A Comparative Analysis of Islamic Religious Education in Senior, Vocational, and Islamic High Schools under the Merdeka Curriculum

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study examines the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education at three types of secondary schools in Kudus: senior, vocational, and Islamic high schools. The study addresses challenges such as the gap in teachers' ability to integrate technology, limited learning time, and the need for content adaptation. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 Islamic religious education teachers and direct observation at senior, vocational, and Islamic high schools. The research findings reveal significant variations in the implementation of the curriculum. The vocational high school excels in integrating the EMIRA digital platform and developing co-curricular projects relevant to the world of work. Senior high schools excel in developing a holistic evaluation system, although they face challenges in increasing student engagement. Meanwhile, Islamic high schools are still in the early stages of adaptation, primarily focusing on preparing appropriate curriculum documents. This study demonstrates that the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to enhance the relevance of Islamic religious education learning to students' real-life experiences. However, its implementation still faces various technical and pedagogical challenges. These findings provide important implications for the development of educational policies and teacher training programs in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

In the post-pandemic (new normal) context, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology launched the Merdeka Curriculum to recover learning loss and answer the challenges of the industrial revolution 4.0-5.0.[1] This curriculum was adopted from the concept of "Merdeka Belajar" in higher education (Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture Number 3 of 2020), which was then extended to PAUD to SMA/equivalent levels through the Decree of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology No. 56/M/2022. The essence of the Merdeka Curriculum lies in a differentiated approach, where learning is tailored to the achievement stage (phase) and students' interests, as well as strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile through project-based co-curricular activities.[2] This structural change includes overhauling the basic framework, core competencies, and allocation of lesson hours with a portion of 70-80% for intracurricular and 20-30% for co- curricular.[3]

However, implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the education unit level, called the Education Unit Operational Curriculum (KOSP) for schools and the Madrasah Unit Operational Curriculum (KOSM) for madrasah, faces multidimensional challenges. At the macro level, weak coordination between agencies, unequal access to technology, and a lack of government assistance hinder the preparation of local context-based curriculum.[4] Teachers' capacity to design differentiated learning, integrate technology, and evaluate projects is still low at the micro level.[5] This issue becomes increasingly complex in the subject of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), which is allocated only two instructional hours per week for intraclass (intracurricular) learning and 1 hour for co-curricular activities in senior high schools (SMA/SMK/MA), totaling 108 instructional hours per year or 72 hours in a semester. This situation vastly differs from the time allocation given to other subjects such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), Social Humanities, and Indonesian Language. STEM subjects are allocated 144 instructional hours for Mathematics, 108 intraclass (intracurricular) and 36 co-curricular hours, and 324 instructional hours for Natural Sciences, 216 intraclass hours and 108 co-curricular hours. Meanwhile, Social Sciences receives 432 instructional hours, 288 intraclass hours, and 144 co-curricular hours,

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[1] Nyoman Ayu Putri Lestari et al., "Kurikulum Merdeka Sebagai Inovasi Menjawab Tantangan Era Society 5.0 Di Sekolah Dasar," *Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Citra Bakti* 10, no. 4 (2023): 738–39, https://doi.org/10.38048/jipcb.v10i4.1996.

[2] Wandri Ramadhan et al., "Analisis Penerapan Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi Pendidikan Pancasila Dan Kewarganegaraan (PPKn) Dalam Kurikulum Merdeka Sekolah Dasar," *Sekolah Dasar: Kajian Teori Dan Praktik Pendidikan* 32, no. 1 (2023): 1, https://doi.org/10.17977/um009v32i12023p1-14; Amarina At'haya, Anna Fitri Hindriana Anna Fitri Hindriana, and Sofyan Hasanuddin Nur Sofyan Hasanuddin Nur, "Analisis Profil Pelajar Pancasila Dalam Proses Pembelajaran Biologi SMA Pada Kurikulum Merdeka Mandiri Belajar," *Biodik* 9, no. 3 (2023): 60–70, https://doi.org/10.22437/biodik.v9i3.27256; Karantiano Sadasa Putra et al., "Manajemen Strategik Implementasi Program Pendidikan Merdeka Belajar," *Badranaya: Jurnal Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat* 1, no. 1 (2023): 1–6, https://doi.org/10.31980/badranaya.v1i1.3023.

[3] Kementerian Pendidikan Kebudayaan Riset dan Teknologi, "Pedoman Penerapan Kurikulum Dalam Rangka Pemulihan Pembelajaran," Pub. L. No. 56/M/2022 (2022).

[4] T. Hasballah and Zulfatmi, "Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka : Tantangan, Kebijakan, Dan Dampak Terhadap Pendidikan," *Jurnal Ilmiah Edukatif* 10, no. 2 (2024): 319–20, https://doi.org/10.37567/jie.v10i2.3404.

