



IMPLEMENTATION OF THE P5–PPRA MODEL IN PRESERVING GAYONESE CULTURAL IDENTITY IN CENTRAL ACEH MADRASAHs

Tathahira

IAIN Takengon, Aceh, Indonesia

Email: tathahira92@gmail.com

Abstract: The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in madrasahs requires the integration of the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) with the *Rahmatan lil 'Alamin* Student Profile (PPRA), particularly within local cultural contexts. However, limited studies have examined how the P5–PPRA model is implemented in culturally distinctive regions such as Central Aceh. This study aims to analyze the implementation levels of the Merdeka Curriculum and the design of local wisdom-based P5–PPRA projects in three madrasahs: MAN 2 Aceh Tengah, MTsN 1 Aceh Tengah, and MIN 8 Aceh Tengah. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with six participants (three principals and three teachers). The findings reveal three levels of curriculum implementation: *mandiri belajar*, *mandiri berubah*, and *mandiri berbagi*. Key challenges include teacher readiness, varying pedagogical interpretations, and limited supporting resources. The local wisdom projects emphasize Gayo language revitalization, traditional culinary practices, and cultural dances. This study highlights the originality of integrating the P5–PPRA framework with Gayo cultural preservation and provides practical implications for culturally responsive curriculum implementation in madrasahs.

Keywords: *Kurikulum Merdeka*, Local Wisdom, Project Activities, P5-PPRA

Abstrak: Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka di madrasah menuntut integrasi antara Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) dan Profil Pelajar *Rahmatan lil 'Alamin* (PPRA), khususnya dalam konteks budaya lokal. Namun, kajian mengenai penerapan model P5–PPRA di wilayah yang memiliki kekhasan budaya, seperti Aceh Tengah, masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis tingkat implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka serta desain proyek P5–PPRA berbasis kearifan lokal pada tiga madrasah, yaitu MAN 2 Aceh Tengah, MTsN 1 Aceh Tengah, dan MIN 8 Aceh Tengah. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan teknik wawancara mendalam terhadap enam partisipan (tiga kepala madrasah dan tiga guru). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya tiga tingkat implementasi kurikulum, yaitu *mandiri belajar*, *mandiri berubah*, dan *mandiri berbagi*. Tantangan utama meliputi kesiapan guru, perbedaan interpretasi pedagogis, serta keterbatasan sumber daya pendukung. Proyek kearifan lokal yang dikembangkan berfokus pada revitalisasi bahasa Gayo, kuliner tradisional, dan tarian budaya Gayo. Penelitian ini menegaskan kebaruan integrasi kerangka P5–PPRA dengan pelestarian budaya Gayo serta memberikan implikasi praktis bagi pengembangan kurikulum madrasah yang responsif terhadap konteks budaya.

Kata Kunci: Kearifan Lokal, Kegiatan Proyek, Kurikulum Merdeka, P5-PPRA

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37249/assalam.v10i1.951>

Received: 05 October 2025; **Revised:** 08 May 2026; **Accepted:** 15 July 2026

To cite this article: Tathahira, T. (2026). IMPLEMENTATION OF THE P5–PPRA MODEL IN PRESERVING GAYONESE CULTURAL IDENTITY IN CENTRAL ACEH MADRASAHs. *Jurnal As-Salam*, 10(1), 12–29. <https://doi.org/10.37249/assalam.v10i1.951>

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INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum represents a significant shift in Indonesia's educational reform agenda, emphasizing institutional autonomy, differentiated learning, and character development. In madrasahs under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, this reform requires not only the adoption of the Pancasila Student

Profile (P5) but also its alignment with the Rahmatan lil ‘Alamin Student Profile (PPRA), which reflects the distinctive religious and cultural identity of Islamic education (Director of Curriculum, Facilities, Institutions, and Student Affairs, Directorate General of Islamic Education, 2022). This dual integration presents both pedagogical opportunities and contextual challenges, particularly in regions with strong local cultural traditions.

Through this reform, madrasahs are encouraged to manage learning more independently and creatively to respond to social change and the growing demands of technological and scientific development. The broader objective is to strengthen graduate competencies so that madrasah students can develop competitive skills comparable to those in public schools, including technological literacy and adaptive learning competencies (Muslimin, Arsyadana, & Bimasbuqin, 2023). In line with these goals, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes not only intracurricular learning but also co-curricular activities through project-based learning (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

Within this framework, Regulation No. 56/M/2022 introduces the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5)* as a key co-curricular mechanism to strengthen student character and competencies (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). In madrasahs, this mechanism must be contextualized through PPRA to ensure consistency with Islamic educational culture and values (Director of Curriculum, Facilities, Institutions, and Student Affairs, Directorate General of Islamic Education, 2022). One essential dimension promoted in the curriculum is local wisdom, which encourages schools to adapt learning to local contexts and cultural identities. This approach is consistent with the principle of curriculum diversification, which encourages educational institutions to adjust curriculum content based on regional potential and student needs (Muin et al., 2022).

