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# The Suitability of the Curriculum with Student Learning Problems at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah: Systematic Literature ReviewAspect Research Findings

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum changes require madrasah ibtidaiyah (MI) to ensure that the curriculum design addresses the learning needs and problems of students, but the synthesis of evidence regarding this alignment is still limited. This research aims to map the learning problems of MI students, assess the curriculum's alignment with these problems, and identify supporting factors, hindering factors, and reinforcement strategies. This systematic literature review follows the PRISMA 2020 guidelines with inclusion criteria for empirical studies in MI, published from 2021 to 2026. Nine studies were analyzed thematically. The results show that learning problems are concentrated on basic literacy (beginning reading and Arabic reading and writing), numeracy (story problems and data processing), as well as motivation and environmental factors. The curriculum alignment is partial: principles of flexibility and differentiation. The Merdeka Curriculum is relevant, but its implementation is hindered by the readiness of teachers, the preparation of teaching materials, diagnostic assessments, and facilities. Supervisory support, digital platforms, and family support are contributing factors. The conclusions are still limited due to the small number of studies, descriptive design, and the absence of studies directly examining the relationship between the curriculum and learning outcomes.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Madrasah ibtidaiyah (MI) is a basic education unit under the Ministry of Religious Affairs that combines general and religious subjects. The students' learning load includes literacy, numeracy, as well as mastery of the Arabic language and Islamic Religious Education (PAI) materials. Madrasahs only started implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in the 2022/2023 academic year, so the experience of its implementation is still relatively new and needs to be monitored in various regions (Imron, 2023). A good curriculum should address the needs and learning problems of students, not just be implemented according to the documents. Research in MI consistently reports real learning problems. Beginning reading difficulties were found in lower-grade students (Ihsanda & Khair, 2022); difficulties in solving story problems and processing statistical data were found in mathematics learning (Aliyah & Fanirin, 2022; Supriatin et al., 2023), and reading and writing in Arabic remain fundamental challenges (Mukhlis & Ulinnuha, 2023; Kusumaning et al., 2022). A study at an MI in Bandung reported that 46.6% of students in grades IV–V fall into the category of high learning difficulties, with Arabic being the most difficult subject (Desi Fitriani et al., 2024). Studies at the elementary and middle school levels also map the types and causes of learning difficulties (Fatah et al., 2021; Novitasari & Fathoni, 2022; Nurani et al., 2021), and the simple view of reading framework distinguishes reading difficulties in the decoding and language comprehension components (Hoover, 2024). The closure of schools during the pandemic further widened the achievement gap, especially among students from less fortunate backgrounds (Engzell et al., 2021),

resulting in greater diversity in learning readiness in the classroom. The study of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in MI focuses heavily on the readiness and challenges faced by teachers. A study in a pilot MI reported constraints such as limited experience, learning resources, facilities, and understanding of assessments (Imron, 2023); a study in Mataram City noted difficulties for teachers in preparing teaching materials and conducting diagnostic assessments (Mulabbiyah et al., 2024). Diagnostic assessments are viewed as strategically important in supporting differentiated learning, but their implementation still needs to be strengthened (Evita Nadia et al., 2026). Reviews of differentiated learning in MI (Anwar & Sukiman, 2023), a systematic review of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by religious teachers in high schools (Jasiah et al., 2024), and studies at other levels (Muhammad Amin et al., 2025; Digna et al., 2023; Ulfa Laelatul Fitriah et al., 2025; Yoto et al., 2024) enrich the understanding of the implementation. International literature discusses differentiation as a way to tailor learning to the diverse needs of students (Goyibova et al., 2025; Melesse & Belay, 2022), examines its impact on learning outcomes (AM et al., 2023), and emphasizes the role of teacher qualifications, experience, and self-efficacy in its implementation (Shareefa, 2023; Woodcock et al., 2022).