[5] Ramadhan et al., "Analisis Penerapan Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi Pendidikan Pancasila Dan Kewarganegaraan (PPKn) Dalam Kurikulum Merdeka Sekolah Dasar."

and Indonesian Language receives 144 instructional hours, 108 intraclass hours, and 36 co-curricular hours.[6] PAI aims to build cognitive competence and instill moral values, character, and spirituality relevant to the Pancasila Student Profile.[7]

The time allocation in the Merdeka Curriculum reveals a significant imbalance between academic and character-based subjects. Out of a total of 1.584 instructional hours per year, the subject of Islamic Religious Education and Character (PAI) receives only 6,8% of the total instructional hours. This is considerably lower compared to Social Sciences, which receive 27,3%, and Natural Sciences, which account for 20,5% of the total instructional hours. This imbalance indicates that the curriculum emphasizes cognitive and academic aspects. At the same time, character building, morality, and spirituality, core domains of Islamic Religious Education, are not given proportionate space in the learning process.[8]

The limited time allocation has constrained PAI teachers in developing deep, contextual, and integrated learning experiences that reflect the values of the Pancasila Student Profile, such as religiosity, mutual cooperation, and integrity. With Islamic Religious Education receiving less than 7% of the total annual instructional time, it becomes challenging to internalize moral and ethical values consistently. This condition further complicates the implementation of character-building projects, which require reflective processes and sustained value habituation. Without a more balanced distribution, national education's holistic and character-driven vision risks being reduced to mere academic achievement.[9]

Previous studies have revealed that PAI learning during the pandemic tends to be monotonous, with the dominance of the lecture method and text assignments via WhatsApp.[10] This condition is exacerbated by students' perception that PAI is a "secondary" subject due to the lack of practice, creative media use, and contextual relevance.[11] On the other hand, the demands of Merdeka Curriculum require PAI teachers to develop co-

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[6] Kementerian Pendidikan Kebudayaan Riset dan Teknologi, "Perubahan Atas Keputusan Mendikbudristek Nomor 56/M/2022 Tentang Pedoman Penerapan Kurikulum Dalam Rangka Pemulihan Pembelajaran," Pub. L. No. 262/M/2022, 1 (2022), https://jdih.kemdikbud.go.id/sjdih/siperpu/dokumen/salinan/salinan_20220215_093900_SalinanKepmendi kbudristek No.56 ttg Pedoman Penerapan Kurikulum.pdf.

[7] Kementerian Pendidikan Kebudayaan Riset dan Teknologi, Pedoman Penerapan Kurikulum dalam Rangka Pemulihan Pembelajaran.

[8] Dodi Ahmad Haerudin, "Religious Education in Forming Students' Character," *Edukasi Islami: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 14, no. 1 (2025): 149–60, https://doi.org/10.30868/ei.v14i01.8132.

[9] Juliani, et al., "Implementation of Islamic Religious Education Curriculum Based on Values to Form Students' Islamic Character," *Journal of Contemporary Islamic Primary Education (JCIPE)* 2, no. 3 (2024): 170–79, https://doi.org/10.61253/jcipe.v2i3.300; Subakri, "Performance Analysis of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in School Learning," *Fenomena: Journal of the Social Sciences* 22, no. 1 (2023): 111–26, https://doi.org/10.35719/fenomena.v22i1.139.

[10] Wirani Atqia and Bahrul Latif, "Efektifitas Media Whatsapp Group Dalam Pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) Di SMA Kabupaten Batang Pada Masa Pandemi Covid-19," *Edification Journal* 4, no. 1 (2021): 40–56, https://doi.org/10.37092/ej.v4i1.284; Susilawati, Azharullail, and Hakkul Yakin, "Eksistensi Guru PAI Dalam Mengembangkan Metode Pembelajaran Pada Masa Pandemi Covid-19 Di SMPN 2 Pringgasela," *Al-Nahdlah: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 1, no. 2 (2021): 90–106, https://doi.org/10.51806/an-nahdlah.v1i2.18.

[11] Sumartono, "Peningkatan Hasil Belajar Pendidikan Agama Islam Dengan Model Jigsaw Kelas Xii Smk Negeri 4 Bondowoso," *ACTION : Jurnal Inovasi Penelitian Tindakan Kelas Dan Sekolah* 3, no. 2 (2023): 139, https://doi.org/10.51878/action.v3i2.2251.

curricular projects such as creating digital da'wah content or Islamic value-based conflict resolution simulations that integrate cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. This challenge demands a transformation of the teacher paradigm from teacher-centered to student-centered learning and holistic mastery of technology.