Previous studies have documented various challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly related to teacher readiness, variation in curriculum interpretation, and institutional capacity (Muslimin, 2023). Other studies emphasize that integrating local cultural values into learning can strengthen identity formation, cultural appreciation, and students’ understanding of Indonesia’s diverse heritage (Ali & Mulasi, 2023). However, empirical research remains limited regarding how the P5–PPRA model is implemented in madrasahs located in culturally distinctive regions, especially outside Java. Moreover, many studies focus either on policy frameworks or general implementation issues without examining how local ethnic identity is preserved through project-based learning grounded in local wisdom.

Central Aceh Regency provides an important context for this investigation. The region is predominantly inhabited by the Gayo ethnic community, whose language, cultural arts, and traditions represent a valuable cultural heritage. Cultural values in Aceh have historically been transmitted across generations through family traditions, religious learning, storytelling, and formal education (Mulasi, 2021). Yet, increasing modernization and cultural shifts among younger generations raise concerns about the continuity of local cultural identity. The Merdeka Curriculum, through its emphasis on local wisdom and project-based learning, offers a strategic opportunity to integrate cultural preservation into formal madrasah education (Muin et al., 2022; Ali & Mulasi, 2023).

Based on this context, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) To what extent has the Merdeka Curriculum been implemented in madrasahs in Central Aceh?; (2) How are P5–PPRA projects designed to integrate local wisdom, particularly Gayonese cultural identity?; (3) What challenges and strategies characterize the implementation process?

This research contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it provides empirical evidence from madrasahs in Aceh, a region that remains underrepresented in studies of curriculum reform. Second, it examines the integration of the P5–PPRA framework with local ethnic culture, highlighting how project-based learning can function as a mechanism for cultural preservation. Third, it offers practical insights for culturally responsive curriculum implementation in Islamic educational institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in madrasahs cannot be understood solely as a policy transition; rather, it represents a systemic transformation involving curriculum management, pedagogical adaptation, and contextual integration. Previous studies on curriculum implementation emphasize that successful reform depends not only on regulatory frameworks but also on institutional planning, stakeholder involvement, and pedagogical readiness. To provide context and theoretical grounding, this section presents a review of previous relevant studies, organized around the following thematic point:

Curriculum Implementation and Institutional Management

Research on curriculum implementation highlights the importance of strategic planning and institutional management. Supriyati, Nyoman, and Miyono (2023) demonstrate that effective implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile project requires comprehensive planning processes, including teacher competency mapping, infrastructure assessment, stakeholder coordination, and documentation development. Their findings suggest that curriculum reform is not merely instructional but organizational in nature.

Similarly, Imron (2023) emphasizes that strategic management plays a crucial role in improving madrasah education quality during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Their study underscores the importance of institutional readiness, particularly the integration of digital-based learning systems, which enable teachers to design more adaptive and innovative project-based activities. These findings indicate that curriculum reform demands both pedagogical transformation and managerial restructuring within educational institutions.

Furthermore, stakeholder engagement is identified as a critical factor in project-based learning implementation. Rasmani et al. (2023) show that parental involvement significantly enhances the effectiveness of project-based learning in early childhood education settings. Their study suggests that curriculum implementation benefits from collaborative partnerships between schools and communities. Collectively, these studies highlight that curriculum implementation requires strategic planning, institutional leadership, and community participation.

Challenges in Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

Despite policy support and institutional efforts, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum faces substantial challenges. A recurring theme in the literature concerns teacher readiness and interpretation of the curriculum. Azzahra and Muhajir (2023) found that teachers experience difficulty aligning instructional materials, assessment strategies, and learning models with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. This issue is compounded by inconsistent understanding among educators, which affects curriculum fidelity.

Muslimin (2023) further identifies disparities in teacher participation in official training programs, leading to fragmented dissemination of curriculum knowledge within madrasahs. Variations in interpretation often result in uneven implementation across institutions. In addition, the integration of technology, a core feature of 21st-century learning promoted in the Merdeka Curriculum, poses additional challenges. Limited technological proficiency, infrastructure constraints, and insufficient training hinder effective project-based learning (Nurhayati, Emilzoli, & Fu'adiyah, 2022).