Research gap. Studies on the learning problems of MI students and studies on the implementation of the curriculum in MI have developed along separate paths. Studies on learning problems generally stop at describing the difficulties and their causes, while studies on curriculum implementation stop at teacher readiness and administrative constraints. In the review of this study, no systematic review has been found that brings both together, namely assessing the extent to which curriculum components (objectives, content, process, and assessment) address the learning problems experienced by MI students. As a result, it is still unclear whether the students' learning difficulties are due to the curriculum design, the quality of its implementation, or factors outside the curriculum, and policymakers do not yet have an honest evidence map of the strengths and limitations of the available knowledge. The novelty of this study lies in (1) mapping learning problems and curriculum components within a single alignment matrix, (2) synthesizing supporting and inhibiting factors at the levels of teachers, madrasahs, and families, and (3) explicitly reporting the limitations of the evidence. This study compiles a systematic literature review (SLR) to answer three research questions: (RQ1) what learning problems are experienced by MI students based on previous research; (RQ2) how well does the curriculum implemented in MI align with the needs and learning problems experienced by students; and (RQ3) what are the supporting and inhibiting factors for the alignment between the curriculum and the learning problems of MI students, as well as what strategies can be used to address them.

## 2. METODE

### Design and reporting guidelines

This research is a qualitative SLR reported following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) and using the step-by-step SLR guide in the field of education (Ghamrawi et al., 2025). The study selection flow was organized following the PRISMA flow diagram format (Haddaway et al., 2022). The research questions are RQ1–RQ3 as formulated in the introduction section.

### Search strategy

The search was conducted in October 2026 through academic web search engines and national journal portals (including Garuda and OJS journal pages). Keywords were compiled in Indonesian and English, such as "madrasah ibtidaiyah" with "learning difficulties," "Kurikulum Merdeka," "diagnostic assessment," "differentiated learning," learning difficulties, and curriculum implementation. The articles found were examined for their titles, abstracts, and article pages; the full text was read if accessible.

### Inclusion and exclusion criteria

**Table 1.** Inclusion and exclusion criteria

| Aspect | Inclusion | Exclusion |
|---|---|---|
| Context | Students, teachers, or madrasahs at the MI level in Indonesia | Other levels (elementary school, junior high school, senior high school, vocational school, university) |
| Focus | Student learning problems and/or curriculum implementation that is relevant to student learning needs | Purely conceptual study without empirical data; literature review |
| Time and type | Journal article 2021–2026 | Thesis, proceedings without DOI, article without active DOI |
| Language | Indonesia or England | Other languages |

Studies from other levels and literature reviews are not counted as included studies. These studies are only used as background and comparison in the introduction and discussion sections.

### Study selection

The selection was conducted in two stages, namely the screening of titles and abstracts, followed by the assessment of eligibility based on the text or article pages. The number of records at each stage [Insert According To Author's Search Log: identified records, duplicates removed, screened, excluded with reasons] is presented in the PRISMA flow diagram. The studies that met all the criteria numbered nine, and this number is consistently used throughout all sections of the article (abstract, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion).

### Data extraction and synthesis

The extracted data includes study identity, design, subjects and locations, focus on learning problems, discussed curriculum aspects, as well as reported factors and strategies. Data were synthesized using thematic analysis: initial codes were grouped into themes according to RQ1–RQ3, and then mapped into a matrix of alignment between learning issues and curriculum components. Formal bias risk assessment was not conducted because the study designs were very diverse. The strength of the evidence is assessed narratively based on design, sample size, and location diversity, and the results of this assessment are used to limit claims in the results and discussion sections.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

## RESULTS

### Characteristics of the included study

Nine studies met the inclusion criteria (Table 2). Eight studies were published from 2022 to 2024 and one in 2026. The design is generally descriptive or qualitative, with one mixed-methods study (Amin et al., 2022). Identifiable locations are spread across Central Java, West Java, West Nusa Tenggara, Central Kalimantan, and Bengkulu. Sample sizes are small to medium, and most studies were conducted in one or two madrasas, so the findings cannot be considered representative of all MI in Indonesia.

