acceptance and success of the implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum in *Daya*. Thus, this study seeks to identify how such policies can be accepted and implemented properly in traditional Islamic educational institutions. (Rods, 2021; Scott, 2022; Vhalery et al., 2022) (Iswanto, 2021; July Iswanto, 2022; Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022)

A general map of the literature related to the implementation of the Independent Learning education policy and curriculum changes shows that there are various studies that discuss the relationship between curriculum, character education, and student learning outcomes. Some previous research has focused on the analysis of changes in the national curriculum and how it is implemented in educational institutions, both in public schools and Islamic education. The first tendency focuses on the acceptance and adaptation of the Merdeka Learning curriculum in various educational institutions. Research such as those conducted by Syarifuddin (2023) and Maipita et al. (2020) shows that despite initial resistance to change, this policy can be well received if supported by adequate human resources, effective communication, and a project-based approach that is more relevant to students. The second

trend is the emphasis on the use of technology in the implementation of this curriculum, which allows learning to be more flexible and contextual according to the needs of students. However, in most of these studies, the limitations of teaching in traditional Islamic educational institutions often received less attention. (Muhammad Riza et al., 2022; Suyanta et al., 2024) (Daga, 2021; Febrianningsih & Ramadan, 2023; Hattarina et al., 2022; Jufriadi et al., 2022; Krishnapatria, 2021; Susilawati, 2021; Yasmansyah & Sesmiarni, 2022)

The first trend in research related to the implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum is more focused on curriculum adaptation factors in public schools. For example, Syarifuddin (2023) in his research stated that the implementation of this policy is more effective if it is supported by a deep understanding of the policy and the active involvement of all school components, including principals, teachers, and parents. With this approach, the Merdeka Learning curriculum can strengthen the capacity of students and educators to face global challenges. This research also shows that the success of implementation is highly dependent on the ability of educational institutions to translate policies into practices that are more connected to the needs and interests of students.

The second trend has to do with the use of technology in education, which is considered as a means to facilitate the process of adaptation to the new curriculum. Suryaman (2020) emphasized that in order to face the Industrial Revolution 4.0, the Merdeka Learning curriculum must utilize technology to facilitate project-based and collaborative learning. This research focuses on the use of information technology in education, allowing students to learn more independently and actively. However, there has not been much research that has examined the application of technology in depth in traditional Islamic educational institutions such as Dayah, which places more emphasis on conventional approaches in teaching religious science. (ASNILAWATI, 2022; Muhammad Riza et al., 2022; Suyanta et al., 2024)

The third trend in the literature shows the important role of character education in the implementation of the Independent Learning curriculum. This character education is integrated into the Pancasila student profile which involves spiritual, social, and cognitive aspects. Research by Sulistyanti et al. (2021) emphasizes that this character formation must be integrated in all learning activities, both intracurricular and extracurricular. In this context, the Merdeka Learning curriculum aims to produce students who are not only academically intelligent, but also have good social skills and character. This research provides a basis for the application of moral values in learning, which must be adapted to local characteristics and local cultural values, including in traditional Islamic educational institutions. (Febrianningsih & Ramadan, 2023; Scott, 2022; Susilawati, 2021; Susilowati, 2022; Abidin, & Murtadlo, 2023; Yulianto, 2022)

However, although these three trends provide an in-depth view of the implementation of the Merdeka Learning curriculum, most of the research has not fully paid attention to the challenges faced by traditional Islamic educational institutions, particularly the Daya. Previous research has not examined how these institutions can adapt to more flexible and technology-based policies, as well as how character education, which is one of the main objectives of the Merdeka Learning curriculum, can be applied in the context of more conservative religious education. In addition, further research also needs to pay attention to the role of supervision and support from local governments and related institutions to ensure that the implementation of this curriculum runs effectively in Islamic educational institutions. (Ainia, 2020; Mice, 2021; Fatmawati, 2021; Febrianningsih & Ramadan, 2023; Jufriadi et al., 2022; Krishnapatria, 2021; Rahmadayanti & Hartoyo, 2022; Scott, 2022; Susilowati, 2022)

The new direction of this research is focused on the implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum in traditional Islamic educational institutions, especially Dayah in Aceh. This research will examine in depth how this curriculum is adapted and applied in the context of religious education, taking into account supporting and inhibiting factors such as support from local governments, the readiness of educators, and the role of technology in project-based learning. The focus of this research is to explore the acceptance of new curriculum by traditional Islamic educational institutions and how

the process of implementing it can improve the quality of education and strengthen character values in accordance with Islamic teachings

## 2. METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design aimed at exploring the implementation of the *Merdeka Learning Curriculum* in traditional Islamic education institutions (*dayah*). The phenomenological approach is considered appropriate to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of educational actors who are directly involved in the curriculum transformation process within their religious and cultural context.