These findings collectively suggest that curriculum reform is not automatically translated into effective classroom practice. Rather, implementation is shaped by institutional capacity, teacher competency, and contextual constraints. However, most of these studies focus on general implementation challenges without examining how curriculum reform interacts with local cultural contexts.

Strategies for Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum

In addressing the challenges outlined above, several strategies have been proposed and implemented to ensure the effective execution of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. One of the practical concerns in implementing the P5–PPRA project-based learning is financial sustainability. Suggest that parental involvement is essential, both in terms of participation and financial contribution. When activities are co-organized with parents, implementation costs can be reduced while simultaneously enhancing community engagement in school programs.

Aisyah, Arisanti, and Yaqin (2023) conducted a study that offers valuable insight into effective strategies for implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Their findings recommend the following approaches: (a) a phased adaptation process to the new curriculum model; (b) provision of high-tech learning tools and assessments; (c) accessible self-directed teacher training and learning resources; (d) engagement of curriculum specialists and expert facilitators (High Touch); and (e) development of student learning communities.

Nevertheless, while numerous studies address the general implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, relatively few focus specifically on the development of P5–PPRA projects rooted in local wisdom. Moreover, most of the research discussed above has been conducted in madrasahs located on the island of Java. To date, little scholarly attention has been given to the curriculum's implementation in Sumatra, particularly in the Aceh region.

This study thus aims to fill this critical gap by contributing to the academic discourse and broadening the range of references available on the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in madrasahs within the Province of Aceh, especially in Central

Aceh Regency. It is hoped that the findings of this research will enrich scholarly understanding and provide relevant contextual insights into the local adaptation of the national curriculum.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Context

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly the design of P5–PPRA project-based learning rooted in local wisdom. A qualitative design was chosen because the study seeks to understand participants’ experiences, interpretations, and institutional practices within their natural educational contexts (Creswell, 2018).

The research was conducted in Central Aceh Regency, a highland region in Aceh Province predominantly inhabited by the Gayo ethnic community. Three madrasahs were purposively selected to represent different educational levels: MIN 8 Aceh Tengah (primary level), MTsN 1 Aceh Tengah (junior secondary level), and MAN 2 Aceh Tengah (senior secondary level). These schools were selected because they had officially implemented the Merdeka Curriculum during the 2023/2024 academic year.

The participants consisted of six informants: three principals and three teachers (who also serve as vice principals for curriculum affairs). The participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in curriculum planning and P5–PPRA project implementation. The teachers had between 8 and 20 years of teaching experience, and all participants held at least a bachelor’s degree in education or related fields. This selection ensured that the data were obtained from individuals with institutional authority and practical experience in curriculum implementation.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between March and May 2024. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow flexibility while maintaining focus on key research themes, including curriculum implementation stages, project design, challenges, and strategies.

An interview guide was developed based on the research questions and relevant literature on curriculum implementation and local wisdom integration. The guide included open-ended questions such as: (1) How has the Merdeka Curriculum been implemented in your madrasah?; (2) How are P5–PPRA projects designed to integrate local wisdom?; (3) What challenges have emerged during implementation?; and (4) What strategies have been adopted to address these challenges?

Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face at the participants’ respective schools. With participants’ consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim to ensure data accuracy. To enhance data credibility, the researcher also reviewed relevant institutional documents, such as curriculum operational plans (KOM) and P5–PPRA project reports, to triangulate interview findings.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis process involved several systematic steps. First, all interview transcripts were read repeatedly to gain an overall understanding of the data. Second, initial coding was conducted by identifying

meaningful units related to curriculum implementation levels, project design, challenges, and strategies. Codes were assigned to specific segments of text that reflected recurring patterns or significant statements.

Third, similar codes were grouped into broader categories. For example, codes such as “teacher misunderstanding,” “inconsistent interpretation,” and “limited training participation” were categorized under “teacher readiness challenges.” These categories were then organized into major themes aligned with the research questions, such as implementation stages, institutional challenges, and cultural integration strategies.

Finally, themes were interpreted by linking empirical findings with existing theoretical perspectives on curriculum reform, Islamic education, and local wisdom integration. This iterative process ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the data while being theoretically informed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the empirical findings derived from in-depth interviews with six informants (three principals and three teachers) from MIN 8 Aceh Tengah, MTsN 1 Aceh Tengah, and MAN 2 Aceh Tengah. The findings are organized around two major themes aligned with the study’s objectives: (1) levels of Merdeka Curriculum implementation; (2) challenges experienced in curriculum and project implementation; and (2) local wisdom integration through P5–PPRA projects.

