CURRICULUM REFORM AND LEARNING NEEDS IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION AT MI AL-AWWAL PALEMBANG

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Abstract

This study analyzes the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at MI Al-Awwal Palembang, with a particular focus on how the curriculum reform addresses the actual learning needs of students in the context of Islamic education. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through classroom observations, teacher and student interviews, and analysis of instructional documents. The findings reveal that the curriculum implementation has generally been effective, supported by well-developed instructional tools, diverse teaching methods, and conducive classroom environments. Nonetheless, several challenges persist, including the limited integration of digital learning media, inconsistent student engagement, and a lack of authentic assessment that reflects the spiritual and moral dimensions of Islamic education. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on curriculum reform in Islamic elementary education and offers practical recommendations for aligning the Merdeka Curriculum more effectively with the religious and academic learning needs of students.

Keywords: *Curriculum Reform, Merdeka Curriculum, Islamic Religious Education, Learning Needs, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka dalam pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) di MI Al-Awwal Palembang, dengan fokus pada bagaimana reformasi kurikulum tersebut menjawab kebutuhan belajar peserta didik dalam konteks pendidikan Islam. Pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif digunakan dengan teknik pengumpulan data melalui observasi kelas, wawancara dengan guru dan siswa, serta analisis dokumen pembelajaran. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa implementasi kurikulum secara umum telah berjalan efektif, ditunjang oleh perangkat ajar yang terstruktur, metode pengajaran yang bervariasi, dan suasana kelas yang mendukung pembelajaran. Namun, masih terdapat tantangan, antara lain keterbatasan pemanfaatan media pembelajaran digital, keterlibatan siswa yang belum konsisten, serta kurang optimalnya penerapan penilaian autentik yang mencerminkan dimensi spiritual dan moral dalam pendidikan Islam. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap diskursus reformasi kurikulum pada pendidikan dasar Islam serta menawarkan rekomendasi praktis untuk menyelaraskan Kurikulum Merdeka dengan kebutuhan belajar religius dan akademik peserta didik.

Kata Kunci: Reformasi Kurikulum, Kurikulum Merdeka, Pendidikan Agama Islam, Kebutuhan Belajar, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah

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Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at the elementary school level plays a strategic role in shaping students' religious character, morality, and spirituality from an early age. PAI does not merely teach religious knowledge but also instills moral values, tolerance, and nurtures a holistic and balanced Islamic personality. In the context of national education reform, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum—introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia—has brought a significant paradigm shift in teaching practices, including in the subject of Islamic Religious Education at the elementary level.

The Merdeka Curriculum is designed based on the principles of flexibility, differentiation, and the strengthening of the Pancasila student profile, which aligns with Islamic values. It provides autonomy for educational institutions to design contextual and meaningful learning experiences tailored to the characteristics of their students. In PAI, this approach is expected to foster more interactive, reflective, and life-integrated learning processes.

Nevertheless, the transition to the Merdeka Curriculum is not without challenges. A study by Alicia and Rosyid (2024) revealed a persistent gap between curriculum design and implementation in the field, particularly concerning the preparedness of PAI teachers, adaptation of teaching methods, and the availability of

learning resources rooted in Islamic values. Similar findings were reported by Jufrida, Furqon, and Dani (2023), who noted that many teachers face difficulties in applying the learning approaches recommended by the Merdeka Curriculum. Meanwhile, Putri (2024) emphasized that although the curriculum enhances students' creativity, it still lacks substantial attention to the religious learning aspects.

This gap between curriculum design and implementation needs to be further examined, especially in PAI, which serves as a foundation for Islamic character development. As formal educational institutions, elementary schools are responsible for aligning national curriculum content with religious values to cultivate students who are not only intellectually capable but also morally upright and faithful.

MI Al-Awwal Palembang, as one of the urban elementary schools that has adopted the Merdeka Curriculum, presents a relevant locus for this study. Although the school has relatively good access to educational resources, there has been no in-depth research on how PAI is implemented within the Merdeka Curriculum framework and how well it aligns with contextual and religious learning needs.

This study aims to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the teaching of Islamic Religious Education at MI Al-Awwal Palembang, focusing on the alignment between curriculum content, teaching methods, and students' learning needs. Specifically, the study investigates instructional tools, teaching media, classroom management, instructional approaches, and the learning environment in Grade VI PAI classes.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to providing empirical insights into the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic elementary education, particularly in PAI. The findings are expected to serve as a basis for policy evaluation, the development of more contextual PAI learning models, and practical guidelines for teachers and school administrators in optimizing religious education that is adaptive to contemporary needs.