**Table 2. Characteristics of the nine included studies**

| No | Studi | Focus and design | Subject and location | Main findings |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | (Imron, 2023) | Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum; descriptive-analytical qualitative (interviews, documentation) | Head of the madrasa, teachers, students; MIN Kota Semarang | Implementation was effective in grades 1 and 4; challenges included experience, learning resources, facilities and assessment; differentiation for students who are not yet fluent in reading. |

| No | Studi | Focus and design | Subject and location | Main findings |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | (Mulabbiyah et al., 2024) | Teacher readiness and challenges; qualitative phenomenological | MI City Mataram Teacher | Readiness is quite good but needs improvement; difficulties in preparing teaching materials and diagnostic assessments. |
| 3 | (Fitriani et al., 2024) | Learning difficulties; qualitative case study with scale, observation, interviews | 30 students from grades IV–V; MI Syifaaush Shuddur, Bandung | 46.6% (14 students) have high difficulty; Arabic is the most difficult (53%), mathematics (27%), fiqh (20%). |
| 4 | (Amin et al., 2022) | Motivation and understanding of PAI concepts; mixed methods | 186 students (87 urban, 99 rural) and 16 teachers; Bengkulu | Motivation (M = 2.88) and concept understanding (M = 81) are good; rural students are better than urban students. |
| 5 | (Supriatin et al., 2023) | Mathematics difficulties (story problems); descriptive-analytical | Third-grade students (34 students) and fifth-grade students; MI Kota Palangka Raya | Describing the level of difficulty in solving story problems and relating it to everyday issues. |
| 6 | (Aliyah & Fanirin, 2022) | Mathematical difficulties; qualitative | Sixth-grade student; MI Darurrohman Kertanegara Haurgeulis, West Java | The most difficulties in data processing material (mean and median) |
| 7 | (Evita Nadia et al., 2026) | Learning based on diagnostic assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum | Context MI (subject details not reported in the accessed summary) | Diagnostic assessments help identify differences in abilities, learning styles, interests, motivation, and learning difficulties; reinforcement is needed. |
| 8 | (Mukhlis & Ulinnuha, 2023) | Difficulties in reading and writing Arabic; analysis of causal factors and contextual solution models | MI students (location details not reported in the accessed summary) | Reading and writing Arabic has become a fundamental challenge; a contextual-based solution model is proposed. |
| 9 | (Ihsanda & Khair, 2022) | Beginning reading difficulties; analysis | Second-grade student; MI Raudatul Jannah Al Ma'arif | Analyzing early reading difficulties in lower grades |

**RQ1: Problems in MI students' learning**

Learning issues from nine studies can be grouped into five themes (Table 3). The most frequently appearing themes are basic literacy and numeracy, each supported by two to three studies.

**Table 3.** Themes of learning problems of MI students

| Theme | Form of the problem | Studi | The strength of the evidence |
|---|---|---|---|
| Basic literacy (Indonesian) | Beginning reading difficulties in 2nd grade; three 4th graders are not yet fluent in reading | (Ihsanda & Khair, 2022; Imron, 2023) | Low–medium; Imron is an example of a class case. |
| Arabic | Difficulty in reading and writing Arabic; Arabic was chosen as the most difficult (53% of 30 students), among other reasons, because it is hard to memorize vocabulary. | (Mukhlis & Ulinnuha, 2023; Desi Fitriani et al., 2024) | Low–medium |

| Theme | Form of the problem | Studi | The strength of the evidence |
|---|---|---|---|
| Numeracy | Difficulty with word problems (grades III and V); difficulty with data processing, namely mean and median (grade VI); mathematics is chosen as difficult by 27% of students. | (Supriatin et al., 2023; Aliyah & Fanirin, 2022; Desi Fitriani et al., 2024) | Low–medium |
| Motivation and interest | Low interest in learning PAI and Arabic; motivation and understanding of PAI concepts are generally good but lower in urban areas. | (Desi Fitriani et al., 2024; Amin et al., 2022) | Low–medium |
| Environmental factor | Lack of family support, monotonous teaching methods, limited facilities, influence of gadgets and peers. | (Desi Fitriani et al., 2024) | Low (one study) |

The study (Desi Fitriani et al., 2024) shows that the issues are not evenly distributed across all subjects, but rather concentrated in Arabic, mathematics, and jurisprudence. The reported internal causes include low intellectual ability and interest in learning, while the external causes include family support, school conditions, and community environment. (Evita Nadia et al., 2026) added that differences in academic ability, learning styles, interests, motivation, and learning difficulties need to be identified first through diagnostic assessment.