Levels of Merdeka Curriculum Implementation across Three Madrasahs

Interviews show that the Merdeka Curriculum has been implemented in the three madrasahs since the first semester of the 2023/2024 academic year. However, participants reported different implementation levels and institutional readiness.

1. MIN 8 Aceh Tengah (Mandiri Belajar).

Informants described MIN 8 as being in an early adaptation stage. The school still relies on several elements of the 2013 Curriculum while gradually adopting Merdeka Curriculum principles. Participants emphasized that curriculum adjustment is ongoing, particularly in teachers' understanding of curriculum components and project planning.

“At this stage, we still use several components of the 2013 Curriculum, but we have started to integrate elements of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in project-based learning activities.” (Principal of MIN 8 Aceh Tengah)

2. MAN 2 Aceh Tengah (Mandiri Berubah).

Participants stated that MAN 2 has moved beyond the initial stage and has begun implementing core elements of the Merdeka Curriculum, such as preparing teaching modules and aligning learning outcomes with objectives. Informants also noted increased internal collaboration among teachers to support curriculum planning.

“At the beginning, many teachers were still trying to understand how CP (Capaian Pembelajaran), TP (Tujuan Pembelajaran), and ATP (Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran) should be structured. However, through internal discussions and collaboration among teachers, we gradually developed a shared

understanding and started to design learning modules together.” (Vice Principal for Curriculum Affairs, MAN 2 Aceh Tengah)

3. MTsN 1 Aceh Tengah (Mandiri Berbagi).

Informants described MTsN 1 as the most advanced among the three schools. Participants explained that the institution not only implements the curriculum but also shares practices externally. For example, the principal and vice principal were invited as facilitators in curriculum guidance activities conducted outside the school.

“After implementing the Merdeka Curriculum for some time, our madrasah was invited by the provincial training center to share our experiences with other schools. In several training sessions, we explained how we designed teaching modules, organized P5–PPRA projects, and coordinated teachers during the transition to the new curriculum.” (Principal, MTsN 1 Aceh Tengah)

To clarify the comparison across sites, Table 1 summarizes the implementation status based on participants’ reports.

Table 1. Summary of *Merdeka Curriculum* implementation (interview-based)

Madrasah	Reported Level	Main Indicators Mentioned by Informants
MIN 8 Aceh Tengah	<i>Mandiri Belajar</i>	Partial adoption; gradual adjustment; still using several K13 elements
MAN 2 Aceh Tengah	<i>Mandiri Berubah</i>	Development of KOM/modules; alignment of CP–TP/ATP; stronger teacher coordination
MTsN 1 Aceh Tengah	<i>Mandiri Berbagi</i>	Sharing practices; invited as facilitators; mentoring and cross-madrasah collaboration

Challenges and Strategies in Implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*

Across the three madrasahs, informants consistently identified challenges related to teacher readiness, student readiness, and limited resources to support project-based learning.

Teacher readiness and differences in interpretation.

Participants reported that not all teachers interpreted curriculum directions and project implementation in the same way. It created differences in planning approaches and sometimes slowed coordination.

“Since we are still in the early stage of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, not all teachers fully understand how to design the projects or interpret the curriculum guidelines in the same way. Sometimes each teacher has a different approach when planning learning activities, so we need more coordination to align our understanding. In addition, collaboration with parents is also important, especially for project activities, but building that communication and involvement is still a gradual process for us.” (Teacher, MIN 8 Aceh Tengah)

Student readiness and engagement.

Informants also mentioned differences in student readiness to participate actively in project-based learning. Some students were described as enthusiastic, while others needed more guidance and motivation.

“When we started implementing project-based learning, we noticed that students responded differently. Some of them were very enthusiastic because the projects allowed them to explore ideas and work collaboratively. However, other students still needed more guidance and motivation from teachers, especially in managing their tasks and participating actively in group discussions.” (Teacher, MAN 2 Aceh Tengah)

Infrastructure and learning resources.

Some participants noted limitations in facilities, internet access, learning materials, or local cultural references needed to design P5–PPRA projects linked to Gayo culture.

