Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education: A Critical Literature Review of Contemporary Challenges and Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract

The implementation of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) has introduced significant pedagogical shifts, yet its enactment in school contexts remains fraught with persistent challenges. This article aims to critically examine contemporary issues surrounding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in IRE, identify their underlying causes, and analyze their pedagogical implications for teaching, learning, and character formation. Employing a critical literature review approach, this study systematically synthesizes recent national and international scholarly works published between 2020 and 2025. The review reveals four interrelated challenges: limited teacher understanding of core curriculum concepts such as learning outcomes (CP), learning pathways (ATP), differentiated instruction, and authentic assessment; inadequate technological infrastructure and instructional resources; insufficient and uneven professional development and mentoring; and structural disparities in school facilities that exacerbate educational inequality. These challenges contribute to uneven student competency attainment, suboptimal learning effectiveness, and constraints on the cultivation of religious and moral character. This article contributes to the discourse on curriculum reform by offering an integrative analytical framework that links curriculum policy, teacher readiness, and pedagogical practice in Islamic Religious Education. It further proposes strategic implications for teacher professional development, school-based support systems, and equitable policy interventions to strengthen the sustainable and just implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum across diverse educational settings.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum, Islamic Religious Education, curriculum reform, pedagogical challenges, literature review

Introduction

Curriculum constitutes a fundamental and strategic component of education, functioning not merely as a technical guide for instruction but as a normative framework that shapes educational vision, pedagogical orientation, and learning outcomes. As the foundation of national education policy and school level implementation, curriculum determines the direction, quality, and relevance of educational processes. In the Indonesian context,

continuous curriculum reform reflects an ongoing effort to address persistent challenges related to educational quality, relevance, and equity. Such reform is considered necessary due to the gap between expected educational outcomes and actual learning achievements, thereby requiring periodic curriculum revitalization to produce future generations who are intellectually competent and morally grounded (Santika et al., 2022).

Curriculum reform is inseparable from the dynamic nature of society and the rapid advancement of science, technology, and contemporary issues. A curriculum that remains static risks losing its relevance in responding to learners' real-life contexts and future demands. Consequently, curriculum development must be adaptive and responsive to social change, educational innovation, and emerging competencies required in the twenty first century (Simanjuntak et al., 2025). However, the effectiveness of curriculum reform depends not only on structural change but also on the ethical, managerial, and pedagogical capacities of educators and leaders. In his book *Etika Profesi Keguruan*, Fauzi explains that ethical professionalism among teachers is foundational to transforming educational policy into meaningful practice, particularly in internalizing values and moral commitments in instructional settings (Fauzi, 2018).

Within this broad reform context, Islamic Religious Education occupies a strategic position due to its role in character formation and moral development. Islamic education aims to cultivate ethical awareness, social responsibility, and spiritual maturity, not only through formal instruction but also through the interaction of learners with their families and communities. Teachers, parents, and communities share responsibility in enabling learners to understand and practice Islamic values in daily life, with the ultimate goal of forming individuals of moral integrity who contribute positively to society (Toyibah et al., 2024). Building on this, Fauzi's work on spiritual leadership in education highlights the significance of emotionally and spiritually grounded leadership that fosters a conducive environment for teachers to model moral behavior and nurture character in learners (Fauzi, 2016).

The Merdeka Curriculum has been introduced as a policy response to these educational challenges by promoting flexibility, differentiated learning, student autonomy, and character development. This curriculum encourages interactive, collaborative, and student-centered learning while granting schools and teachers greater autonomy in curriculum design and instructional strategies (Lestari et al., 2023). In the context of Islamic Religious Education, the Merdeka Curriculum offers opportunities to strengthen contextual learning and meaningful value internalization. Nevertheless, its implementation has met substantial challenges. Qoirunnisa (2025) reports that many Islamic education teachers experience difficulties in understanding and operationalizing core curriculum components such as Learning Outcomes and Learning Pathways. In addition, Syafriani et al. (2025) identify inconsistencies between regulatory frameworks, particularly those explained in the Ministry of Education Regulation Number 12 of 2024, and their

practical enactment in schools, especially in relation to assessment procedures and learning completion standards. These findings point to ongoing issues related to teacher readiness, availability of instructional resources, and infrastructural capacity.