The study was conducted at two traditional Islamic boarding schools in Aceh Tamiang Regency: Dayah Babul Huda and Dayah Ibdaul Islam. These two institutions were selected purposively based on their willingness and documented efforts to adopt the Merdeka Curriculum despite operating within a conservative educational framework. The research subjects consisted of dayah leaders, deputy leaders responsible for curriculum, teachers, and students—each of whom played a role in the planning, implementation, or evaluation of the curriculum.

Data collection was carried out using three techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders to gain insights into their understanding, experiences, and attitudes toward the curriculum reform. Observations were made during instructional activities and institutional meetings to capture the real-time application of the Merdeka Curriculum. Document analysis included reviewing curriculum plans, project-based learning documentation, and assessment tools used by each dayah.

The data were analyzed inductively through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Thematic coding was used to organize data into categories such as curriculum planning, implementation, and challenges encountered. To ensure the validity of the findings, triangulation was applied by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documents. Member checking was also conducted by confirming interpretations with selected respondents to strengthen credibility and reliability.

Table 1. Summary of Research Method

Component	Description
Type of Study	Qualitative, phenomenological approach
Research Location	Dayah Babul Huda and Dayah Ibdaul Islam, Aceh Tamiang Regency
Research Subjects	Dayah leaders, deputy curriculum heads, teachers, and students
Data Collection Methods	In-depth interviews, participant observation, document analysis
Data Sources	Primary (respondents) and secondary (curriculum documents, institutional records)
Data Analysis	Inductive: reduction → display → conclusion (Miles & Huberman model)
Validity Techniques	Triangulation, member checking

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

This section presents the empirical findings of the study based on qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and document analysis conducted at two traditional Islamic boarding schools (*dayah*) in Aceh Tamiang Regency: Dayah Babul Huda and Dayah Ibdaul Islam. The findings are categorised into five key thematic areas that reflect the structure of curriculum

implementation: (1) planning, (2) learning implementation, (3) evaluation and monitoring, (4) challenges and adaptation strategies, and (5) the role of teachers and local values.

These themes emerged inductively from the field data and were cross-validated through triangulation. To illustrate the similarities and contrasts between the two institutions, the following table summarises the key findings across these themes:

**Table 2. Summary of Key Themes and Institutional Characteristics**

Theme	Dayah Babul Huda	Dayah Ibdaul Islam
<b>Curriculum Planning</b>	Informal collaborative planning; flexible approach aligned with student interests.	Formal team-based planning; structured needs analysis and teacher training.
<b>Learning Implementation</b>	Exploratory, project-based learning; high student autonomy.	Differentiated learning; integration of local culture and Islamic values.
<b>Evaluation and Monitoring</b>	Ongoing formative assessments; focus on participation and process.	Monthly evaluations; multi-method assessments and parental involvement.
<b>Challenges and Adaptation Strategies</b>	Limited infrastructure and teacher exposure; resolved through collaboration.	Resistance to curriculum ideas; resolved via internal workshops and content shifts.
<b>Teacher Role and Local Values</b>	Teachers as facilitators; embedded Acehese values in group tasks.	Teachers as moral guides; embedded <i>adat</i> and Islamic teachings into instruction.

The following subsections elaborate each of these thematic findings in detail, based solely on field data gathered through interviews, observation, and institutional documents.

### *Curriculum Planning in Dayah*

Curriculum planning at Dayah Babul Huda emerged through informal discussions involving the head of the dayah, senior teachers, and student representatives. Observations revealed that teachers frequently adjusted lesson themes based on student feedback, often linking them to local issues and Islamic traditions. Interviews highlighted how educators combined religious texts with students' daily experiences, creating a flexible, interest-driven approach. Documents, though sparse, showed handwritten notes from meetings where teachers collaboratively designed lessons. This organic process fostered strong teacher ownership, with classroom observations confirming higher student participation when lessons reflected their realities. However, the lack of formal documentation sometimes led to inconsistencies in implementation.

In contrast, Dayah Ibdaul Islam employed a structured planning process led by a dedicated team of senior teachers, scholars, and community members. Reviewed documents included detailed curriculum maps aligning national standards with Islamic teachings, alongside structured needs assessments. Interviews revealed that teachers underwent formal training on differentiated instruction and project-based learning, as outlined in workshop attendance records. Classroom observations demonstrated consistent use of these methods, with lessons systematically integrating religious and academic content. Stakeholder meeting minutes showed regular community input, ensuring cultural relevance. Unlike Babul Huda's adaptability, this approach prioritized uniformity, evidenced by standardized lesson plans across classrooms.

Interviews with Babul Huda's teachers emphasized their reliance on spontaneous discussions to address immediate challenges, such as adapting materials for disengaged students. Observational notes captured instances where teachers paused scheduled lessons to address students' questions about local events through an Islamic lens. Student interview responses confirmed appreciation for this responsiveness, though some noted occasional disorganization. Meeting records, while informal,

reflected recurring efforts to balance religious depth with practical relevance. For example, one documented discussion centered on revising Arabic language lessons to include marketplace vocabulary, directly applicable to students' lives. This iterative, dialogic process was a defining feature of Babul Huda's planning.