This research adopts a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data collection techniques include classroom observation, interviews with teachers and students, and document analysis of instructional materials. The data were analyzed using a thematic approach to identify key patterns in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI teaching at MI Al-Awwal Palembang.

The results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of more effective and contextual PAI teaching practices that are in line with Islamic educational values. Furthermore, the findings aim to enrich academic discourse on

curriculum reform in elementary education and serve as a reference for policymakers and stakeholders in Islamic education in Indonesia.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum within a specific and real-life context— namely, the teaching of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at MI Al-Awwal Palembang. The case study design was used to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the curriculum is applied in the classroom, particularly in terms of its alignment with students' learning needs. This approach enabled the researchers to holistically analyze key aspects of curriculum implementation, including instructional materials, teaching media, classroom management, instructional methods, and the learning environment.

The study was conducted in November 2024, beginning on November 18, at MI Al-Awwal Palembang, located at Jalan Angkatan 66 No. 893 RT.11/RW.5, Pipa Jaya, Kemuning District, Palembang City, South Sumatra. This school was selected because it has actively implemented the Merdeka Curriculum and has adequate access to educational resources, including digital learning tools and teacher training. These factors made MI Al-Awwal a relevant context for evaluating both the successes and challenges of curriculum implementation, particularly in the PAI subject.

The focus of this study was on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education for Grade VI, with special emphasis on the topic of faith in the revealed scriptures (iman kepada kitab-kitab Allah). This topic was chosen because it demands not only cognitive learning but also affective and contextual engagement, in line with the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on meaningful and life-relevant education. The research subjects included the Grade VI PAI teacher who had implemented the curriculum for at least one semester, Grade VI students actively participating in PAI lessons, and instructional documents such as teaching modules, syllabi, annual programs, semester programs, and academic calendars. The subjects were selected using purposive sampling, based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Suriani, Risnita, & Jailani, 2023).

Data were collected through three main techniques: observation, interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted directly using a non-

participant approach, focusing on how the teacher managed the class, utilized media, applied instructional methods, and created a conducive and religious learning environment. Semi-structured interviews were held with both the teacher and students to gain deeper insights into teaching practices and responses to the curriculum. Meanwhile, document analysis focused on PAI instructional materials developed in accordance with the Merdeka Curriculum, in order to assess how well these documents reflect students' learning needs and Islamic educational values.

The data analysis process consisted of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the first stage, researchers filtered and focused the data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation to select the most relevant information. Next, the data were presented in the form of descriptive narratives, tables, and direct quotations to clarify the meaning of the observed phenomena. Finally, conclusions were drawn inductively based on emerging patterns from the field data. To ensure the validity of the findings, source and technique triangulation were employed, allowing the research results to be scientifically accountable.

Findings and Discussion

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the Grade VI Islamic Religious Education (PAI) subject at MI Al-Awwal Palembang demonstrates both achievements and challenges. Based on observations, interviews, and documentation, the following findings were obtained:

Table 1. Summary of Merdeka Curriculum Implementation in PAI at MI Al-Awwal Palembang

Component	Key Findings	Description
Learning Materials	Well-structured and complete	Teaching modules, syllabi, annual and semester programs follow curriculum principles.
Learning Media	Fairly diverse	Visual and contextual media are used, but digital media use remains suboptimal.
Classroom Management	Moderately conducive	Teachers maintain student engagement but need strategies to address learning styles.
Teaching Methods	Varied but still conventional	Lectures and discussions dominate; project-based learning is inconsistently applied.
Student Engagement	Fluctuating	Students are active in discussions or role-play but passive during theoretical learning.

Learning Assessment	Not fully authentic	Assessment is mostly cognitive; affective and spiritual aspects are not systematically measured.

In general, teachers have made efforts to implement the Merdeka Curriculum according to its guidelines, especially in developing instructional tools and creating a contextual learning atmosphere. However, limited digital proficiency and adaptation to interactive teaching methods remain significant challenges.

Readiness of Instructional Tools to Support the Merdeka Curriculum

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at MI Al-Awwal Palembang indicates that Islamic Religious Education materials have been systematically and well-organized. The teaching modules were developed based on the principles of differentiated and contextual learning, with structured content on topics such as "faith in the revealed scriptures" starting from basic understanding to practical applications in daily life.

The syllabi and semester programs were designed with flexibility, taking into account students' developmental stages and the school's socio-cultural context. These documents allow teachers to adapt learning activities to meet students' needs, consistent with the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on adaptive and transformative learning (Rahmafitri, Deswita, & Trisoni, 2024).