**RQ2: The alignment of the curriculum with learning problems**

The suitability is assessed on four components of the curriculum. The assessment in Table 4 is a synthesis by the author of the evidence reported in the included studies, not direct findings from those studies. None of the nine studies directly measured the relationship between curriculum implementation and learning outcomes, so the status "partially suitable" indicates alignment of principles or practices, not evidence of impact.

**Table 4.** Matrix of the alignment between learning problems and curriculum components (synthesis by the author)

| Problem | Curriculum components | Available evidence | Suitability status |
|---|---|---|---|
| Basic literacy | Learning process | The teacher adjusts the material and assignments to the level of ability, provides special reading books, and establishes a communication book with parents for reading 30 minutes at home (Imron, 2023) | Partially appropriate; the effectiveness on reading ability has not been tested |
| Numeracy | Content and process | The study identified difficulties with story problems and data processing, but did not evaluate the content design or the achievement of mathematical learning (Aliyah & Fanirin, 2022; Supriatin et al., 2023) | Not yet assessable |
| Arabic language and interest in learning | Learning process | Lecture, discussion, and quiz methods are considered less engaging; systematic repetition and a participatory approach are recommended (Desi Fitriani et al., 2024); a contextual solution model is proposed (Mukhlis & Ulinnuha, 2023) | Partially appropriate; depending on the diversity of the teacher's methods |

| **Problem** | **Curriculum components** | **Available evidence** | **Suitability status** |
|---|---|---|---|
| All the problems | Assessment | Diagnostic assessment plays a strategic role but needs strengthening (Evita Nadia et al., 2026); teachers find it difficult to conduct diagnostic assessments and create varied questions (Mulabbiyah et al., 2024); the KKM 70 is considered too high for students by the fifth-grade homeroom teacher (Desi Fitriani et al., 2024). | Not quite appropriate |
| All the problems | Scope of implementation | In the 2022/2023 academic year, the Merdeka Curriculum was only implemented in grades 1 and 4, while other grades still used the 2013 Curriculum (Imron, 2023). | Partially compliant; implementation is not yet comprehensive. |

Overall, the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which include flexibility and differentiation, are relevant to the diverse learning needs of students, and differentiation practices have been recorded in the exemplary MI. However, the alignment at the assessment and numeracy levels is still weak or untested.

### RQ3: Supporting factors, inhibiting factors, and strategies

**Table 5.** Supporting factors, inhibiting factors, and strategies for strengthening alignment

| **Category** | **Findings** | **Source** |
|---|---|---|
| Supporting factors | Active participation of teachers and madrasahs; utilization of the Merdeka Belajar platform; continuous evaluation and improvement; supervision assistance | (Imron, 2023) |
| Supporting factors | Diagnostic assessment as the basis for differentiated learning | (Evita Nadia et al., 2026) |
| Restricting factors | Limited experience with the independent learning approach, learning resources, facilities, and assessment understanding | (Imron, 2023) |
| Restricting factors | Teachers are not yet fully capable of developing teaching materials, the preparation time is long, there are challenges in cooperation and parental involvement, and difficulties in diagnostic assessment. | (Mulabbiyah et al., 2024) |
| Restricting factors | Lack of family support, monotonous methods, insufficient facilities, influence of gadgets | (Fitriani et al., 2024) |
| Strategy | Tasks and materials according to ability level, special reading books, daily reading time, utilization of learning styles | (Imron, 2023) |
| Strategy | Systematic repetition of material and a participatory approach; collaboration between teachers, parents, and the school environment | (Fitriani et al., 2024) |
| Strategy | Contextual-based solution model for reading and writing Arabic | (Mukhlis & Ulinnuha, 2023) |

The inhibiting factors focus on the capacity of teachers and the support of the learning environment, while the supporting factors focus on mentoring and digital learning resources. The reported strategies are practical and have not yet been evaluated through a design that compares before and after implementation.