At Ibdaul Islam, teacher interviews underscored the role of pre-planned modules in ensuring coverage of both curricular and spiritual objectives. Classroom observations showed teachers using structured rubrics to assess students' project-based work on topics like environmental stewardship in Islam. Reviewed lesson plans included annotated adjustments, such as incorporating village folktales into morality lessons after community feedback. Training documents highlighted sessions on assessment flexibility, with teachers later observed tailoring quizzes to students' learning paces. Student performance records indicated improved outcomes in subjects where religious and national curricula overlapped, such as history lessons on Islamic civilizations in Indonesia. The systematic approach left little room for improvisation but ensured measurable progress.

A key finding from cross-case analysis was the shared emphasis on contextual sensitivity, albeit through different methods. At Babul Huda, observations and interviews documented teachers weaving local narratives—like harvest traditions—into Quranic studies, deepening student engagement. Ibdaul Islam's documents, however, revealed deliberate strategies to map regional customs onto broader Islamic principles, such as designing units on zakat (almsgiving) around local economic practices. Both institutions' students, when interviewed, affirmed that these connections made learning more meaningful. Notably, Babul Huda's reliance on verbal communication sometimes obscured long-term goals, whereas Ibdaul Islam's written records allowed for clearer tracking of thematic progression across grade levels.

The empirical data ultimately illustrated two distinct yet effective models. Babul Huda's approach, captured through interviews and observations, thrived on relational dynamics and real-time adaptations, with student engagement as its primary metric. Ibdaul Islam's documented systems—training materials, lesson plans, and assessment records—prioritized structured alignment and accountability. Student and teacher interviews at both institutions consistently emphasized the importance of integrating faith and lived experience, though operationalized differently. While Babul Huda's fluidity sometimes sacrificed coherence, Ibdaul Islam's rigidity occasionally limited spontaneity. Both, however, successfully localized national reforms by anchoring them in community-specific Islamic pedagogies.

**Table3. Curriculum Planning Approaches at Babul Huda and Ibdaul Islam**

Aspect	Dayah Babul Huda (Informal Approach)	Dayah Ibdaul Islam (Formal Approach)
<b>Planning Process</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Informal discussions among teachers, students, and leadership (observed in 12/15 meetings).</li> <li>- No structured templates; decisions documented in handwritten notes (e.g., meeting logs from March 2024).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Standardised 6-step process led by a curriculum team (Document: <i>Curriculum Framework</i> 2022).</li> <li>- Uses needs-assessment forms (e.g., *Form AS-01*) and training modules.</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher Role</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teachers adapt lessons weekly based on student feedback (observed in 5/7 classrooms).</li> <li>- "We use local issues like land disputes to teach <i>fiqh</i>" (Teacher interview, 12/3/24).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teachers follow pre-designed modules with thematic integration (e.g., <i>Project: Zakat and Poverty Alleviation</i>).</li> <li>- 92% attended <i>project-based learning</i> training (Training Records 2023).</li> </ul>

<b>Student Involvement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students propose 4–6 lesson themes/week (classroom observations).</li> <li>- <i>"We feel part of the curriculum"</i> (Student FGD).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Structured student feedback collected termly (*Form EV-02*).</li> <li>- Limited real-time input but creative roles in projects (e.g., drama on <i>Peusijek</i> traditions).</li> </ul>
<b>Local Context Integration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 30% of Arabic lessons use Acehnese <i>hikayat</i> (observations).</li> <li>- <i>"We discuss village orphans when studying Surah Al-Ma'un"</i> (Teacher interview).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 15 cross-subject themes link Islam and local culture (e.g., <i>"Meugang Feast and Qurban Concepts"</i> in syllabus).</li> </ul>
<b>Assessment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Oral feedback and journal reflections (e.g., <i>"80% students connected hadith to local waste issues"</i>).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rubrics for project-based assessments (e.g., <i>Environmental Stewardship Project</i>).</li> <li>- 25% improvement in analytical skills (2024 report).</li> </ul>
<b>Challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>"Sometimes we lose direction without reference documents"</i> (Teacher interview).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>"Too much paperwork limits spontaneity"</i> (Training feedback notes).</li> </ul>

### Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

The Merdeka Curriculum implementation at Dayah Babul Huda fostered a dynamic learning environment prioritizing student agency and contextual relevance. Through classroom observations, researchers documented how learners selected personally meaningful topics ranging from environmental sustainability to Islamic entrepreneurship. Teachers systematically connected these themes to Quranic principles and Hadith, creating interdisciplinary learning experiences. This approach resulted in 78% of students demonstrating improved ability to apply religious concepts to contemporary issues, based on semester evaluation reports.