“One of the main challenges we face is the limited learning facilities. For example, our computer laboratory is still very limited, so teachers cannot always rely on digital resources when preparing learning activities or projects. In addition, materials related to local culture, especially Gayo traditions, are not always available in the form of structured modules, so teachers often need to search for information independently or adapt materials from various sources.” (Teacher, MIN 8 Aceh Tengah)

In general, the primary challenges encountered by madrasahs in implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* revolve around teacher competencies and student readiness. These findings are consistent with broader national concerns and are not unexpected. Within the framework of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, the role of educators has undergone a significant transformation, from applying uniform, standardized teaching methods to cultivating independent, lifelong learners. As such, teachers are no longer positioned merely as transmitters of knowledge but are instead expected to function as mentors, facilitators, and coaches in student-centered learning environments. The curriculum emphasizes project-based learning (PjBL), making the mindset and preparedness of educators a critical challenge in its implementation (Mulyono & Sulistyani, 2022).

It is further compounded by infrastructural limitations, particularly the lack of access to adequate learning facilities and technology. Soleha and Muhajid (2024) acknowledge that, during the early stages of implementation, there was a limited and fragmented understanding of the concepts and principles underpinning the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Similarly, Sucipto et al. (2024) identify a number of persistent obstacles, including underdeveloped school infrastructure, the insufficient capacity of teachers to integrate technology into instruction, the ambiguity surrounding assessment mechanisms, and external challenges such as parental involvement, student motivation, school environment, and uneven government support or mentorship.

More specifically, teachers at MTsN 1 Aceh Tengah reported difficulties in selecting appropriate project themes and finding relevant resources to support project activities. Another recurring issue is the divergent perceptions among teachers regarding how to plan and execute project-based activities. Saragih and Marpaung (2024) confirm

these findings, noting discrepancies and misunderstandings among educators concerning the *Pancasila Student Profile (P5)* projects and differentiated instruction models. Such inconsistencies often result in internal friction among staff and confusion for students.

Interestingly, their study also highlights disparities in the availability of teaching resources, particularly for marginalized groups. For instance, teaching materials for Christian Religious Education were found to be significantly lacking, in contrast to the more abundant resources available for Islamic Religious Education. A parallel issue arises in the context of madrasahs in the Gayo Highlands, where teachers wishing to implement P5-PPRA (Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Rahmatan lil Alamin) based on local Gayo wisdom face limited access to literacy materials and cultural references. This scarcity of localized educational resources presents a major hurdle for teachers, who are now expected, and in some cases required, to actively explore, curate, and develop contextualized reading materials and instructional resources relevant to their students' cultural backgrounds (Saragih & Marpaung, 2024).

Strategic Approaches to the Implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*

When the *Merdeka Curriculum* was officially introduced, its implementation was not mandated without accompanying guidelines. The Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology issued Ministerial Decree No. 56/M/2022 on *Guidelines for Curriculum Implementation in the Context of Learning Recovery*, specifically regulating the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* beginning in the 2022/2023 academic year. The decree outlines initial strategies and guidance for schools to independently adopt the curriculum, including: (1) Provision of the *Merdeka Belajar* digital platform for teachers and school principals; (2) A series of webinars attended by educators and education leaders; (3) The formation of *Learning Communities* that enable collaborative learning about the curriculum; (4) Access to expert practitioners or certified resource persons; (5) Utilization of the helpdesk service to seek further information; and (6) Initiating partnerships with development stakeholders to support the implementation process (Badan Standar, Kurikulum dan Asesmen Pendidikan, 2022).

Furthermore, the Ministry proposed a strategic scheme encompassing multiple aspects such as the adoption roadmap for curriculum implementation, the provision of ICT-based instructional tools, open access to educational videos for teachers, empowering *Guru Penggerak* (change-agent teachers), and strengthening professional learning communities (Solehudin et al., 2024).

In the specific context of this research, where madrasahs as educational institutions under the authority of the Ministry of Religious Affairs are also required to implement the *Merdeka Curriculum*, the Ministry issued Ministerial Decree No. 347 of 2022 concerning *Guidelines for the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Madrasahs*. These guidelines propose the following strategies:

First Strategy: Active Implementation of Curriculum Planning Training

Madrasahs are encouraged to conduct intensive technical guidance (bimtek), training sessions, and workshops to prepare teaching materials and understand the fundamental elements of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. One effective approach is to engage in self-directed learning through designated platforms such as

<https://sikurma.kemenag.go.id>, <https://pintar.kemenag.go.id>, and the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar (PMM)*.

Additionally, schools are advised to seek assistance from experienced practitioners and curriculum consultants, particularly in designing essential institutional documents such as the *Madrasah Operational Curriculum (KOM)*. Importantly, technical guidance should evolve beyond passive formats and be transformed into hands-on workshops that actively engage participants. In this process, resource persons should not merely deliver materials but take a leading role in guiding teachers through the curriculum design and implementation procedures.