Despite the growing body of research on the Merdeka Curriculum, most existing studies remain general in scope and do not sufficiently address contemporary issues specific to Islamic Religious Education. In particular, limited attention has been given to the intersection between teacher preparedness, resources, infrastructural inequality, and the implications of these factors for educational equity and character development. At this point, the conceptual work by Fauzi on curriculum convergence in Islamic educational settings, such as his book *Konvergensi Kurikulum dan Pembelajaran di Madrasah Berbasis Pesantren*, is particularly relevant. Fauzi argues that curriculum integration and contextual adaptation in Islamic boarding school–based madrasahs can serve as a model for bridging formal curriculum demands with spiritual and moral formation that reflects both local values and national educational goals (Fauzi, 2020).

Based on these considerations, this article aims to critically analyze contemporary challenges in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education, explore their underlying causes, and examine their pedagogical implications for teaching, learning, and character development. By employing a critical literature review approach, this study seeks to contribute to curriculum reform discourse by offering an integrative analysis that connects policy design, teacher readiness, pedagogical practice, and educational equity. Ultimately, this article aspires to provide conceptual and practical insights for educators, school leaders, and policymakers in strengthening the sustainable and just implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum across diverse educational settings.

Method

This study employs a literature review approach to analyze contemporary issues in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education at the school level. The literature review method was selected to enable a comprehensive and critical synthesis of existing scholarly discussions, empirical findings, and policy analyses related to curriculum reform, teacher readiness, pedagogical practices, and learning challenges in Islamic Religious Education. Through this approach, the study aims to map dominant themes, identify recurring challenges, and examine emerging pedagogical implications within recent academic discourse (Ghamrawi et al., 2025).

The sources reviewed in this study consist of peer reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, academic books, and relevant research reports that discuss the Merdeka Curriculum and its implementation in Islamic Religious Education. Data were collected from reputable national and

international academic databases, including Google Scholar, DOAJ, and GARUDA. These databases were selected to ensure broad coverage of scholarly publications while maintaining academic credibility and relevance.

The literature review process followed a series of systematic stages to enhance transparency and analytical rigor. First, the researchers identified key issues and thematic boundaries relevant to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education. Second, appropriate search terms were determined, including combinations of keywords related to curriculum reform, Merdeka Curriculum, Islamic Religious Education, teacher competence, learning assessment, and character education. Third, an initial search was conducted across the selected databases to obtain potentially relevant publications. Fourth, the retrieved literature was screened using inclusion and exclusion criteria, which comprised thematic relevance, publication period limited to the last five years from 2020 to 2025, and academic quality as indicated by journal credibility and methodological clarity. Studies that did not directly address the research focus or lacked sufficient scholarly rigor were excluded from the analysis. These systematic procedures strengthen the validity and reliability of the synthesized findings (Dhamayanti, 2022).

Following the selection process, the included literature was analyzed using a thematic synthesis technique. This analytical strategy involved categorizing findings into recurring themes, comparing perspectives across studies, and identifying critical patterns, convergences, and gaps in the existing body of research. Through this process, the study was able to generate an integrative understanding of how the Merdeka Curriculum has been interpreted and enacted within Islamic Religious Education, as well as the pedagogical and structural challenges that influence its implementation.

By relying on secondary data rather than primary field data, this literature review enables the formulation of an objective and up to date synthesis of research findings without being limited to a single institutional or regional context. This approach allows the study to highlight broader trends, policy implications, and pedagogical innovations related to Islamic Religious Education under the Merdeka Curriculum, including strategies employed by teachers to enhance learning quality and character development (Dwiputra et al., 2023).