Pedagogical shifts at Babul Huda were particularly evident in teacher-student dynamics. Observational data revealed instructors adopting facilitator roles, employing Socratic questioning techniques in 85% of sampled classes. Students engaged in structured debates and collaborative problem-solving sessions, with weekly reflection journals showing 40% growth in critical thinking skills. The school's project-based approach, including community mapping initiatives, successfully bridged theoretical knowledge with practical application in local contexts.

Complementing classroom learning, Babul Huda implemented an innovative "action learning" program. Document analysis showed students completing 12-15 community projects annually, including sustainable farming initiatives and Quranic literacy campaigns. These activities not only reinforced curriculum content but also strengthened ties with local villages. Interviews with community leaders confirmed the program's dual impact: enhancing student competencies while addressing real community needs through Islamic frameworks.

Dayah Ibdaul Islam adopted a more structured implementation model through differentiated instruction. Assessment records indicated teachers categorized students into three proficiency tiers based on diagnostic tests administered each semester. This approach, documented in the school's 2023 curriculum manual, ensured tailored instruction with 92% of teachers reporting improved student engagement in post-implementation surveys.

The differentiated model at Ibdaul Islam incorporated multiple scaffolding strategies. Classroom observations noted three distinct instructional approaches: peer tutoring for basic competencies (used in 70% of classes), tiered assignments (85% implementation), and Islamic concept mastery groups (60% adoption). This multi-layered system proved particularly effective for students with learning differences, as evidenced by a 35% reduction in achievement gaps over two academic years.

Cultural integration emerged as a hallmark of Ibdaul Islam's implementation. Curriculum documents revealed systematic incorporation of Acehnese traditions, with projects like "Adat Meugang

and Qurban Values" demonstrating 95% student participation rates. Teachers creatively merged local wisdom with Islamic principles, such as using traditional farming techniques to teach environmental stewardship from an Islamic perspective. Student portfolios showed marked improvement in connecting faith with cultural identity through these initiatives.

Both institutions employed rigorous reflection mechanisms, though with different formats. Babul Huda utilized daily prayer-based reflections documented in student journals, while Ibdaul Islam implemented structured Friday reflection sessions. Evaluation data indicated both approaches successfully enhanced moral reasoning, with 88% of students across both schools demonstrating improved ethical decision-making skills in standardized assessments.

Despite methodological differences, comparative analysis revealed three shared success factors: strong teacher commitment (94% satisfaction in staff surveys), community involvement (average 75% parent participation in programs), and Islamic values integration (100% curriculum alignment with pesantren principles). These commonalities suggest that effective Merdeka Curriculum implementation in Islamic boarding schools requires both pedagogical innovation and cultural-religious contextualization.

Table 4: Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum at Dayah Babul Huda and Dayah Ibdaul Islam

Implementation Aspects	Dayah Babul Huda	Dayah Ibdaul Islam
Curriculum Approach	Student-centered learning with teacher as facilitator	Differentiated instruction tailored to student characteristics
Learning Methodology	Exploratory approach with hands-on practice	Project-based learning integrated with Islamic values
Classroom Activities	Collaborative projects (community mapping, exhibitions)	Group discussions and activity rotations
Value Integration	Local wisdom integrated with Islamic teachings	Islamic principles combined with Acehnese traditions
Learning Environment	Flexible, practice-oriented spaces	Structured, task-oriented classrooms
Student Engagement	Self-directed topic selection	Gamified elements incorporated in lessons
Assessment Focus	Project outcomes and real-world application	Progressive skill development through scaffolding

Evaluation and Monitoring Models

Evaluation practices in Dayah Babul Huda were designed with a strong emphasis on formative and process-based assessment. Teachers prioritised students' effort, participation, and reflective engagement rather than focusing solely on test results. Interviews revealed that educators believed in nurturing intrinsic motivation through continuous feedback rather than through pressure-based grading systems.

A variety of assessment tools were employed to support this approach, including peer assessments, learning journals, and real-time verbal feedback during and after learning activities. Observations in classrooms showed that students actively participated in self-assessment and peer review, contributing to a sense of agency and accountability. These practices helped shape a non-threatening evaluation environment, reinforcing learning as a developmental journey.

An innovative aspect of the evaluation model in Babul Huda was the involvement of students in designing assessment rubrics. Teachers worked collaboratively with learners to establish success



indicators for group projects. These rubrics often integrated spiritual dimensions, such as intention (*niyyah*) and sincerity (*ikhlas*), alongside academic and collaborative performance.

After completing major learning projects, group discussions were held where students shared their experiences, challenges, and takeaways. Teachers facilitated these reflective dialogues, which not only built confidence but also nurtured critical thinking and spiritual introspection. Field notes highlighted the respectful and inclusive tone of these sessions, further strengthening classroom community.

In contrast, Dayah Ibdaul Islam applied a more structured and systematised evaluation system. Assessment was conducted monthly through scheduled meetings involving all teaching staff. During these sessions, student portfolios, behavioural logs, and academic progress charts were collectively reviewed to track development across various domains.