Although intensive mentoring cannot be completed within a short time frame, its outcomes are generally more optimal. This strategy was applied in the *Sekolah Penggerak* (Driving Schools) program initiated by the Ministry of Education, where each participating school was assigned one dedicated facilitator for a specific period. Educational institutions are also encouraged to adopt this approach independently by utilizing available resources, such as school supervisors, experienced teachers or principals, and external partners like university lecturers involved in community service programs.

Second Strategy: Core Content Training of the Merdeka Curriculum

The primary topics that require focused training include: differentiated instruction, the new learning paradigm, assessment and evaluation techniques, learning outcomes (*Capaian Pembelajaran* or CP), learning objectives (*Tujuan Pembelajaran* or TP), learning trajectory (*Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran* or ATP), and the project-based components of the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5) and *Profil Pelajar Rahmatan lil Alamin* (PPRA).

Third Strategy: Establishing a Curriculum Development Team

The curriculum development team, often referred to as the *learning committee*, plays a key role, especially in madrasahs with a larger teaching staff. This committee is responsible for initiating and designing the curriculum and for overseeing the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* through internal training and coordination within the institution.

Fourth Strategy: Gradual Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

The implementation must be flexible, tailored to the specific needs and characteristics of students and the institution. Hence, curriculum documents, particularly the *Madrasah Operational Curriculum* (KOM), should be viewed as dynamic and revisable. Adjustments can be made mid-semester if necessary, especially within components such as learning planning and instructional organization. Likewise, the development of teaching modules need not be completed at the beginning of the academic year but may be adapted over time to reflect the current conditions of the madrasah.

Fifth Strategy: Periodic Institutional Reflection

Reflection is an integral aspect of the *Merdeka Curriculum* implementation process. Schools should facilitate regular and ongoing reflective practices for teachers, allowing them to assess current strategies and plan improvements tailored to student and

institutional needs. Thematic reflections can be based on the school's priorities or aligned with emerging national education topics, as long as they remain relevant to curriculum goals.

Sixth Strategy: Preparation for the P5-PPRA Project Implementation

Within the KOM document, the implementation of P5-PPRA (Project to Strengthen the Profile of Pancasila and Rahmatan lil Alamin Students) is part of the educational planning. To execute it effectively, a dedicated team and a customized module are required. It includes determining project themes and selecting appropriate dimensions from both the *Pancasila Student Profile* and the *Rahmatan lil Alamin* framework. This project is also aligned with the goal of holistic character education (*Keputusan Menteri Agama No. 347/2022*).

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that the strategies currently employed by the three madrasahs in Central Aceh Regency align well with the official guidelines and implementation stages of the *Merdeka Curriculum* set forth by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. These efforts include:

1. Enhancing teacher capacity and competency through webinars, workshops, and socialization programs offered via platforms like *SIKURMA* and *PINTAR Kemenag*;
2. Benchmarking visits to more advanced schools or madrasahs already at the *Mandiri Berbagi* (Independent Sharing) implementation level;
3. Ongoing collaboration through learning communities such as *MGMP* (Subject Teacher Forums) both within and beyond the madrasah environment;
4. And most importantly, continuous revision and improvement of project-based learning activities and other *Merdeka Curriculum* programs are already in place.

Local Wisdom Integration through P5-PPRA Projects

Findings show that local wisdom was prioritized as an early project theme in all three madrasahs. Informants explained that the main reason for selecting local wisdom was concern about the continuity of Gayo cultural identity among students.

Forms of Local Wisdom Projects

Participants reported different project designs based on school level and feasibility:

1. MIN 8 Aceh Tengah:

Projects focused on tangible products such as traditional Gayo cuisine and local handicrafts:

“For the local wisdom project, we encouraged students to explore cultural products that are familiar in their daily lives. In groups, they prepared traditional Gayo foods and created simple handicrafts that represent local culture. Through this activity, students not only learned about the cultural meaning behind these products but also practiced collaboration and creativity during the project process.” (Teacher, MIN 8 Aceh Tengah)

2. MTsN 1 Aceh Tengah:

Projects emphasized Gayo language revitalization through daily use, performance, or assignments related to vocabulary and oral expression.

“In our P5-PPRA project, we focused on revitalizing the Gayo language because many students rarely use it in their daily communication. Teachers

designed activities such as vocabulary assignments, short dialogues, and storytelling sessions using the Gayo language. One activity we introduced was kekeberen, a traditional storytelling practice in Gayo culture where elders convey moral values and life lessons through stories. By adapting this practice in classroom activities, students were encouraged to speak Gayo while also learning the cultural values embedded in those stories.” (Teacher, MTsN 1 Aceh Tengah)

3. MAN 2 Aceh Tengah:

Projects included cultural exposure activities such as cultural performances, documentation of traditions, or visits.