## DISCUSSION

The suitability is conditional, not automatic. The Merdeka Curriculum design provides space for differentiation, but that space only functions if teachers are able to recognize students' needs. Inclusive studies highlight weaknesses in that very ability: teachers struggle to conduct diagnostic assessments and create varied questions (Mulabbiyah et al., 2024), and diagnostic assessments still need to be strengthened (Evita Nadia et al., 2026). These findings are in line with international literature which states that the implementation of differentiation is influenced by teacher qualifications and experience (Shareefa, 2023) as well as teacher self-efficacy (Woodcock et al., 2022). So, the apparent gap is more likely to be at the implementation stage rather than at the curriculum design stage, although this conclusion has not yet been tested because there are no studies directly comparing design and implementation. The relationship between the curriculum and learning outcomes has not been directly proven. Included studies measure learning difficulties (Desi Fitriani et al., 2024; Supriatin et al., 2023) or measure curriculum implementation (Imron, 2023; Mulabbiyah et al., 2024), but do not measure both on the same subjects. Therefore, the statement that the Merdeka Curriculum addresses learning difficulties has not yet been empirically supported in MI. In comparison, an international meta-analysis review examined the impact of differentiated learning on learning outcomes (AM et al., 2023), suggesting that a similar design could be adapted to the MI context. At the same time, a review of religious teachers in high schools shows that curriculum challenges in Islamic institutions also include balancing religious education with a broader curriculum (Jasiah et al., 2024), which is relevant for MI as the learning load of Arabic and PAI increases alongside general subjects. Difficulties in Arabic and basic literacy require assessments that differentiate the sources of difficulty. The simple view of reading framework separates decoding from language comprehension (Hoover, 2024), and this separation can be used in the diagnostic assessment discussed (Evita Nadia et al., 2026) to ensure targeted teacher interventions. In mathematics, learning obstacles have also been reported in other Islamic educational institutions (Ramdhani et al., 2021), but the analyzed MI study stopped at identifying difficulties without examining whether the sequence of content or learning achievements played a role. This is the most obvious gap for future research. Student performance assessments with KKM rated too high (Desi Fitriani et al., 2024) indicate a potential mismatch between achievement standards and students' initial abilities. This reinforces the importance of formative and diagnostic assessments so that the established standards align with the students' starting points, especially after the learning disruptions caused by the pandemic, which have increased the diversity of learning readiness (Engzell et al., 2021).

### Implication

Theoretically, the alignment matrix in Table 4 can be used as an initial framework to test the relationship between curriculum components and learning problems. Practically, supervisor mentoring, diagnostic assessment training, and partnerships with parents appear to be the most frequently mentioned leverage points. For policymakers, this result directs the monitoring of implementation toward the assessment capacity of teachers, not just the completeness of curriculum documents.

### Limitations

First, only nine studies were included, the majority being descriptive in design at one or two madrasahs, so the findings cannot be generalized to all MI. Second, a formal bias risk assessment was not conducted, and in some studies, data extraction was sourced from summaries. Third, the search did not cover all indexed databases, so some relevant studies may have been missed. Fourth, the suitability matrix is a synthesis by the authors. Further research should use a multi-site design or mixed methods that measure curriculum implementation and learning outcomes on the same subjects.

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## 4. CONCLUSION

Berdasarkan sembilan studi terinklusi, permasalahan belajar siswa MI terkonsentrasi pada literasi dasar (membaca permulaan dan bahasa Arab), numerasi (soal cerita dan pengolahan data), serta motivasi dan faktor lingkungan (RQ1). Kesesuaian kurikulum dengan permasalahan tersebut bersifat parsial: prinsip fleksibilitas dan diferensiasi relevan, tetapi kesesuaian pada asesmen masih lemah dan pada numerasi belum dapat dinilai (RQ2). Faktor penghambat terutama berupa kesiapan guru, penyusunan perangkat ajar, asesmen diagnostik, dan sarana, sedangkan pendukungnya berupa pendampingan pengawas, platform digital, dan dukungan keluarga; strategi yang dilaporkan berupa diferensiasi tugas, pengulangan sistematis, dan model kontekstual (RQ3). Kesimpulan ini terbatas pada bukti yang kecil, deskriptif, dan belum menguji hubungan langsung antara kurikulum dan hasil belajar, sehingga belum dapat digeneralisasi ke seluruh MI. Penelitian berikutnya perlu mengukur implementasi kurikulum dan hasil belajar secara bersamaan pada banyak madrasah.

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