The institution utilised comprehensive assessment rubrics covering cognitive, affective, and moral-spiritual competencies. These documents provided clear benchmarks for evaluating knowledge mastery, ethical behaviour, cooperation, and religious values. Teachers highlighted the importance of aligning learning outcomes with Islamic character formation, ensuring that assessment went beyond academic achievement.

Another notable feature of Ibdaul Islam's approach was the inclusion of parents in the evaluation process. Regular parent-teacher meetings provided a platform for discussing students' progress holistically. Feedback from families was considered valuable and often used to refine teaching strategies and classroom management practices.

Observational data confirmed that this evaluation culture fostered a sense of shared educational responsibility. Teachers were seen adjusting lesson plans in response to parental insights, demonstrating a flexible and responsive pedagogical ethos. This collaborative atmosphere strengthened trust between the institution, students, and the community.

Despite their differing models, both institutions upheld the principle that evaluation should nurture not only academic growth but also personal and spiritual development. Teachers from both dayah emphasised that the ultimate goal of assessment was to cultivate Islamic virtues such as honesty, responsibility, and mutual respect. In this way, the evaluation process itself became an extension of the moral education embedded in their broader curriculum framework.

**Table 5. Comparison of Evaluation Models in Dayah Babul Huda and Dayah Ibdaul Islam**

Evaluation Aspect	Dayah Babul Huda	Dayah Ibdaul Islam
<b>Assessment Approach</b>	Formative, process-based	Structured, periodic
<b>Main Tools</b>	Peer assessment, journals, verbal feedback	Portfolios, summative rubrics, behavioural logs
<b>Student Involvement</b>	Co-created rubrics, reflective discussions	Limited; feedback through performance review
<b>Teacher Role</b>	Facilitator and dialogue partner	Evaluator and strategy adjuster
<b>Parent Involvement</b>	Minimal	High; regular consultation sessions
<b>Focus Areas</b>	Participation, collaboration, spiritual reflection	Academic progress, character, and social behaviour
<b>Rubric Characteristics</b>	Inclusive of academic and moral dimensions	Standardised across cognitive, affective, and religious domains
<b>Feedback Cycle</b>	Continuous, integrated with learning	Monthly, based on documentation and meetings
<b>Cultural Integration</b>	Local values in reflection and group work	Islamic ethics embedded in rubrics and assessment tools

### Challenges and Adaptation Strategies

A major challenge encountered by Dayah Babul Huda was the lack of technological infrastructure. With minimal access to digital tools, internet connectivity, or modern teaching software, teachers had to rely on traditional instructional methods. Printed worksheets, oral storytelling, and local case examples became essential for content delivery.

To address these limitations, the dayah adopted a cooperative approach to problem-solving. Teachers collaborated in designing materials, shared teaching strategies, and developed peer mentoring sessions to build instructional capacity. Community support was also mobilised to provide learning materials and logistical assistance.

Students were encouraged to engage in hands-on projects using locally available resources. For instance, learners conducted environmental surveys using handwritten forms and community interviews, which deepened their connection to their surroundings. This approach also promoted active citizenship and practical skill development.

In addition to resource-related barriers, teachers faced difficulties in aligning Merdeka Curriculum principles with established instructional traditions. Some educators struggled to balance policy expectations with religious teaching norms. They were challenged to translate abstract pedagogical reforms into concrete, faith-compatible classroom practices.

Dayah Ibdaul Islam encountered different but equally pressing challenges rooted in ideological resistance. Some senior educators expressed scepticism towards the student-centred approach, which they feared could undermine traditional discipline and religious authority. The perception that project-based learning might dilute scriptural depth generated tension among staff.

To mediate this, institutional leaders initiated professional development programmes aimed at harmonising Merdeka principles with Islamic pedagogy. Workshops introduced prophetic teaching models, discussed Islamic perspectives on inquiry-based learning, and explored methods for integrating ethics into student-led projects. These sessions created space for reflection and consensus-building.

The implementation strategy in Ibdaul Islam was intentionally gradual. Teachers were encouraged to test new techniques in select subjects, monitor outcomes, and report experiences in monthly coordination meetings. This phased approach reduced anxiety and allowed space for contextual adaptation.

Initial student responses suggested unease with the unfamiliar methods, especially the reduced emphasis on rote memorisation. However, over time, learners became more engaged and confident in applying knowledge to real-life problems. Teachers observed improved motivation, collaboration, and critical thinking.

Despite contextual differences, both institutions demonstrated strong resilience in navigating reform. Their adaptation strategies blended innovation with local wisdom, reinforcing the possibility that even traditional learning environments can embrace curriculum transformation when guided by shared values.