This transformation involves enhancing teachers' capacity to design collaborative learning activities based on real-life issues within students' environments, utilizing digital platforms (such as Canva, Padlet, or Learning Management Systems) to develop interactive Islamic content, and aligning assessment methods with authentic and holistic principles.[12] Teachers must also be trained to become facilitators, encouraging students' exploration, creativity, and reflection in completing projects grounded in Islamic values. In this way, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) goes beyond merely transmitting religious knowledge; it fosters the internalization of spiritual values through meaningful, real-world learning experiences relevant to students' lives.[13]

Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum also creates disparities between public schools (SMA/SMK) and madrasah (MA). Under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Madrasahs have unique characteristics because they integrate religious subjects (40%) with general subjects (60%). Minister of Religious Affairs Decree No. 347/2022 on Guidelines for Implementing Merdeka Curriculum in Madrasahs emphasizes contextualizing Islamic values in co-curricular projects.[14] However, PAI teachers in MA still rely on classical books (tahfīz al-nuṣūṣ) without adaptation to the current context, while SMA/SMK tend to stick to Kemdikbudristek modules that do not touch local aspects. This phenomenon reflects the inequality of curriculum adaptation capacity in educational units with different characteristics.

This research offers a distinct contribution to the existing body of knowledge by addressing the underexplored area of comparative implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) under the Merdeka Curriculum across three different types of secondary education institutions, Senior High Schools (SMA), Vocational High Schools (SMK), and Islamic High Schools (MA) which possess diverse institutional mandates, learner profiles, and curriculum orientations. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize macro-level policy analysis or technical constraints of distance learning, this study provides a context-sensitive micro-level exploration that uncovers how institutional culture, teacher competence, resource availability, and student engagement vary significantly between school types.

A key novelty of this research lies in its focus on the impact of instructional hour allocation on PAI's pedagogical depth and character development function, supported by comparative qualitative data from schools with different operational logics. It also highlights

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[12] Elsa Oskarita and Hadid Nur'afra Arasy, "The Role of Digital Tools in Enhancing Calligraphy Education," *Journal of Digital Learning* 11, no. 1 (2018): 53–67; Patrick Brugliera, "The Effectiveness of Digital Learning Platforms in Enhancing Student Engagement and Academic Performance," *Journal of Education, Humanities, and Social Research* 1, no. 1 (2024): 1–11.

[13] Siti Nurhalimatus Sa'diah, "The Role of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Increasing Students' Interest in Learning at Ibtidaiyah Al Hikmah Argomulyo," *Unisan Jurnal: Journal of Management and Education* 3, no. 4 (2024): 822–32.

[14] Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, "Pedoman Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka Pada Madrasah," Pub. L. No. 347 (2022).

how teachers innovate with project-based and technology-integrated approaches in settings with varying constraints and support systems. Additionally, the study's setting in Kudus Regency, known for its rich Islamic heritage and dynamic educational landscape, adds a sociocultural dimension rarely captured in prior research. These findings enrich the discourse on curriculum implementation by integrating educational policy, school ecology, and religious pedagogy within a comparative framework, thus offering a fresh and contextually grounded perspective.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used field research with a qualitative approach, which aims to explore the learning of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum. The qualitative approach was chosen because it aims to understand the meaning of a phenomenon based on participants' views through observation, interviews, and document analysis. This research involved in-depth interviews with PAI teachers and deputy curriculum heads in each school, who are considered important in formulating the curriculum and the PAI learning process.

The research sites were in three high school-level educational institutions in Kudus Regency, Central Java: SMA 2 Bae, SMK Wisudha Karya, and MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2. The research participants consisted of PAI teachers and the deputy head of curriculum, who are considered relevant to this study because of their role in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The data were obtained through primary sources such as interviews and observations, and secondary sources from related documents, such as curriculum and previous research reports.

The total number of teachers involved as research subjects was 14, as shown in the following table.

Table 1. Informant Profile

Name (Initial)	Institution	Position
H, S.Sos. M.Pd.	SMA 2 Bae	Vice Principal of Curriculum
KE, S.Ag.	SMA 2 Bae	Islamic Religious Education Teacher
AL, S.P.d.I	SMA 2 Bae	Islamic Religious Education Teacher
HS S.Pd.	SMA 2 Bae	Islamic Religious Education Teacher
BPC, S.Pd, S.T	SMK Wisudha Karya	Vice Principal of Curriculum
NK, S.Ag, M.PdI	SMK Wisudha Karya	Islamic Religious Education Teacher
AC, S.Pd .I, M.Pd.I	SMK Wisudha Karya	Islamic Religious Education Teacher
M, S. Ag, M. PdI	SMK Wisudha Karya	Islamic Religious Education Teacher
MUA, M.Pd	SMK Wisudha Karya	Islamic Religious Education Teacher
INA, S.Kom.	MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2	Vice Principal of Curriculum
BA. AH, S.Ag	MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2	Islamic Religious Education Teacher
NA	MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2	Islamic Religious Education Teacher
TM, S.Pd.	MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2	Islamic Religious Education Teacher
M, S.Pd.I.	MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2	Islamic Religious Education Teacher