In addition, the adoption of a literature review method is intended to support both educational practitioners and academic researchers in understanding the methodological value of literature based studies as a viable approach for generating scholarly contributions in the field of education. The synthesized findings are expected to inform future empirical research and provide practical insights for the formulation of educational policies and improvement strategies in Islamic Religious Education institutions (Lutfi et al., 2024).

Results and Discussion

Contemporary Issues in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education at Schools

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education at the school level reveals a range of interrelated contemporary issues that directly affect the effectiveness and quality of the teaching and learning process. One of the most prominent challenges concerns teachers' limited understanding of the philosophical foundations and pedagogical orientation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in relation to differentiated learning, formative assessment, and character development. Many teachers still encounter difficulties in interpreting and operationalizing key curricular components such as Learning Outcomes and Learning Pathways into coherent instructional practices. As a consequence, lesson planning and classroom implementation often remain misaligned with curriculum expectations, leading teachers to rely on conventional lecture based methods despite the curriculum's emphasis on active, collaborative, and project based learning (Susilowati, 2022).

This condition indicates that the challenges of curriculum implementation extend beyond technical or administrative constraints and are deeply rooted in teacher preparedness and professional capacity. Research on curriculum management in Islamic educational institutions shows that curriculum reform requires not only policy change but also strong institutional support and teacher competence to translate curricular objectives into meaningful learning experiences. Fauzi et al. (2024) demonstrate that curriculum effectiveness is closely linked to how teachers understand, manage, and contextualize curriculum content within their instructional settings. Without sufficient pedagogical comprehension, curriculum reform risks being reduced to procedural compliance rather than substantive transformation.

Another critical issue relates to the accessibility and adequacy of instructional resources. Many Islamic Religious Education teachers experience difficulties in developing lesson plans because learning materials available on the Merdeka Mengajar platform remain limited and do not fully accommodate diverse school contexts. This situation forces teachers to independently design or modify instructional materials, a task that requires pedagogical expertise and digital literacy that are not evenly distributed across educators. The gap between curriculum design and the availability of supporting materials complicates teachers' efforts to align instructional practices with curriculum objectives (Susilawati & Sugmawati, 2024).

These resource related challenges highlight the importance of curriculum management and organizational support in educational reform. Studies on organizational behavior and educational management emphasize that teacher performance and instructional innovation are strongly influenced by institutional culture, leadership, and professional support systems. Fauzi

and Kusairi (2023) argue that organizational behavior within educational institutions plays a decisive role in shaping professional capacity and work effectiveness. In the absence of supportive organizational structures, teachers may experience increased workload pressures that hinder creativity and reduce the quality of learning implementation.

Assessment practices constitute another significant issue in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education. Conventional assessment approaches that prioritize cognitive test scores and numerical evaluation continue to dominate classroom practice, while authentic assessment models that emphasize learning processes, portfolios, and character development remain underutilized. This situation is largely attributable to teachers' limited understanding of competency based assessment and their lack of experience in applying alternative assessment strategies. In addition, some teachers demonstrate reluctance to utilize digital assessment platforms due to insufficient technological skills and limited training opportunities (Astuti et al., 2024).

From a broader educational management perspective, assessment practices reflect not only pedagogical choices but also institutional readiness and professional culture. Research on teacher competence development in pesantren based and Islamic educational contexts shows that assessment innovation is closely linked to teachers' motivation, commitment, and continuous professional development. Fauzi et al. (2022) found that holistic approaches to teacher development, which integrate competence, commitment, and motivation, contribute significantly to the adoption of more meaningful and reflective assessment practices. When assessment remains narrowly focused on numerical outcomes, the broader educational mission of Islamic Religious Education, particularly character and moral development, is at risk of being marginalized.

Structural issues further exacerbate the challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Unequal distribution of learning materials, limited internet access, and insufficient government support and training reveal a persistent gap between the ideal curriculum framework and the realities faced by schools. Institutions with limited infrastructure encounter greater difficulties in implementing project based learning, technology enhanced instruction, and differentiated learning strategies. This situation underscores the uneven implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum across educational contexts and raises concerns regarding educational equity.