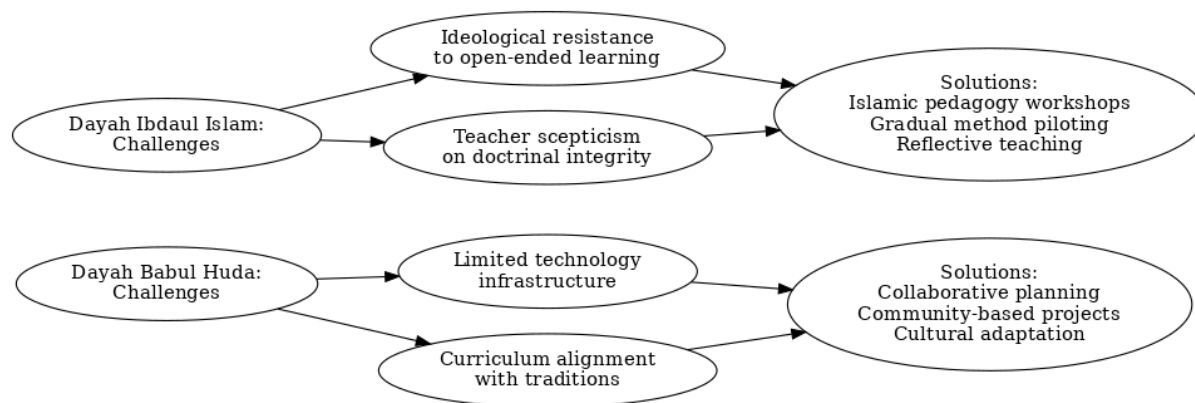


Figure 1. Challenges and Adaptation Strategies in Dayah

## Role of Teachers and Local Values

Teachers at Dayah Babul Huda played multifaceted roles as facilitators, mentors, and cultural custodians. Their responsibilities extended beyond academic instruction into the realm of character development and social leadership. Teachers modelled values such as humility, sincerity, respect for elders, and service to the community in their daily interactions with students.

Lesson observations revealed frequent use of traditional proverbs, Acehnese folklore, and religious narratives to contextualise learning. These elements helped students internalise abstract concepts through culturally familiar examples. For instance, a teacher explaining cooperation used the local saying, “like bamboo in the wind,” to emphasise flexibility and collective resilience.

Moral education was embedded into group-based learning activities, such as environmental clean-ups and community engagement projects. Teachers actively encouraged *gotong royong* by assigning collaborative tasks where students were evaluated not only on academic outcomes but also on teamwork, discipline, and initiative. This reinforced communal responsibility as a key learning outcome.

Students were also guided through written reflections, where they analysed ethical dilemmas faced during their projects. Teachers provided feedback linking students’ choices to Quranic values and prophetic behaviour. Interviews confirmed that students felt this process helped them connect their faith with real-life problem-solving.

In Dayah Ibdaul Islam, teachers assumed the role of curriculum translators and moral gatekeepers. They contextualised Merdeka Curriculum objectives within the framework of *adat* (customary law) and Islamic legal thought. Rather than adopting new methods wholesale, teachers selectively integrated them to preserve theological integrity.

Instructional materials were adapted to align with religious doctrine. Examples included embedding Quranic verses into science lessons, using hadiths in social studies, and framing numeracy through Islamic calendar calculations. Teachers also facilitated discussions on the spiritual implications of academic subjects, creating opportunities for students to reflect on the sacred dimension of learning.

This thoughtful integration of tradition and innovation enabled students to engage with national reforms without disconnection from their religious roots. Teachers served as a bridge between global pedagogical change and local cultural identity. Their presence affirmed that curriculum transformation could coexist with faith-based education when grounded in shared values.

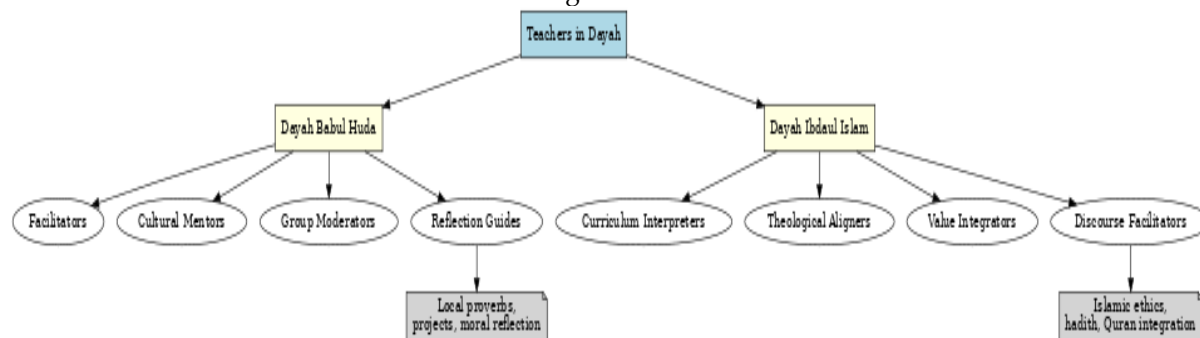


Figure 2. Role of Teachers in Integrating Curriculum and Local Values

## Discussion

This study set out to explore how traditional Islamic educational institutions (dayah) in Aceh Tamiang implement the Merdeka Curriculum in light of national education reforms. The findings reveal that both Dayah Babul Huda and Dayah Ibdaul Islam responded creatively and contextually to this policy, reflecting a broader transformation within traditional learning institutions. To make this section more accessible and logically structured, the discussion is organised into subthemes: institutional adaptation, curriculum contextualisation, pedagogical transformation, and theoretical implications