Data collection techniques involved observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted repeatedly to obtain more in-depth and complex information. Observation was used to describe teacher interactions and the learning process, while document analysis aimed to obtain relevant structural data. Interview data were transcribed, labeled (coding), and classified based on particular themes. It made it easier to analyze and compare the views of various interviewees.[15]

Data validity testing was carried out through extended observation time, increased persistence, triangulation of sources, techniques, time, and member checks. Triangulation was conducted to ensure data credibility by comparing information from different sources and data collection techniques. In addition, negative case analysis was also applied to look for conflicting data, which could strengthen the validity of the findings.[16]

The data analysis technique includes data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction is done by summarizing and sorting data according to the research focus. Data presentation aims to organize and present the data thoroughly, while drawing conclusions is done in a deductive or inductive way to get a complete understanding.[17] Through this process, it is expected that relevant findings can be found related to implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI learning in the schools.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Learning

SMK Wisudha Karya has pioneered the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Kudus Regency since 2020, which was initially known as the "Prototype Curriculum." As a flagship school, it acts as an influencer by providing training and socialization to other schools such as SMK Nusantara, SMK 1 Kudus, and SMK Bhakti. To support government policy, the school organized a 10-day workshop and in-house training to improve the competence of teachers, including Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers.[18] The goal is for teachers to understand the Education Unit Operational Curriculum (KOSP) and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5BK), so that they can implement the curriculum according to student characteristics and the needs of maritime majors. SMK Wisudha Karya emphasizes project-based learning with a balanced time division between intracurricular and co-curricular activities.

The PAI teachers at this school have understood and implemented the Merdeka Curriculum effectively. PAI learning has three domains: intracurricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular, with three weekly lesson hours. PAI teachers teach religious material and internalize the Pancasila Student Profile and Work Culture through various learning

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[15] Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Pendidikan Pendekatan Kuantitatif, Kualitatif, Dan R&D* (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2015).

[16] Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Analisis Data Kualitatif: Buku Sumber Tentang Metode-Metode Baru* (Jakarta: Universitas Indonesia, 1992).

[17] Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldana, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Source Book*, Third Edition (California: SAGE Publication, 2014).

[18] Erica Meilia Safitri et al., "In House Training: Peningkatan Kompetensi Guru Melalui Implementasi Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5)," *Jurnal Review Pendidikan Dan Pengajaran* 6, no. 4 (2023): 340–46.

methods. Students are invited to develop characters such as faith, independence, cooperation, and critical and creative thinking. These values are applied in various activities, both inside and outside the classroom, such as collaborative projects that teach interfaith tolerance, cooperation, and social care.[19]

The implementation of PAI learning follows the principles of Merdeka Curriculum, which actively involves students and emphasizes creativity and critical thinking. The methods used include lectures, discussions, questions and answers, and projects, with media support such as master books, PowerPoint, and the EMIRA (Learning Management System) digital platform. Each session begins with prayer and an introduction to Pancasila values, followed by a diagnostic assessment to measure students' initial understanding. The materials are delivered interactively, using stories and illustrations to connect religious concepts to everyday life and sparking questions to encourage deep thinking about moral and religious values.

PAI learning evaluation is conducted formatively and summatively to get a holistic picture of student achievement. Evaluation methods include oral, written tests, Qur'an recitation practice, observation, independent projects, portfolios, and peer assessment. Assessment focuses on understanding religious concepts and Arabic language skills, attitudes, and participation in religious activities. Formative evaluations allow immediate feedback for quick improvement, while summative evaluations provide an overall picture of student achievement.[20]

Challenges in PAI learning include the technology gap between senior and junior teachers. Senior teachers are more accustomed to traditional methods such as textbooks and PowerPoint, so they are less optimal in utilizing digital technology. To overcome this, the school organizes technology training and encourages inter-teacher collaboration.[21] Another challenge is the lack of concentration among students who are more interested in playing games. The solution is for teachers to use varied methods such as group discussions, role-playing, and digital media, and to provide intensive assistance for struggling students.

The Merdeka Curriculum differs from the 2013 Curriculum regarding document structure, evaluation methods, learning outcomes, and learning objectives. The Merdeka Curriculum focuses more on character development by integrating religious and moral values, and provides flexibility for schools in determining materials and evaluation. Meanwhile, the 2013 Curriculum emphasizes the achievement of basic competencies and measurable learning indicators, with a more rigid implementation.[22]

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[19] Ria Nata Kusuma, Wachidi, Triono Ali Mustofa, "Internalisasi Nilai-Nilai Agama Islam Dan Budi Pekerti Dalam Sikap Gotong Royong Pada Profil Pelajar Pancasila," *SOCIAL: Jurnal Inovasi Pendidikan IPS* 4, no. 4 (2025): 763–72, https://doi.org/10.51878/social.v4i4.4534; Bagus Cahyanto et al., "The Internalization of the Pancasila and Rahmatan Lil Alamin Student Profiles Dimensions in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum," *Cendekia: Jurnal Kependidikan Dan Kemasyarakatan* 22, no. 2 (2024): 224–41, https://doi.org/10.21154/cendekia.v22i2.9906.