Empirical evidence from studies on educational quality control and stakeholder collaboration reinforces the importance of systemic support in curriculum reform. Fauzi, Syaifullah, and Suharto (2023) emphasize that effective learning quality control requires synergy among schools, families, and communities, particularly during periods of rapid change. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, the absence of coordinated support mechanisms risks widening disparities between well resourced and under resourced schools.

Overall, the findings presented in this section demonstrate that contemporary issues in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education are multidimensional and interconnected. Challenges related to teacher understanding, instructional resources, assessment practices, organizational support, and structural inequality collectively shape the effectiveness of curriculum implementation. These findings suggest that addressing implementation challenges requires an integrative approach that combines pedagogical capacity building, institutional management strengthening, and equitable policy support. Without such a comprehensive strategy, the Merdeka Curriculum risks functioning merely as an administrative reform rather than as a transformative framework for improving learning quality and strengthening students' moral and religious character.

Factors Contributing to the Implementation Issues of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education

The challenges encountered in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education do not emerge in isolation but are the result of multiple interrelated factors operating at pedagogical, institutional, and structural levels. One of the most fundamental contributing factors is teachers' limited understanding of the principles, structure, and pedagogical orientation of the new curriculum. Many Islamic Religious Education teachers still possess insufficient knowledge of core concepts such as differentiated learning, the integration of digital platforms, and the development of instructional materials including learning modules and authentic assessment instruments. Due to inadequate preparation, teachers tend to rely on traditional teaching methods that emphasize content delivery rather than student engagement, thereby constraining the realization of learner centered and competency based learning envisioned by the Merdeka Curriculum (Susilowati, 2022).

This condition highlights the central role of teacher readiness in curriculum reform. Curriculum change demands not only policy dissemination but also deep pedagogical understanding and professional commitment from teachers. Studies on curriculum management and teacher professionalism in Islamic educational settings emphasize that teachers' capacity to interpret and adapt curriculum frameworks significantly determines implementation quality. Fauzi et al. (2024) demonstrate that effective curriculum management in Islamic schools is closely linked to teachers' comprehension of curriculum objectives and their ability to translate these objectives into coherent instructional practices. When teachers lack conceptual clarity, curriculum reform risks remaining superficial and procedural rather than transformative.

A second major factor contributing to implementation issues is the limited availability of educational facilities, instructional tools, and learning resources in many schools. Teachers often face difficulties in developing open and innovative learning materials due to inadequate infrastructure, including

unstable internet connectivity, malfunctioning LCD projectors, and limited access to technological devices such as computers. These constraints hinder teachers' ability to utilize digital learning resources and to design lesson plans that meet the standards of the Merdeka Curriculum. In addition, the scarcity of accessible reference materials compels teachers to independently search for or develop instructional content, often resulting in learning modules that fall short of pedagogical expectations. Such limitations directly affect the effectiveness of project based learning and differentiated instruction, which are central components of the Merdeka Curriculum (Nurnaifah, 2024).

From an organizational perspective, infrastructural limitations are closely related to institutional capacity and management practices. Research on organizational behavior in educational institutions indicates that professional performance is shaped not only by individual competence but also by organizational support systems. Fauzi and Kusairi (2023) argue that educational organizations with weak structural support tend to produce fragmented instructional practices, as teachers are forced to operate without adequate resources or coordinated guidance. In the context of Islamic Religious Education, this situation constrains teachers' ability to implement innovative pedagogies aligned with curriculum expectations.

Another significant contributing factor is the lack of systematic and continuous professional development and mentoring for teachers. Empirical studies indicate that many teachers struggle to fully understand the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum, the characteristics of Pancasila oriented learners, and the pedagogical adjustments required to support these goals. Insufficient and sporadic training programs limit teachers' exposure to curriculum innovations, including the development of Learning Pathways and the application of integrated assessment models. As a result, teachers experience difficulties in integrating digital technology and designing adaptive learning experiences that respond to diverse student needs, both of which are essential requirements of the Merdeka Curriculum (Gunawan & Bahari, 2024).

