



Policy Analysis of Merdeka Belajar: Implications for Curriculum Autonomy in Integrated Islamic Schools

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Abstract

The implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy promotes flexibility and autonomy in curriculum management; however, in the context of Integrated Islamic Schools, it presents challenges in integrating the national curriculum with Islamic values while maintaining educational quality. This condition requires curriculum autonomy to be managed in a way that ensures value-based quality assurance. This study aims to evaluate the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy and analyze its impact on curriculum quality autonomy in Integrated Islamic Schools using a policy analysis approach. This study employs a qualitative method with a case study approach, with data collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman. The findings indicate that the policy provides significant autonomy in curriculum development; however, its effectiveness is strongly influenced by school management capacity, curriculum leadership, and internal quality assurance systems. These findings imply the importance of strengthening institutional capacity and quality assurance systems to optimize policy implementation in Islamic-based schools.

INTRODUCTION

The evaluation of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy in the context of Integrated Islamic Schools indicates that, conceptually, this policy is designed to promote school autonomy in managing and developing curricula in accordance with students' needs and institutional characteristics; however, its implementation at the school level has not fully reflected this spirit of autonomy (Kause et al., 2025). Integrated Islamic Schools, which are characterized by an integrative curriculum combining national standards and Islamic values, continue to operate within a policy environment that emphasizes administrative compliance and uniform quality standards. This condition arises from the tension between the decentralization goals of education policy and quality control mechanisms that remain largely centralized. Empirical evidence can be observed in curriculum practices that prioritize document completion, conformity to instructional formats, and the fulfillment of administrative indicators rather than the development of contextual and innovative curricula (Mubarok et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2025). Consequently, curriculum quality autonomy tends to be interpreted

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procedurally rather than as a strategic opportunity to enhance learning quality in a sustainable manner aligned with the characteristics of Integrated Islamic Schools.

From a public policy perspective, the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* in Integrated Islamic Schools reveals that curriculum quality autonomy is not solely determined by regulatory frameworks that grant flexibility, but also by the internal capacity of schools to translate policy into curriculum management practices (Adilla, 2024; Gracia et al., 2025; Sayfullah et al., 2024). Schools with adaptive human resources, transformational leadership, and a strong quality culture are more capable of optimizing the opportunities provided by the policy. In contrast, schools with limited managerial readiness encounter difficulties in integrating the policy with their distinctive curriculum systems (Annabila et al., 2024). Empirical evidence also indicates disparities in implementation across schools, where some Integrated Islamic Schools are able to develop innovative and quality-oriented curricula, while others remain at a normative level. This finding underscores that the success of *Merdeka Belajar* depends on the synergy between policy design, institutional readiness, and sustained support for quality-based curriculum management.

The literature on the *Merdeka Belajar* policy suggests that it represents an educational reform aimed at strengthening school autonomy and flexibility in curriculum management. Several studies highlight that curriculum autonomy plays a crucial role in improving educational quality, as it enables schools to adapt learning processes to students' needs as well as social and cultural contexts (Parastu et al., 2023). From a quality management perspective, autonomy is not merely administrative freedom but also the capacity of schools to systematically and continuously plan, implement, and evaluate curricula. Studies on curriculum management in Integrated Islamic Schools emphasize that integrating national curricula with Islamic values requires adaptive leadership and a strong quality culture (Kurnia et al., 2024; Shofiyah et al., 2023; Suprayitno & Moefad, 2024). However, policy studies also reveal a persistent gap between policy intentions and implementation practices, largely due to the dominance of administrative approaches. Therefore, a policy analysis approach is relevant to evaluate the impact of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy on curriculum quality autonomy and the effectiveness of curriculum management in Integrated Islamic Schools.

The novelty of this study lies in its in-depth analysis of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy by positioning curriculum quality autonomy as the central focus within the context of Integrated Islamic Schools. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine policy implementation or general pedagogical innovation, this research explores the relationship between policy design, implementation mechanisms, and institutional capacity in managing value-based curriculum quality. Through a policy analysis approach, this study identifies the gap between the normative objectives of *Merdeka Belajar* and actual practices at the school level, while also highlighting the roles of leadership, quality culture, and administrative dynamics in shaping curriculum autonomy. Thus, this study provides both conceptual and practical contributions to educational policy development and curriculum management in Islamic-based schools.