[20] Srimutia Elpalina et al., "Implementasi Model Evaluasi Formatif-Sumatif Dalam Meningkatkan Pembelajaran Seni Budaya," *Gorga: Jurnal Seni Rupa* 13, no. 01 (2024): 1–8, https://doi.org/10.24114/gr.v13i01.55826.

[21] Marhamah, et al., "Urgensi Penguasaan Budaya Dan Teknologi Digital Bagi Guru Pendidikan Agama Islam," *SAP (Susunan Artikel Pendidikan)* 9, no. 3 (2025): 447–54.

[22] Erida Fitriani and Iqnatia Alfiansyah, "Analisis Efektivitas Implementasi Antara Kurikulum 2013 Dan Kurikulum Merdeka Di Sekolah Dasar," *SAP (Susunan Artikel Pendidikan)* 8, no. 2 (2023): 250–63,

Examples of PAI learning in the Merdeka Curriculum include research projects, group discussions, field activities, and the creation of educational materials. For example, students research the history of the Prophet Muhammad SAW or ethical values in Islam, discuss tolerance or the role of women in religion, and visit mosques or Islamic study centers for hands-on experience. They also create educational materials such as videos, posters, or presentations on ablution procedures or the life of the Prophet Muhammad SAW.

PAI learning in the Merdeka Curriculum includes five core components: assessment, meaningful understanding, sparking questions, learning activities, and reflection. Assessment is done through tests, assignments, or projects to measure student understanding. Meaningful understanding is achieved when students can relate religious concepts to everyday life. Sparking questions stimulates critical thinking while learning activities such as discussions, simulations, or field trips provide real-life experiences. Reflection helps students evaluate their understanding and plan for future improvements.[23]

SMA 2 Bae has been implementing the Merdeka Curriculum since 2021, demonstrating a strong commitment to adopting new learning approaches. Teachers and students adapted to more active, student-centered learning methods for two years. PAI teachers at this school have attended special training to understand and implement Merdeka Curriculum, including evaluation of the learning process, to improve the quality of education according to the principles of student empowerment, creativity, and independence. They positively welcome this curriculum because it provides opportunities for students to be more active and creative, while preparing them to face real-world challenges.

The PAI teachers at this school have mastered the Merdeka Curriculum well. This understanding is supported by the training attended as well as teaching experience during the two years of curriculum implementation. They also realize the importance of internalizing Merdeka Curriculum values, such as student empowerment and skills development, in PAI learning. PAI learning in this school refers to Merdeka Curriculum documents, such as Learning Outcomes (CP), Learning Objectives (TP), Flow of Learning Objectives (ATP), and Teaching Modules, which serve as a guide for implementing student-centered learning with the teacher as a lighter or companion.[24]

The learning methods are diverse, including discussions, video observations, and learning projects. PAI projects fall under the intracurricular category, are integrated in the official school curriculum, and are designed to meet learning outcomes while integrating Merdeka Curriculum values, such as local wisdom and religious values. In addition, cocurricular activities such as social projects and extracurricular activities are also implemented to support students' character and skill development. However, challenges such as students' difficulty in concentrating and reliance on traditional methods still exist. To overcome this, teachers provide a variety of learning methods and intensive mentoring.[25]

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https://doi.org/10.30998/sap.v8i2.17733.

[23] Mohammad Cholil Alwi and Muh Wasith Achadi, "Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) Di Sekolah Dasar Negeri," *Didaktika: Jurnal Kependidikan* 13, no. 001 (2024): 825–32, https://doi.org/10.58230/27454312.1383.

[24] Alwi and Achadi.

[25] Bagas Armayoga et al., "Research Based Curriculum Development Model and Islamic Scientific Tradition in Senior High Education," *Fitrah: Journal of Islamic Education* 5, no. 2 (2024): 98–113,

The evaluation of PAI learning includes diagnostic tests, oral, written, and Qur'an recitation practices. Diagnostic tests measure students' initial understanding before learning begins, helping teachers adjust methods and materials. Formative and summative evaluations are conducted on an ongoing basis to monitor students' development in knowledge, skills, and religious attitudes.[26] PAI teachers also have the flexibility to choose learning materials according to students' needs and interests. They use various sources, such as teaching modules, supplementary books, and online sources, to design relevant and interesting learning, without neglecting the curriculum standards.