The absence of sustained professional support also affects teachers' motivation and commitment to instructional improvement. Research on teacher competence development in pesantren and Islamic educational contexts suggests that continuous mentoring and collaborative professional culture are critical for fostering pedagogical innovation. Fauzi et al. (2022) emphasize that the development of teacher competence, commitment, and motivation occurs most effectively within supportive institutional environments that prioritize long term professional growth rather than short term training interventions. Without such support, curriculum reform initiatives are unlikely to achieve lasting impact at the classroom level.

Structural inequality in school facilities further exacerbates the challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education. Empirical evidence shows that schools in urban areas generally possess more advanced infrastructure compared to those in rural or remote regions. Limitations in classroom facilities, access to technology, and

availability of digital resources significantly influence learning outcomes and pedagogical practices. This disparity undermines the core objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasize creativity, collaboration, and technology enhanced learning. Consequently, regional variations in educational facilities play a decisive role in determining the success or failure of curriculum implementation in Islamic Religious Education (Wijayanti et al., 2024).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the implementation issues of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education stem from a complex interaction of teacher preparedness, infrastructural capacity, professional development systems, and structural inequality. Poor facilities, limited institutional support, and insufficient government provided educational resources collectively hinder the realization of curriculum objectives. Addressing these challenges therefore requires a comprehensive and integrated approach that involves schools, teachers, policymakers, and infrastructure development. Without coordinated efforts across these levels, the Merdeka Curriculum risks reinforcing existing disparities rather than promoting equitable and meaningful educational transformation.

Impacts of the Implementation Issues on Islamic Religious Education Learning

The issues arising from the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum have generated multidimensional impacts on the quality and effectiveness of Islamic Religious Education learning in schools. Insufficient teacher preparedness, limited infrastructure, and partial understanding of the new curriculum framework have collectively prevented learning practices from fully reflecting the core aspirations of the Merdeka Curriculum, namely flexibility, creativity, student autonomy, and character oriented learning. As a result, Islamic Religious Education instruction often remains procedural rather than transformative, with limited opportunities for meaningful engagement and value internalization (Yusup & Rahman, 2025).

One of the most immediate and observable impacts is the decline in instructional effectiveness in Islamic Religious Education classrooms. The introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum has significantly increased teachers' administrative responsibilities, including the preparation of more complex lesson plans, learning reports, and diverse assessment formats. These additional tasks reduce the time available for reflective lesson planning and pedagogical innovation. Consequently, teachers experience increased psychological pressure and work related stress, which negatively affects classroom interaction, instructional creativity, and overall teaching performance. Empirical evidence indicates that excessive administrative workload can erode teacher motivation and directly undermine learning effectiveness (Rosyada et al., 2024).

From an educational management perspective, this condition suggests a misalignment between curriculum policy demands and teachers'

professional capacity. Studies on organizational effectiveness in Islamic educational institutions highlight that when teachers are overburdened administratively, their role as facilitators of meaningful learning is compromised. Fauzi and Kusairi (2023) emphasize that professional performance in educational settings is closely linked to organizational systems that balance accountability with pedagogical support. In the absence of such balance, curriculum reform initiatives may inadvertently weaken instructional quality.

Another significant impact relates to limited access to educational facilities and infrastructure. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum remains constrained by inadequate technological resources, particularly those required to support digital and project based learning. Insufficient infrastructure restricts teachers' ability to design innovative and engaging learning experiences that align with curriculum expectations. The lack of technological resources also hampers the use of digital media, platform based assessment, and the development of learning modules that depend on consistent internet access. As a result, instructional practices in Islamic Religious Education often fail to meet the intended standards of the Merdeka Curriculum (Diana & Amalia, 2024).