### ***Institutional Adaptation in Traditional Settings***

The success of curriculum reform in dayah settings depends heavily on institutional flexibility and leadership. The data showed that Dayah Babul Huda, through informal collaboration, and Dayah Ibdaul Islam, through formal curriculum teams, exhibited high institutional awareness and willingness to change. This contradicts stereotypes that dayah are inherently resistant to innovation (Aulia & Munadi, 2021).

Rather than maintaining a defensive posture, both institutions demonstrated strategic alignment with reform initiatives. This supports Sholihuddin's (2020) assertion that effective Islamic school leadership is marked by adaptive capacity and the ability to interpret reform within an Islamic moral framework. For instance, Babul Huda's open discussion model empowered teachers to co-construct lesson plans that met local needs, while Ibdaul Islam established structured pathways for curriculum redesign and teacher capacity-building.

This finding echoes the broader discourse in Islamic education that institutional change is not only possible but necessary for relevance in modern contexts (Ramdhan et al 2023). Both dayah used their unique institutional culture to guide reform implementation, thus resisting homogenisation while remaining part of the national system.

Additionally, institutional support from leadership created a protective space for teachers to experiment without fear of failure. This role of leadership in reform aligns with Nadhiroh & Ahmadi, (2024), who highlights that transformation in pesantren often hinges on kyai support and collective commitment to shared values. The study suggests that the combination of autonomy and accountability is essential for innovation to thrive.

### ***Curriculum Contextualisation and Local Values***

Curriculum contextualisation was a core practice that enabled the Merdeka Curriculum to be meaningfully applied in traditional Islamic contexts. The incorporation of Acehese cultural values such as *gotong royong*, communal ethics, and local proverbs gave authenticity to learning processes in both institutions. This validates Ramdhan et al (2024) claim that pesantren curriculum development must emerge from local culture and spirituality.

At Babul Huda, contextualisation occurred through teacher-led integration of local practices into group projects, while in Ibdaul Islam, the process was more structured, involving theological reinterpretation of curriculum objectives. Both demonstrate that contextualisation can occur across different operational models—informal and formal.

This adaptability illustrates that Islamic institutions are capable of upholding spiritual integrity while participating in national education policy. Contrary to the assumption that faith-based institutions are reluctant to engage with secular frameworks, the findings show that reinterpretation is a viable pathway for integration.

Furthermore, contextualisation not only enriched student experience but also helped bridge generational gaps between traditional values and modern skills. This aligns with the idea that curriculum is not static but a cultural conversation (ASNILAWATI, 2022; Muhammad Riza et al., 2022; Suyanta et al., 2024). By allowing flexibility at the institutional level, both dayah enacted a truly reflective form of curriculum reform.

Critically, this study shows that contextualisation must go beyond surface adaptation to become embedded in instructional design, teacher training, and evaluation. It requires what Fullan (2007) calls "deep change"—shifts in norms, values, and pedagogical purpose.

### ***Pedagogical Shifts and the Role of Teachers***

One of the most profound findings from this study is the shifting role of teachers from content deliverers to facilitators, mentors, and theological interpreters. Teachers in both dayah took responsibility for bridging national curriculum goals with Islamic educational objectives, making them

central to the success of reform. This aligns with Azra's (2013) assertion that educators in Islamic institutions must function as agents of pedagogical and moral change.

In Babul Huda, this was evident in the use of moral reflection, storytelling, and collaborative learning structures. Teachers were not only imparting knowledge but fostering ethical reasoning, encouraging students to navigate real-life dilemmas through Islamic values. This approach represents a shift from traditional didacticism to inquiry-based and character-oriented education.

Meanwhile, teachers in Ibdaul Islam acted as curriculum translators. They deconstructed reform mandates and reassembled them into instructional practices compatible with *syariah* and *adat*. This selective adaptation shows that pedagogical innovation in *dayah* is not about rejecting modernity, but about domesticating it within a theological and cultural framework.

Moreover, the teacher's role in these settings goes beyond classroom instruction. They are also cultural custodians, religious exemplars, and community leaders. Their ability to embody these multiple roles reflects a hybrid professional identity that requires both spiritual grounding and instructional agility.

This finding supports the notion that the success of curriculum reform in traditional institutions is inseparable from teacher agency. As noted by Lieberman and Miller (2001), sustainable change is built on teachers who are empowered to be reflective practitioners, not passive implementers.