Technology is also utilized in learning, such as LCDs to display visual materials, smartphones to access online learning resources and record activities, and practical tools such as worship simulations so that students understand religious concepts firsthand. This flexibility in the selection of materials and the use of technology helps create more dynamic and contextualized learning, according to the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum.[27]

MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2 has just started implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in the 2023/2024 school year, so it is still in the introduction stage. The school has carried out technical guidance for teachers by inviting instructors from the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Central Java which emphasizes hands-on practice, such as compiling learning plans (Learning Outcomes, Learning Objectives, Learning Objective Flow), creating teaching modules, and designing learning evaluations (diagnostic tests and structured tests). This shows the school's commitment to understanding and implementing Merdeka Curriculum effectively, although it is still in its early stages.

PAI teachers' understanding of Merdeka Curriculum in this madrasah shows a basic understanding, but with serious efforts to adopt the concepts and principles of the new curriculum. Teachers continue to try to understand more interactive and student-centered learning, although they still need further training to strengthen implementation, especially in integrating new approaches into PAI learning. The implementation of PAI learning within the framework of the new Merdeka Curriculum began in 2023 with the main challenge of not having complete supporting documents such as Learning Outcomes (CP), Learning Objectives (TP), Flow of Learning Objectives (ATP), and appropriate Teaching Modules.

PAI teachers in this madrasah have planned lessons flexibly, adapting methods to class characteristics and students' learning styles using various techniques such as discussions, demonstrations, and projects to create contextualized learning experiences. Flexibility in the division of class hours allows more time for in-depth activities such as projects and discussions. The Merdeka curriculum, which emphasizes practical experience, is very relevant to Islamic Education learning, where teachers help students understand religious theory and apply religious values in daily life through discussions of moral situations, worship simulations, and Islamic values projects.

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https://doi.org/10.53802/fitrah.v15i2.861.

[26] Taqiyuddin Taqiyuddin, Supardi Supardi, and Lubna Lubna, "Evaluasi Formatif Dan Sumatif Dalam Pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam," *Jurnal Ilmiah Profesi Pendidikan* 9, no. 3 (2024): 1936–42, https://doi.org/10.29303/jipp.v9i3.2392.

[27] U C Berlian, S Siti, and R Puji, "Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Improving the Quality of Education at State Islamic Senior High Schools," *Journal of Educational and Language Research* 6, no. 1 (2022): 58–76.

Key implementation challenges include developing appropriate learning documents, measuring learning outcomes, and understanding diverse student characteristics to design appropriate learning methods. The flexibility of lesson hours also requires careful planning for the efficient use of time and resources. In the Merdeka Curriculum, the role of the teacher shifts from an information deliverer to a companion who guides students to understand and apply religious values. In contrast, students are required to be active through asking questions, discussing, and finding practical solutions to moral and religious problems.[28] This role shift aligns with the curriculum's aim to create a generation capable of practicing religious values in real life.

The research findings reveal that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) across three types of educational institutions, vocational high schools (SMK), general senior high schools (SMA), and Islamic senior high schools (MA) varies in readiness and responsiveness, depending on institutional context, teacher experience, and structural support. One of the key variables influencing these outcomes is institutional readiness, which includes human resources (teacher competencies), supporting infrastructure (access to technology and learning media), and internal policy support. For example, SMK Wisudha Karya demonstrates a more advanced level of implementation due to its role as a model school and its longer experience with the Merdeka Curriculum. In contrast, MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2, which only began implementation in the 2023/2024 academic year, faces more fundamental challenges, such as the lack of supporting documents and limited ongoing technical training.

Another significant variable is the characteristics of students and the learning culture in each school. In SMKs, project-based PAI approaches and work-related values are more relevant due to the vocational orientation of students. Meanwhile, SMA students with more academic orientation and MA students with a stronger religious atmosphere encounter different challenges both in integrating the values of the Pancasila Student Profile and in utilizing flexible instructional time.

In terms of contributions to the discipline of education, this research enriches the study of character-based curriculum and religious education within the framework of national education reform. The findings provide evidence-based insights that the success of curriculum implementation is not solely determined by the curriculum design itself, but also by the adaptive capacity of teachers, institutional management, and systemic support tailored to the educational context. The study also underscores the need for more differentiated training strategies for PAI teachers and highlights the importance of a transdisciplinary approach combining religious education, modern pedagogy, and educational technology. These interpretations contribute to developing more responsive Islamic education policies that align with the paradigm shifts of 21st-century education.

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[28] Dimas Khijri Saputra, Ahmad Maghfurin, and Nasirudin Nasirudin, "Kesiapan Guru Dalam Mengimplementasikan Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar Pada Mata Pelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam Dan Budi Pekerti Di Smp Kota Semarang," *Taklim : Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 21, no. 1 (2023): 21–34, https://doi.org/10.17509/tk.v21i1.55751.