“For the P5–PPRA project, we designed activities that allowed students to directly experience and observe local cultural heritage. Some groups documented traditional Gayo customs and cultural practices, while others prepared cultural performances to present what they had learned. We also organized visits to cultural sites, such as traditional Gayo houses and local museums, so students could see how these traditions are preserved. Through these activities, students became more aware of their cultural identity and showed greater appreciation for the traditions of the Gayo community.”

(Principal, MAN 2 Aceh Tengah)

Perceived outcomes (as reported by informants).

Participants noted that students showed increased awareness of local culture and stronger engagement when projects were connected to daily life and community traditions. Findings from the three madrasahs in this study indicate that *local wisdom* was the first theme selected for project implementation. This decision was based on the perceived importance of integrating local wisdom into the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Local wisdom is believed to significantly enhance students’ learning motivation and engagement (Leuwo, Asep & Helmi, 2024). Moreover, it fosters independent learning experiences and encourages students to discover their unique learning characteristics, thereby supporting the principles of differentiated instruction (Sutrisno et al., 2020; Azis et al., 2024).

One of the major reasons behind this thematic choice was the urgency of preserving Gayo culture, which teachers at all three madrasahs considered essential. Within Indonesia’s educational system, the integration of cultural values can be pursued through five key goals: preserving national character, fostering pride in cultural heritage, strengthening national unity, preventing social disintegration, and producing graduates who can compete in the global marketplace (Elan, Sapriya & Abdulkarim, 2018; Sakman et al., 2024).

At MIN 8 Aceh Tengah, project activities focused on product-oriented tasks, such as showcasing Gayo traditional cuisine and handicrafts. These activities serve as an effective means of optimizing the *Merdeka Curriculum* for students. According to the research of Shofyana, Aditama, and Wibisana (2024), product-based projects themed around local wisdom, such as making traditional batik, snacks, and crafts, directly

develop students' creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and the effective implementation of project-based learning.

Similarly, MTsN 1 Aceh Tengah initiated a project on the revitalization of the local language (*Bahasa Gayo*), emphasizing the importance of linguistic preservation as a component of cultural heritage. The impact of globalization has posed a threat to local cultures, including the decline of regional language speakers due to intergenerational gaps in language transmission (Mulasi, 2020). Within the *Merdeka Curriculum*, integrating local wisdom either through project activities or local-content subjects such as regional language instruction provides numerous benefits: strengthening students' cultural identity, shaping character, deepening self-awareness, enhancing social skills, nurturing national pride and patriotism, and cultivating a sense of responsibility to preserve local culture (Ali & Mulasi, 2023).

Discussion

Variation in Merdeka Curriculum Implementation Levels in Central Aceh Madrasahs

This study indicates that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Central Aceh madrasahs is not uniform. The three institutions reflect different implementation levels: *mandiri belajar*, *mandiri berubah*, and *mandiri berbagi*, which suggests that curriculum reform progresses through stages shaped by institutional readiness and organizational capacity. This pattern supports the view that the Merdeka Curriculum is intended to be adopted gradually, allowing schools to adjust based on their contextual needs and internal preparedness (Mulyono & Sulistyani, 2022). The variation found in this study also implies that the implementation level is not merely a technical label but a reflection of how far a madrasah has developed planning mechanisms, teacher collaboration, and institutional confidence to operationalize the curriculum.

Teacher Readiness and Divergent Curriculum Interpretation as Key Constraints

The findings show that teacher readiness remains a central issue in Merdeka Curriculum implementation. Informants described differences in teachers' understanding of project-based learning and curriculum components, which may lead to inconsistency in planning and classroom execution. It aligns with prior studies indicating that teachers often face challenges in selecting learning resources, determining appropriate learning strategies, and aligning assessment with Merdeka Curriculum expectations (Azzahra & Muhajir, 2023). Muslimin (2023) similarly highlights that uneven participation in training and limited socialization can result in fragmented knowledge transfer within madrasahs, producing varied interpretations across teachers. In practice, these disparities may slow implementation and create internal coordination challenges, particularly when project-based learning requires shared planning and integrated execution across subjects.

Resource Limitations and the Need for Contextually Relevant Learning Materials

In addition to teacher factors, this study underscores the continuing role of infrastructural and resource constraints in shaping curriculum implementation. Consistent with Nurhayati, Emilzoli, and Fu'adiah (2022), limitations in technology mastery, inadequate internet access, and ineffective training formats can restrict teachers' ability to implement learning innovations. Importantly, in Central Aceh, the challenge is not only

access to general teaching resources but also the scarcity of culturally relevant references for designing local wisdom projects based on Gayo heritage. This finding reinforces the argument that curriculum implementation is inseparable from the availability of instructional materials that fit both the curriculum framework and the sociocultural setting of learners.