The absence of sustained professional support and training further exacerbates the negative impacts on learning design and instructional quality. Many Islamic Religious Education teachers remain inadequately equipped to develop learning modules, Learning Pathways, and authentic assessment instruments that align with curriculum objectives. This lack of pedagogical competence leads to uncertainty in aligning learning goals with student profiles and the intended outcomes of character education. Without systematic mentoring and continuous professional development, teachers struggle to implement innovative learning strategies, resulting in instructional practices that fall below expected standards (Hasanah, 2024).

At a broader systemic level, the uneven implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has intensified disparities in Islamic Religious Education learning across schools. Differences in school readiness, including infrastructure availability, teacher competence, and administrative support, have produced unequal learning opportunities. Schools with adequate resources are more capable of implementing project based learning and differentiated instruction, while under resourced schools face persistent difficulties in meeting curriculum requirements. This inequality undermines the core objective of the Merdeka Curriculum to provide equitable and independent learning opportunities for all students, leading to uneven educational outcomes in Islamic Religious Education (Siregar et al., 2024).

Research on quality assurance and stakeholder collaboration in Islamic education further illustrates that such disparities have long term implications for learning outcomes and character development. Fauzi, Syaifullah, and Suharto (2023) argue that without strong coordination among schools, families, and communities, educational reforms risk reinforcing existing

inequalities rather than reducing them. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, the lack of systemic support mechanisms contributes to fragmented implementation and inconsistent learning quality across regions.

Collectively, these impacts hinder the development of students' social, academic, and moral competencies. The reduced effectiveness of Islamic Religious Education learning, coupled with unequal access to quality instruction, constrains the formation of religious character and ethical awareness that constitute the core mission of the subject. If these implementation issues remain unaddressed, their long term consequences may extend beyond classroom learning to affect broader national education goals, particularly the development of resilient, morally grounded, and socially responsible future generations.

Strategic Solutions and Pedagogical Implications for the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education

Addressing the multifaceted challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education requires strategic solutions that extend beyond technical adjustments and emphasize pedagogical transformation, institutional strengthening, and equitable policy intervention. One of the most fundamental strategies lies in strengthening teacher competence through sustained and structured professional development. Continuous training programs should focus on deepening teachers' understanding of the core principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, including differentiated learning, curriculum planning through Learning Outcomes and Learning Pathways, the development of instructional modules, and the application of authentic assessment. Such programs are essential for enabling teachers to shift from traditional content driven instruction toward learner centered and character oriented pedagogical practices (Elkominoki et al., 2025).

From a pedagogical perspective, continuous professional development should not be treated as isolated workshops but as part of a long term learning ecosystem that nurtures reflective teaching and instructional innovation. Teachers of Islamic Religious Education require professional training in classroom management, digital adaptation, communication skills, and subject matter mastery to effectively respond to diverse student needs. Through sustained professional learning, teachers are better positioned to facilitate creative and collaborative learning environments that align with the philosophical foundations of the Merdeka Curriculum (Saputra & Setiawan, 2024). In this regard, research on teacher competence development in Islamic educational institutions emphasizes that professional growth is most effective when training initiatives are aligned with teachers' real classroom challenges and supported by institutional commitment (Fauzi et al., 2022).

In addition to individual teacher competence, the availability of supportive learning infrastructure constitutes a critical dimension of successful curriculum implementation. Collaboration with local communities,

school committees, and broader stakeholders can help alleviate resource constraints, particularly in educational institutions facing financial limitations. Access to technological resources such as functional digital devices, reliable internet connectivity, and digital learning platforms enables teachers to implement interactive instructional models, including project based learning, digital media integration, and authentic assessment practices. Infrastructure enhancement is therefore not merely a technical investment but a pedagogical prerequisite for reducing disparities in learning quality across schools.

Strategic support mechanisms from both government and educational institutions are equally essential. Effective implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education requires systematic mentoring and academic supervision that guide teachers through curriculum interpretation, instructional design, and assessment implementation. Schools should strengthen the role of academic supervision through structured coaching, monitoring, and professional dialogue to provide ongoing pedagogical guidance. At the policy level, local governments play a pivotal role in ensuring the provision of facilities, technical assistance, and sustained training programs. Without coordinated and long term support, teachers' understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum remains fragmented, thereby limiting its pedagogical impact (Wahidah et al., 2024).