Comparative Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Learning

The implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in three schools shows similarities and differences that are interesting to analyze. These three schools show a strong commitment to implementing this curriculum, with high enthusiasm for the curriculum's potential to improve the quality of education. At SMK Wisudha Karya, which has been implementing the Merdeka Curriculum for longer, they have become a mentor for other schools in adopting the curriculum. SMA 2 Bae, which has been implementing the Merdeka Curriculum for two years, continues to evaluate the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning process. MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2 has just started implementation in the 2023/2024 academic year. Although they are at different stages, the three schools have the same goal of preparing students to face real-world challenges through more active and creative learning.

Teacher training and mentoring are an important focus in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. At SMK Wisudha Karya, they have carried out various training activities involving other schools, while SMA 2 Bae and MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2 focus more on the internal development of their teachers. PAI teachers at SMK Wisudha Karya and SMA 2 Bae clearly understand the Merdeka Curriculum, which is reflected in their learning approach.

Regarding learning implementation, SMK Wisudha Karya applies an approach that prioritizes character development through teaching Pancasila and religious values, and integrates technology by using a Learning Management System (LMS) called EMIRA. Students at SMA 2 Bae are also encouraged to be active in learning through discussion methods, learning projects, and co-curricular projects, which focus not only on knowledge but also on developing students' character and skills. MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2, which is still in the introductory stage, has not yet fully adopted these methods. However, they have started to evaluate the methods that best suit their school context.

The supporting documents for learning at SMK Wisudha Karya are complete and neatly arranged, including teaching modules, learning outcomes, learning objectives, and the flow of learning objectives, all of which can be accessed through the EMIRA application. SMA 2 Bae, although not fully able to access documents online, understands the content of curriculum documents and teaching modules well. MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2, which has just started implementing Merdeka Curriculum, has received technical guidance regarding developing teaching modules and other supporting documents. However, it is still in the development stage.

Evaluation in the Merdeka Curriculum at SMK Wisudha Karya adopts a method that covers knowledge, skills, attitudes, and religious values, which is more inclusive than the traditional evaluation approach. At SMA 2 Bae, the challenge lies in developing evaluation methods that align with the Merdeka Curriculum approach, focusing on character development. At MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2, evaluation is still in the preparation stage to be adjusted to the vision and principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. Using projects and modern learning methods, such as research projects, group discussions, and field activities, is an important part of the learning process at SMK Wisudha Karya and SMA 2 Bae, which supports more active and contextualized learning. MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2 is expected to develop similar methods over time.

The implications of similarities and differences in understanding the Merdeka Curriculum on the learning process of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMA 2 Bae, SMK Wisudha Karya, and MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2 can be seen from several important aspects, such as commitment to the curriculum, teacher training and assistance, and active student participation. Each school shows a different approach in implementing this curriculum, which affects the learning process and students' character development.

Commitment to implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education Learning

SMK Wisudha Karya is firmly committed to integrating the Merdeka Curriculum into PAI learning. The primary focus in this school is student character development, where religious values are instilled in students' daily lives. This shows that PAI learning at SMK Wisudha Karya does not only focus on religious theory, but also on the practical application of these values in social life. The implication is that students gain a deeper understanding of religious and ethical values and how to apply them in a broader context, such as social interaction, work, and daily life.[29]

SMA 2 Bae also demonstrates a significant commitment to the Merdeka Curriculum, emphasizing PAI learning that is contextual and relevant to students' current needs. At SMA 2 Bae, PAI learning focuses on religious theory and practical skills that can be applied in real life. Students are encouraged to think critically about ethical and religious issues in contemporary situations. This approach implies that PAI learning can provide valuable skills for students in facing more complex social and moral challenges in the real world.[30]

MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2, which has just started implementing Merdeka Curriculum, faces challenges in adjusting PAI learning to the vision and principles of this curriculum. At this stage, MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2 still focuses on introducing basic religious concepts and developing a deeper understanding of religious values. This early stage implies that students may not fully engage in a more dynamic and contextualized approach to learning. However, this initial step provides a solid foundation for further developments in more relevant and applicable PAI teaching.

Islamic Religious Education Teacher Training and Mentoring

The results of interviews conducted through face-to-face meetings, focus group discussions, and observations and documentation show that each school provides training and mentoring for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers. However, the activities and programs differ from one another. At SMK Wisudha Karya, attention to training and mentoring teachers, including PAI teachers, is a top priority. PAI teachers at this school have received adequate training, which enables them to be better prepared to implement the Merdeka Curriculum. The implication is that teachers strongly understand religious values

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[29] Nur Azisah, Umi Nur Kholifatun, and Muh Arfandi, "Studi Kasus Dalam Pengajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI)," *Al-Tadzkiyyah: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 8, no. 12 (2024): 290–93.