The annual programs and academic calendar included religious and character-building activities, such as regular Qur'an recitation, prayer practice, and Islamic holiday commemorations. However, there remains a need for more structured scheduling of practical and experiential learning activities. As Hendrawati, Winanto, and Kristanti (2024) suggest, annual planning that includes hands-on experiences can enhance the internalization of religious values.

Despite the strengths, several weaknesses were found, such as underutilized formative assessments and limited integration of digital media into the modules. Assessment remains focused on the cognitive domain, with minimal space for evaluating religious behavior and spiritual practice. As emphasized by Nurcahya et al. (2024), diverse forms of assessment are crucial in measuring students' spiritual and social dimensions.

Effectiveness of Teaching Methods and Learning Media in PAI Implementation

PAI teachers at MI Al-Awwal have used various teaching methods such as lectures, group discussions, Q&A sessions, and role-playing. However, project-based

or collaborative methods—which are a hallmark of the Merdeka Curriculum—have not been fully and consistently implemented. Learning still tends to be teacher-centered, particularly in topics related to aqidah and worship.

The media used include textbooks, visual aids, and simple teaching props such as miniature Qur'an replicas and daily activity boards. However, the use of digital media—such as educational videos or Islamic learning apps—is still very limited. Research by Khaira, Hermita, and Alim (2025) shows that interactive media such as Islamic videos and animations can enhance student interest and understanding of religious concepts.

Laela, Basuki, and Subandriyo (2025) also highlight the importance of creative visual tools like Canva in helping teachers deliver abstract concepts in more engaging ways. The main barriers to technology integration at MI Al-Awwal include a lack of teacher training and inadequate digital infrastructure.

Dynamics of Student Engagement and Classroom Management

Student engagement in PAI at MI Al-Awwal Palembang is varied. When materials are delivered through storytelling or role-play, students appear enthusiastic and active. However, when lessons are more theoretical or memorization-based, student enthusiasm tends to decrease.

Teachers have attempted to manage the classroom environment effectively through flexible seating arrangements, Islamic-themed ice-breaking activities, and spiritual motivation. Nonetheless, the diverse learning styles of students have not been fully accommodated.

Berliani et al. (2024) assert that classroom management under the Merdeka Curriculum requires teachers to be creative in designing responsive and participatory learning environments. Likewise, Saputri et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of ongoing teacher mentoring to help manage diverse classroom dynamics.

Assessment Challenges in Achieving Authentic Evaluation

The Merdeka Curriculum promotes authentic assessment, which aims to evaluate not only students' cognitive achievements but also their attitudes and spiritual skills. However, PAI teachers at MI Al-Awwal still struggle to implement authentic assessments comprehensively. Most assessments rely on multiple-choice or short-answer questions, while portfolios, self-assessment, and performance observations are rarely used.

Research by Indriyani, Hanifah, and Fitria (2023) shows that although teachers understand the concept of authentic assessment, barriers such as time constraints,

lack of standardized formats, and insufficient training hinder effective implementation. Teachers also find it challenging to design instruments that can objectively assess students' affective and spiritual dimensions.

To address these challenges, ongoing training on authentic assessment aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum is essential, along with school policy support to diversify assessment formats. A supportive environment is crucial to ensure that Islamic Religious Education fosters not only knowledge transfer but also character and spiritual development.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at MI Al-Awwal Palembang has shown considerable progress, particularly in the development of systematic and contextual instructional materials, the application of varied teaching methods, and efforts to create a learning environment that supports the reinforcement of spiritual values. The instructional materials have been developed in accordance with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, allowing for flexibility and contextualization, while classroom management reflects teachers' efforts to enhance student engagement through narrative methods and religiously themed activities.

However, several challenges remain, especially in integrating interactive educational technology, sustaining student engagement throughout the learning process, and implementing holistic authentic assessments that cover cognitive, affective, and spiritual domains. Learning is still largely dominated by conventional approaches and cognitive-based evaluations, while the Islamic character dimension has not been fully accommodated in the assessment instruments.

To optimize the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI learning, it is essential to strengthen teacher capacity through continuous training on active learning strategies, the use of Islamic-based digital educational media, and the development of authentic assessment tools. Furthermore, school support is needed in providing technology-based learning resources and developing classroom management systems that are responsive to students' diverse needs. Through these efforts, the goals of PAI learning that are transformative, contextual, and relevant to 21st-century challenges can be achieved more effectively.

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