The urgency of this study is grounded in the need to critically examine the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy in relation to strengthening curriculum quality autonomy in Integrated Islamic Schools. While the policy conceptually promotes decentralization and flexibility, empirical evidence indicates a gap between its normative goals and operational realities at the school level. Given its novelty in positioning curriculum quality autonomy as the primary analytical focus, this study is important for understanding how policy design is translated into value-based curriculum management practices. Furthermore, the limited integration of policy analysis and quality management perspectives in existing studies on Integrated

Islamic Schools reinforces the significance of this research as both an academic and practical reference. The findings are expected to contribute to the advancement of educational policy studies and provide strategic recommendations for policymakers and school leaders in strengthening curriculum autonomy and sustaining educational quality improvement. Therefore, this study aims to critically analyze the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy and its impact on strengthening curriculum quality autonomy in Integrated Islamic Schools through a policy analysis approach.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative method with a case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy and its impact on curriculum quality autonomy in a *pesantren*-based secondary school. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows a comprehensive and contextual exploration of policy processes, institutional settings, and the dynamics of educational decision-making. This research is evaluative in nature and applies a policy analysis approach, focusing on examining the alignment between policy objectives, implementation mechanisms, and their impact on curriculum management practices at the school level (Bishop & Kuula-Lummi, 2017; Collins & Stockton, 2018; Flick, 2014).

The study focuses on a secondary school operating within an Islamic boarding school environment, characterized by the integration of the national curriculum, Islamic curriculum, and *pesantren* traditions within a unified educational system. This institutional context plays a significant role in shaping how the *Merdeka Belajar* policy is interpreted and implemented, particularly in terms of curriculum flexibility, quality management autonomy, and value-based decision-making (Engkizar et al., 2023; Hasanah & Haris, 2023; Nasser et al., 2022; Sabiruddin et al., 2021).

The units of analysis include the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy at the school level, curriculum management practices, and mechanisms of curriculum quality autonomy within a *pesantren*-based educational context. Data were obtained from primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected from purposively selected key informants, including school leaders and curriculum coordinators. Secondary data were derived from policy documents, curriculum documents, teaching modules, internal quality evaluation reports, and relevant educational regulations (Collins & Stockton, 2018; Engkizar et al., 2025; Ghasemi, 2023; McLeod, 2015; Mortelmans, 2019).

Data collection techniques consisted of in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted to explore the perspectives and strategies of policy actors in implementing the policy, while observations were used to examine curriculum management and instructional practices. Document analysis was carried out to assess the consistency between policy design and its implementation in practice.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, including data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The analysis was conducted iteratively throughout the research process to ensure continuous validation of findings. Within the policy analysis framework, the study identifies gaps between policy design, implementation, and their impact on curriculum quality autonomy. The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through triangulation of sources, methods, and time to enhance credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Ath-Thukhi et al., 2022).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The *Merdeka Belajar* policy expands curriculum autonomy in Integrated Islamic Schools, but its implementation remains semi-structural

The *Merdeka Belajar* policy is normatively designed to expand school autonomy in managing curricula in accordance with students' needs and institutional characteristics. In the context of Integrated Islamic Schools, this policy is viewed as a strategic opportunity to strengthen the integration of the national curriculum with Islamic value-based curricula (Darise, 2021; Sayfullloh et al., 2024; Utomo & Rizqa, 2024). However, the findings indicate that although this autonomy is formally granted, its implementation at the school level remains semi-structural. Schools have flexibility in curriculum planning and enrichment, yet they remain bound by regulatory and administrative frameworks established by the government, such as learning outcomes, national assessments, and standardized reporting systems. As a result, curriculum autonomy has not fully transformed into substantive autonomy in quality-based decision-making.

Empirical findings further show that, despite opportunities for curriculum innovation aligned with institutional vision, implementation practices remain constrained by structural policy frameworks, particularly in assessment and administrative aspects. This condition is reflected in the statement of one informant as follows:

...The Merdeka Belajar policy provides space for schools to develop curricula in line with their Islamic vision; however, in practice, we are still required to follow established frameworks, especially regarding assessment and administration, so this autonomy is not yet fully realized... (Informant)

These findings suggest that the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* in Integrated Islamic Schools lies between autonomy and structural control, resulting in a form of autonomy that is more administrative than pedagogical. Thus, while the policy opens opportunities for autonomy, it has not fully enabled schools to achieve independence in managing curriculum quality optimally.

This condition can be interpreted as a form of *bounded autonomy*, in which autonomy is granted within the limits of state regulatory frameworks. From a public policy perspective, this indicates that the decentralization of curriculum promoted by *Merdeka Belajar* has not yet led to substantive autonomy, but rather remains at an administrative level. These findings are consistent with the theory of *school-based management* (Mørch et al., 2018), which emphasizes that school autonomy significantly improves educational quality only when schools possess real authority in pedagogical decision-making, rather than merely administrative freedom. In this context, Integrated Islamic Schools are given space to develop curricula aligned with Islamic values, yet this authority remains constrained by assessment standards, learning outcomes, and national accountability systems.