[30] Layly Atiqoh and Budiyono Saputro, "Kurikulum Pendidikan Agama Islam Berbasis Lingkungan Sebagai Penguatan Pendidikan Humanistik Di Sekolah Adiwiyata," *Edukasia Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Islam* 12, no. 2 (2017): 285–308.

and can integrate technology and more creative and character-based learning approaches.[31] PAI teachers can be more effective in guiding students to develop skills related to religion and morality.

SMA 2 Bae also pays attention to PAI teacher training, although there is still room for further development. The evaluation conducted on the learning process at SMA 2 Bae shows that PAI teachers there have opportunities to improve the quality of their teaching. The implication is that PAI teachers need to adopt more learning methods that support students' character development, such as religious and ethics-based learning projects and co-curricular projects that lead to developing social and moral skills.[32]

MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2, in the introduction phase of the Merdeka Curriculum, has started technical guidance for PAI teachers. This provides an opportunity for teachers to prepare themselves better to adopt new learning approaches that align with the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum. The implication is that PAI teachers must be responsive to change and ready to develop more adaptive and creative learning methods, which can accommodate the diversity of students and their social context.[33]

Active Student Participation in Islamic Religious Education Learning

At SMK Wisudha Karya, active student participation in PAI learning is one of the main focuses. Students are encouraged to apply religious values actively in their daily lives. They are invited to engage in in-depth discussions on religious and ethical issues and can apply these values through real social action. The implication is that students understand religious theory, internalize these values, and apply them to their social interactions and daily behavior.

SMA 2 Bae also encourages students' active participation in PAI learning more creatively. Students are given space to think critically and find creative solutions to problems related to religion and ethics. Discussions, learning projects, and cocurricular projects aim to increase students' involvement in understanding and applying religious values in their social lives. The implication is that students should be better prepared to face moral and ethical challenges in an ever-evolving society.[34]

MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2, although still in the early stages of implementation, also seeks to encourage active student participation in PAI learning. In this school, students are allowed to participate in the formation of deeper religious understanding and strong character. The implication is that although students may not yet fully engage in more dynamic and interactive learning, they have a strong foundation to develop a more applicable

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[31] Adiyono, et al., "A Transdisciplinary Approach to Character Development: Islamic Teachings and Pancasila Values in Shaping Global and Faithful Students," *Indonesian Journal on Learning and Advanced Education (IJOLAE)* 7, no. 1 (2024): 198–217, https://doi.org/10.23917/ijolae.v7i1.24017.

[32] Robiyatul Adawiyah, "Strategy for Integration of Science and Religion in Islamic Education In 4.0 Era," *At-Ta'dib* 16, no. 1 (2021): 136, https://doi.org/10.21111/at-tadib.v16i1.6190.

[33] Suraijiah et al., "The Effectiveness of Using Media Technology in Islamic Religious Education in an Independent Curriculum: Technocultural Study of Religious Education," *Jurnal Iqra': Kajian Ilmu Pendidikan* 8, no. 1 (2023): 335–49, https://doi.org/10.25217/ji.v8i1.2760.

[34] Noor Malihah and Umar Fauzan, "Implementation of the Child-Friendly Madrasah Program in PAI Learning to Enhance Student's Spiritual," *Edukasi Islami: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 13, no. 4 (2024): 679–86, https://doi.org/10.30868/ei.v13i04.6959.

understanding of religion in the future.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMK Wisudha Karya (Vocational High School), SMA 2 Bae (Senior High School), and MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2 (Islamic High School) demonstrates both similarities and differences, each carrying significant implications for the learning process and the development of student character. All three schools exhibit a strong commitment to applying the Merdeka Curriculum, although they are at different stages of implementation. SMK Wisudha Karya has the longest experience and serves as a mentor school for others, SMA 2 Bae has been adapting the curriculum for the past two years, while MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2 has only begun implementation in the 2023/2024 academic year. Across these institutions, challenges such as varying levels of teacher understanding, limited infrastructure, and the relatively small allocation of time for PAI compared to other subjects remain prevalent.

Despite these obstacles, all three schools are committed to enhancing the quality of education by strengthening student character and aligning learning with contemporary social issues. At SMK Wisudha Karya, PAI teachers have received comprehensive training, allowing them to integrate religious values into character education through project-based and innovative teaching methods. This has led to more active student participation and applying religious concepts in real-life contexts. SMA 2 Bae has also made strides in curriculum implementation, though issues like student concentration persist. Meanwhile, MA NU Hasyim Asy'ari 2 has begun incorporating practical, project-based learning approaches to help students internalize religious values more meaningfully through hands-on experiences.

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