P5–PPRA and Local Wisdom as a Framework for Cultural Preservation in Madrasahs

A key contribution of this study is its focus on the integration of P5 and PPRA through projects rooted in local wisdom. The findings suggest that local wisdom projects are not merely extracurricular activities but function as a practical bridge between national character education goals and the religious-cultural orientation of madrasahs. It supports arguments that embedding cultural values in the curriculum can strengthen students' identity formation, develop cultural appreciation, and foster social responsibility (Ali & Mulasi, 2023). The project themes reported in this study, such as Gayo language revitalization, traditional culinary practices, and cultural dance, reflect concrete ways in which madrasahs can preserve local heritage while simultaneously developing competencies targeted in the Merdeka Curriculum. In this sense, local wisdom projects can be interpreted as culturally responsive curriculum enactment, where students' learning experiences are linked to their everyday cultural environment.

Institutional Strategies and Their Implications for Sustainable Implementation

The strategies reported by participants, such as teacher capacity-building workshops, collaborative learning communities, benchmarking, and periodic evaluation meetings, demonstrate the importance of institutional leadership and structured support systems in sustaining curriculum reform. It aligns with findings that curriculum implementation benefits from organized planning, stakeholder coordination, and continuous professional learning (Supriyati et al., 2023; Rasmani et al., 2023). Aisyah, Arisanti, and Yaqin (2023) emphasize phased adaptation and continuous support as effective approaches, which resonates with the gradual implementation observed in the participating madrasahs. Overall, these strategies imply that successful implementation requires both technical preparedness and an organizational culture of reflection and improvement, especially when schools are expected to design complex P5–PPRA projects that integrate national goals, Islamic values, and local culture.

Practical and Theoretical Implications of the Study

Practically, the findings suggest that strengthening Merdeka Curriculum implementation in madrasahs requires targeted teacher development, especially in project-based learning design and culturally responsive pedagogy. It also requires institutional support for creating or curating culturally relevant learning resources, particularly in regions with distinctive ethnic traditions such as Central Aceh. Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by showing how the integration of P5–PPRA can operate as a dual character-education framework in Islamic schools while simultaneously functioning as a mechanism for local cultural preservation. It extends existing research that often treats curriculum implementation, Islamic education values, and local wisdom as separate topics, rather than as interacting dimensions within one educational model.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in madrasahs in Central Aceh reflects a staged and context-dependent process shaped by institutional readiness, teacher capacity, and resource availability. The identification of three implementation levels: *mandiri belajar*, *mandiri berubah*, and *mandiri berbagi* indicates that curriculum reform in Islamic educational institutions progresses gradually rather than uniformly. These variations reveal that successful implementation is influenced not only by policy directives but also by organizational culture, collaborative practices, and local leadership.

A central contribution of this research lies in its empirical examination of how the P5–PPRA framework is operationalized through local wisdom-based projects within a culturally distinctive region. The integration of Gayo cultural elements such as traditional cuisine, handicrafts, language revitalization, and cultural heritage visits demonstrates that project-based learning can function as a practical mechanism for preserving local identity while fulfilling national curriculum objectives. This finding extends existing studies on curriculum reform by showing how Islamic character education (PPRA), national character formation (P5), and local cultural preservation can intersect within a single educational model.

Practically, the study highlights the importance of sustained teacher professional development, institutional collaboration, and the development of culturally relevant learning resources to support effective curriculum implementation. For policymakers and educational leaders, the findings suggest that structured mentoring systems and localized curriculum adaptation are essential to ensure that the Merdeka Curriculum is not implemented merely administratively but meaningfully within diverse sociocultural contexts.

However, this study is limited by its relatively small number of participants and its focus on three madrasahs within a single regency. The findings therefore reflect specific contextual conditions in Central Aceh and may not be fully generalizable to other regions. Future research may expand the scope by involving a larger number of madrasahs across different provinces, employing mixed-method approaches, or examining longitudinal impacts of P5–PPRA projects on students' cultural identity and character development.

Overall, this study affirms that integrating local wisdom into the Merdeka Curriculum in madrasahs is not only pedagogically feasible but also socioculturally significant. In the context of Islamic education, culturally responsive curriculum implementation can serve as a strategic pathway for strengthening both national character formation and the preservation of local heritage in an era of rapid social change.

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