From a quality management perspective, this condition indicates that semi-structural curriculum autonomy is insufficient to drive sustainable quality improvement. (Liu et al., 2023) argues that quality enhancement requires strong internal control and data-driven decision-making at the organizational level. When strategic authority remains dominated by external structures, schools face limitations in developing contextual quality assurance systems. Therefore, these findings highlight that the success of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy in improving curriculum quality in Integrated Islamic Schools largely depends on the extent to which administrative autonomy can be transformed into substantive pedagogical autonomy.

The *Merdeka Belajar* policy enhances learning flexibility but has not fully supported internal quality assurance systems

The *Merdeka Belajar* policy is fundamentally designed to provide greater flexibility for educational institutions in managing the learning process so that it

becomes more contextual, adaptive, and student-centered. In practice within Islamic schools, this flexibility is reflected in teachers' autonomy to select instructional methods, utilize diverse teaching media, adjust formative assessments, and integrate Islamic values into learning activities (Alias et al., 2024; Fatiroh & Sukhoiri, 2024). The findings indicate that this policy has successfully created broader opportunities for pedagogical innovation compared to previous curriculum policies. Teachers and school administrators experience greater freedom in designing learning processes that align with students' needs and institutional characteristics.

However, this increased learning flexibility has not been accompanied by a systematic strengthening of internal quality assurance systems (Chen et al., 2022; Topping et al., 2022). The findings reveal that although there is greater variation in teaching methods and assessment practices, mechanisms for monitoring, continuous evaluation, and data-driven follow-up remain sporadic and are not integrated into a comprehensive quality assurance cycle. Flexibility tends to be interpreted as individual pedagogical freedom rather than as part of an institutional strategy for quality improvement. Consequently, emerging instructional innovations are not yet systematically measured in terms of their impact on curriculum quality and student learning outcomes. This condition suggests that *Merdeka Belajar* is more effective in promoting flexibility at the level of instructional practice, but has not fully strengthened sustainable internal quality governance within schools.

Table 1. Learning Flexibility and Internal Quality Assurance Systems in Integrated Islamic Schools

Aspect Examined	Empirical Findings	Field Evidence
Learning method flexibility	Teachers have autonomy to select methods (project-based learning, discussion, contextual learning)	Lesson plans and teaching modules are designed variably according to class characteristics
Assessment flexibility	Formative and alternative assessments are more widely applied	Teachers use portfolios, reflections, and project-based assessments
Learning monitoring	Not conducted systematically or on a scheduled basis	Evaluation depends on individual teacher initiative
Curriculum quality evaluation	Not integrated into an internal quality assurance cycle	No data-based curriculum evaluation documents based on student outcomes
Follow-up for quality improvement	Incidental and not planned for the long term	Instructional improvements are made without standardized quality benchmarks

The implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy in Integrated Islamic Schools is more effective in promoting pedagogical flexibility at the level of instructional practice than in strengthening institutional internal quality assurance systems. The flexibility provided by this policy has created opportunities for teachers to innovate in selecting instructional methods, developing teaching materials, and applying more contextual formative and alternative assessments. This is reflected in the variation of lesson plans, teaching modules, and assessment forms that are tailored to classroom characteristics and students' needs. Thus, *Merdeka Belajar* can be considered successful in shifting the learning paradigm from a standardized approach toward more adaptive and student-centered learning (Ainia, 2020).

However, the findings indicate that this flexibility has not been accompanied by a structured and sustainable internal quality assurance system. Evidence from monitoring practices, curriculum quality evaluation, and follow-up improvement efforts shows that evaluation remains largely dependent on individual teacher initiative rather than on integrated institutional mechanisms (Anjani et al., 2023; Siregar et al., 2024; Suhartono, 2021). The absence of a clear quality cycle ranging from planning, implementation, and evaluation to data-driven improvement makes it

difficult to comprehensively measure the impact of instructional innovations on curriculum quality and student learning outcomes. In other words, high levels of pedagogical flexibility do not automatically lead to quality improvement without strong internal quality governance (Ajith et al., 2022; Del-Río-Carazo et al., 2022).

Based on these findings, this study argues that the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* in Integrated Islamic Schools remains in a transitional phase, where the policy is interpreted more as individual pedagogical freedom than as an institutional strategy for quality enhancement. This argument is supported by evidence showing that, despite increased variation in instructional practices, schools have not yet established standardized quality benchmarks or consistent data-based evaluation systems. Therefore, the findings suggest that the success of *Merdeka Belajar* in improving educational quality depends not only on learning flexibility but also on the capacity of schools to integrate such flexibility into systematic and sustainable internal quality assurance systems (Simatupang & Yuhertiana, 2021).