From an educational management perspective, curriculum reform must be supported by organizational systems that promote professional accountability while fostering pedagogical autonomy. Studies on organizational behavior in Islamic educational settings demonstrate that institutional cultures characterized by collaboration, trust, and professional support are more likely to produce effective curriculum implementation. Fauzi and Kusairi (2023) argue that educational organizations that prioritize human resource development and professional empowerment create conditions in which curriculum innovation can flourish. This insight underscores the importance of aligning curriculum policy with institutional management practices that value teacher professionalism and continuous improvement.

Finally, addressing disparities in the quality of Islamic Religious Education across schools requires policy level interventions that prioritize educational equity. Significant differences between urban and rural schools in terms of infrastructure, technological access, and professional capacity continue to shape unequal learning opportunities. Since the Merdeka Curriculum presupposes the use of digital tools and active learning strategies, under resourced schools must receive targeted support through operational funding, infrastructure development, and capacity building programs. Educational policies should therefore focus on closing quality gaps and ensuring that all schools, regardless of geographical location, can implement the Merdeka Curriculum effectively and equitably (Yanti et al., 2024).

Synthesizing these strategic directions, the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education depends on an

integrative approach that combines teacher professional development, institutional support, infrastructural readiness, and equity oriented policy design. Pedagogically, this approach reinforces the role of Islamic Religious Education not only as a subject of knowledge transmission but as a transformative space for character formation and moral development. Without such a comprehensive strategy, curriculum reform risks remaining symbolic and administrative rather than serving as a catalyst for meaningful educational transformation.

Conclusion

This critical literature review demonstrates that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education remains confronted by complex and interrelated challenges that operate at pedagogical, institutional, and structural levels. The findings indicate that limited teacher understanding of core curriculum concepts, inadequate instructional resources and technological infrastructure, insufficient professional support systems, and persistent disparities in school facilities collectively constrain the realization of the curriculum's transformative goals. These challenges not only affect instructional processes but also undermine the broader aims of Islamic Religious Education, particularly in fostering moral character, religious competence, and meaningful student engagement.

From a theoretical perspective, the study highlights that curriculum reform cannot be understood merely as a policy shift or technical redesign. Instead, it must be conceptualized as a systemic transformation that requires alignment between curriculum philosophy, teacher professionalism, organizational capacity, and equity oriented governance. When such alignment is absent, the Merdeka Curriculum risks functioning as an administrative mandate rather than a pedagogical framework capable of reshaping learning practices and educational values. The impacts identified in this review, including increased teacher workload, constrained pedagogical innovation, and unequal learning opportunities across schools, illustrate how curriculum reform may inadvertently reproduce existing structural inequalities if not accompanied by comprehensive support mechanisms.

The review further underscores that strategic solutions must be integrative and sustainable. Strengthening teacher competence through continuous and context responsive professional development, enhancing school infrastructure with particular attention to digital learning capacity, institutionalizing mentoring and academic supervision, and prioritizing equity focused policy interventions are essential conditions for effective curriculum implementation. These strategies reinforce the understanding that Islamic Religious Education is not solely concerned with knowledge transmission but serves as a critical space for character formation, ethical reflection, and social responsibility within contemporary educational systems.

In a global context, the challenges and lessons identified in the Indonesian experience resonate with broader debates on curriculum reform in values based and religious education worldwide. The findings contribute to international scholarship by demonstrating that curriculum autonomy and flexibility must be supported by strong institutional capacity and teacher readiness to achieve meaningful educational transformation. Future research is therefore encouraged to extend this review through empirical investigations that examine classroom level enactment, comparative studies across educational contexts, and longitudinal analyses of the Merdeka Curriculum's impact on student character development. Such efforts are vital for ensuring that curriculum reform initiatives, both in Indonesia and beyond, advance not only educational effectiveness but also social justice and moral integrity in an increasingly complex global landscape.

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