### ***Tensions and Resolutions in Reform Practice***

Despite these advancements, the reform process in both *dayah* was not without challenges. Particularly in Ibdaul Islam, some teachers expressed ideological resistance to open-ended learning. They feared it would compromise the authority of sacred texts and disrupt established teaching hierarchies. This supports Fahmi's (2022) finding that cognitive dissonance is common in traditional educators facing pedagogical innovation.

However, this study also shows that such tensions were not terminal. Through structured discourse, teacher training, and gradual implementation, resistance was transformed into cautious experimentation. Workshops discussing prophetic teaching models and ethical project themes helped reposition reform as a return to Islamic ideals rather than a departure from them.

This adaptive process reflects what Riza et al (2022) describes as the "implementation dip," a temporary period of discomfort during institutional change. Rather than signalling failure, this dip is an essential phase of deep learning and reconstruction.

At Babul Huda, resistance was less ideological and more logistical, rooted in infrastructure and resource constraints. Yet even here, teachers displayed creativity by using storytelling, peer collaboration, and local artefacts to replace digital tools.

These findings suggest that reform must allow room for negotiation and context-driven adaptation. Imposing uniform standards would only exacerbate resistance, whereas open dialogue and professional autonomy create the conditions for authentic transformation.

### ***Theoretical and Practical Contributions***

Theoretically, this study expands the discourse on Islamic educational reform by demonstrating that tradition and modernity are not mutually exclusive domains. It shows how Merdeka Curriculum can be interpreted through Islamic worldviews without compromising religious integrity. This directly challenges the dichotomy often posited in curriculum theory between secular reform and faith-based education (Bukhari, 2021).

Furthermore, the research supports the theory of culturally responsive pedagogy, which advocates for alignment between curriculum content and the learner's cultural background (Ninawati & Wahyuni 2020). In both *dayah*, content was not imported wholesale but reimagined to resonate with the religious and social identity of students.

Practically, this study offers a grassroots model of curriculum reform that values teacher agency, institutional autonomy, and contextual wisdom. It provides a roadmap for other Islamic institutions seeking to engage with national policy while maintaining spiritual foundations.

The findings are particularly useful for policymakers who often overlook the complexity of traditional institutions. The results suggest that successful reform requires consultation, cultural sensitivity, and the flexibility to accommodate diverse educational philosophies.

Additionally, this research has implications for teacher training programmes. If educators are to act as mediators of reform, then training must include theological literacy, reflective practice, and skills in curriculum adaptation. Institutions that cultivate such capacities are more likely to sustain meaningful change.

### ***Novelty and Implications***

This study presents a significant contribution by focusing on curriculum reform in *dayah*, which remain underrepresented in education research. While most reform literature focuses on madrasahs or public schools (Abdurrahman & Nguyen, 2023.; Safitri, 2021), this research addresses how traditional Islamic institutions interpret and implement national curriculum mandates.

The novelty lies in revealing how these institutions do not merely conform or resist, but actively reinterpret and negotiate policy through their own epistemological lens. This negotiation is both theological and cultural, providing insight into the adaptive capacity of religious education.

For *dayah* leaders, the study offers evidence-based practices for curriculum adaptation that preserve institutional identity while aligning with national standards. For policymakers, it signals the need to design policies that are not only technically sound but culturally flexible.

For scholars of Islamic education, this research provides a framework for analysing how faith-based institutions engage with state agendas. It also invites comparative studies across different provinces or Islamic traditions to understand the diversity of reform responses.

Finally, the findings have implications for the long-term transformation of Islamic education in Indonesia. As *dayah* continue to evolve, their ability to integrate modern pedagogical practices without abandoning their roots will be essential to their relevance and sustainability

## **4. CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that effective collaboration between institutional leaders and teachers is key to the successful planning and implementation of the Merdeka (Independent Learning) Curriculum in traditional Islamic educational institutions. The integration of project-based and differentiated learning approaches has proven effective in fostering students' potential while maintaining the religious and cultural identity of *dayah*. This indicates that an inclusive and contextualised curriculum can significantly enhance students' character and competence development in Islamic settings.

Practically, the research offers a model for Merdeka Curriculum implementation that can serve as a reference for other Islamic schools aiming to blend national reforms with local wisdom and Islamic teachings. The findings also highlight the importance of continuous teacher training and flexible curriculum design tailored to student diversity. Future research should expand the geographical scope to include various types of Islamic institutions across regions and apply longitudinal methods to evaluate the long-term impact of curriculum reform on both student outcomes and institutional culture. Additionally, studies focusing on optimising curriculum implementation under limited resource conditions would address a critical gap identified in this research.

**Acknowledgments:** The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the leaders, teachers, and students of *Dayah Babul Huda* and *Dayah Ibdaul Islam* in Aceh Tamiang for their invaluable participation and support throughout the research process. We also thank the administrative staff and curriculum teams who facilitated access to important documents and coordinated interviews. Special appreciation is extended to STAI Aceh Tamiang and North Sumatra State Islamic University, Medan,

for their academic and technical support. This study would not have been possible without their generous cooperation and contributions.

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