The lack of alignment between pedagogical innovation and structured internal quality assurance can be interpreted as a gap between instructional flexibility and institutional quality governance. From an educational quality management perspective, pedagogical flexibility will only have a significant impact on quality improvement when it is integrated into a systematic quality assurance framework. Deming (1986), through the concept of continuous quality improvement, emphasizes the importance of a clear cycle of planning, implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement (Plan–Do–Check–Act). When monitoring and evaluation practices rely primarily on individual teacher initiatives, as identified in this study, instructional innovations tend to become fragmented and difficult to evaluate comprehensively. Furthermore, these findings align with the theory of Total Quality Management in education (Liu et al., 2023), which asserts that quality cannot be achieved solely through individual creativity but must be institutionalized through robust systems, standards, and a strong quality culture. The absence of data-driven curriculum evaluation mechanisms indicates that the flexibility promoted by *Merdeka Belajar* has not yet been fully internalized as an institutional strategy for quality improvement.

In conclusion, these findings highlight that high levels of pedagogical flexibility do not automatically result in improved learning quality. Without a structured internal quality assurance system, instructional innovations risk lacking direction and sustainability (Moslimany et al., 2024; Mukarromah et al., 2025; Öpengin & Sezerel, 2023). Therefore, strengthening internal quality governance is a critical prerequisite for ensuring that the flexibility offered by the *Merdeka Belajar* policy can contribute meaningfully to sustained improvements in curriculum quality and student learning outcomes.

The integration of the national and Islamic curricula has improved, but has not been accompanied by strengthened curriculum management capacity

The integration of the national curriculum and Islamic value-based curriculum in Integrated Islamic Schools has shown significant improvement following the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy. Schools have greater flexibility to combine national learning outcomes with Islamic components, such as Qur'an memorization, character development, and the habituation of religious practices, within both curriculum structures and classroom instruction (Rahmat, 2024). The findings indicate that this integration is no longer merely symbolic but has been implemented at the level of curriculum planning and classroom practice. Teachers are encouraged to link general subject content with Islamic values, while schools strive to align their religious vision with national education standards.

However, this increased level of curriculum integration has not been accompanied by adequate strengthening of curriculum management capacity. This

condition is reflected in the statement of one informant as follows:

...*Conceptually, we have integrated the national curriculum with the Islamic curriculum, but in practice, the management process is still developing, as not all teachers share the same understanding of curriculum management...* (Informant)

These findings indicate that curriculum integration is often implemented at a practical level within classroom instruction without being supported by a standardized managerial framework. This suggests that although integration has improved, curriculum management capacity particularly in terms of data-driven planning, teacher coordination, and continuous evaluation has not developed proportionally. As a result, curriculum integration continues to face governance-related challenges, which may limit its effectiveness in enhancing learning quality in a sustainable manner.

This condition can be interpreted as a gap between curriculum innovation and institutional governance readiness. From a curriculum management perspective, integration involves not only the combination of content but also systematic planning, coordination among educators, consistent implementation, and data-based evaluation. (Print, 2020) emphasizes that curriculum effectiveness is highly dependent on a school's managerial capacity to manage the curriculum cycle comprehensively, from planning to evaluation. When integration primarily occurs at the classroom level without a structured management framework, as identified in this study, it tends to be sporadic and reliant on individual teacher initiatives.

Therefore, these findings highlight that improving curriculum integration requires strengthening curriculum management capacity in a comprehensive manner. Without strong governance particularly in data-driven planning, teacher collaboration, and continuous evaluation curriculum integration risks losing its effectiveness as a sustainable strategy for improving educational quality.

CONCLUSION

The *Merdeka Belajar* policy has expanded the scope of autonomy for Integrated Islamic Schools in curriculum management, learning flexibility, and the contextual integration of national and Islamic values. However, the findings indicate that this autonomy remains within the framework of *bounded autonomy*, as it continues to be constrained by state regulations, particularly in terms of learning standards, assessment, and administrative accountability.

Pedagogical flexibility has developed at the level of instructional practice, yet it has not been systematically integrated into curriculum management and internal quality assurance systems. This suggests that quality autonomy has not been fully realized in a substantive sense, but remains largely administrative and partial. Conceptually, this study highlights that the success of educational policy implementation is not solely determined by the expansion of autonomy, but also by the institutional capacity to manage such autonomy in a systematic and sustainable manner. Therefore, strengthening curriculum governance, educational leadership, and data-driven monitoring and evaluation systems is essential for transforming administrative autonomy into substantive pedagogical autonomy.

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