


## Integration of Islamic Religious Education Values with Independent Curriculum: Opportunities and Challenges in Elementary Schools

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### ABSTRACT

Penanaman ajaran dan nilai-nilai Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) sejak usia sekolah dasar merupakan fondasi penting dalam membentuk peserta didik yang beriman teguh, berakhlak mulia, dan bertanggung jawab. Kehadiran Kurikulum Merdeka sebagai sistem pembelajaran baru memberikan keleluasaan bagi pendidik untuk mengembangkan aspek moral dan spiritual melalui pendekatan yang berpusat pada peserta didik dan berbasis konteks kehidupan nyata. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengevaluasi sejauh mana nilai-nilai PAI dapat diintegrasikan secara optimal dalam implementasi kurikulum merdeka pada jenjang sd, sekaligus mengkaji peluang dan kendala yang menyertainya. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode studi pustaka dengan pendekatan deskriptif-kualitatif, memanfaatkan referensi dari berbagai publikasi akademik, kebijakan kurikulum, dan laporan pelaksanaan pendidikan. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kurikulum independen memberikan potensi besar bagi penguatan nilai-nilai keagamaan, seperti melalui integrasi profil siswa Pancasila, kebebasan merancang pembelajaran, serta pelaksanaan proyek-proyek berorientasi nilai. Namun, sejumlah kendala juga muncul, antara lain keterbatasan pemahaman guru terhadap model integrasi nilai, disparitas fasilitas pembelajaran, dan perlunya pelatihan berkelanjutan bagi para pendidik. Oleh karena itu, sinergi berbagai pihak, terutama sekolah, guru, orang tua, dan pemerintah menjadi kunci dalam memastikan nilai-nilai PAI benar-benar terwujud dalam proses pendidikan, bukan hanya sebatas teori. Penelitian ini diharapkan dapat menjadi kontribusi konseptual dalam merancang pendidikan agama yang kontekstual dan selaras dengan kurikulum nasional saat ini.

Implanting teachings and values in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) since elementary school age is an important foundation in shaping students who have strong faith, commendable morals, and a sense of responsibility. The presence of the Merdeka Curriculum as a new learning system provides freedom for educators to develop moral and spiritual aspects through student-centered approaches and based on real life contexts. This study aims to evaluate the extent to which PAI values can be integrated optimally in the implementation of an independent curriculum at the elementary school level, as well as examining the opportunities and obstacles that accompany it. This study uses a literature study method with a descriptive-qualitative approach, utilizing references from various academic publications, curriculum policies, and educational implementation reports. The findings show that the independent curriculum provides great potential for strengthening religious values, such as through the integration of Pancasila student profiles, freedom to design learning, as well as the implementation of value-oriented projects. However, a number of obstacles also emerged, including the limitations of teacher understanding of the value integration model, the disparity of learning facilities, and the need for sustainable training for educators. Therefore, the synergy between various parties, especially schools, teachers, parents, and government is the key in ensuring PAI's values are truly manifested in the educational process, not only theoretical. This study is expected to be a conceptual contribution in designing contextual religious education and in harmony with today's national curriculum policy.



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## INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) serves as a fundamental pillar within the educational system, aiming to cultivate individuals who are not only intellectually capable but also spiritually and emotionally mature. At the elementary school level, religious education plays a crucial role in instilling core Islamic values such as honesty, discipline, tolerance, responsibility, and empathy. These values serve as the foundation for character development, which continues to evolve as students grow. During childhood a critical period for personality formation students are highly receptive to and easily influenced by behaviors they observe and experience daily, including those encountered in the learning process at school. Therefore, religious education must be presented not merely as a subject of study but as a lived experience, integrated into the students' everyday activities within the school environment.

The *Merdeka Curriculum* has emerged as the government's response to contemporary educational challenges that demand flexibility, relevance, and meaningful learning processes. This curriculum is designed to provide greater autonomy for teachers and schools in determining learning methods that are appropriate to the conditions and characteristics of their students. Within this framework, the integration of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values becomes more feasible, as the *Merdeka Curriculum* does not rely solely on textbooks or rigid structures. Instead, it promotes project-based, collaborative, and contextual learning approaches. This flexibility creates new opportunities for *PAI* teachers to incorporate religious values in more creative and practical ways. Islamic principles can thus be delivered not only in the classroom but also through various activities such as citizenship projects, social initiatives, and explorations of local culture.

In addition to supporting flexibility in lesson planning, the *Merdeka Curriculum* also promotes character development through the integration of values in every learning activity. In this context, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and Islamic values are highly relevant in supporting the realization of the *Pancasila Student Profile*, which emphasizes, among other things, religiosity, mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), independence, and critical thinking. By connecting religious content with real-life experiences, students can understand that Islamic values are not merely theoretical concepts, but practical guidelines applicable to everyday life. *PAI* teachers can incorporate current social themes such as environmental awareness, interfaith tolerance, and ethical use of social media as meaningful and contextual ways to introduce Islamic teachings.

However, the integration of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values within the *Merdeka Curriculum* does not always proceed without challenges. One common obstacle is the limited understanding among teachers regarding interdisciplinary and project-based learning concepts. Many teachers—particularly at the elementary school level are not yet accustomed to designing instructional materials that combine religious values with general themes outlined in the *Merdeka Curriculum*. This issue is further compounded by substantial administrative workloads, limited instructional time, and the lack of continuous pedagogical training, all of which hinder teachers from effectively implementing integrative learning. Consequently, there is a risk that religious education may revert to conventional, isolated teaching methods, disconnected from students' everyday lives.

Another major challenge concerns the unequal distribution of educational infrastructure and facilities across Indonesia. Schools in remote areas or those with limited funding often lack access to adequate learning resources, technological tools, and professional support from educational experts. Yet, the success of the *Merdeka Curriculum* heavily relies on teachers' ability to design meaningful and relevant learning experiences. In such circumstances, religious education is at risk of being reduced to rote memorization, without the deep internalization of values. The school environment also plays a crucial supporting role. Schools that lack a strong religious culture or fail to provide regular opportunities for worship practices will likely struggle to create a vibrant and engaging atmosphere for religious learning.

On the other hand, the successful integration of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values within

the *Merdeka Curriculum* is highly dependent on the involvement of various stakeholders, particularly school principals, parents, and the broader community. When school principals support innovative teaching practices, provide necessary facilities, and grant teachers autonomy, curriculum implementation becomes more effective. Parents also need to be actively involved in their children's religious education to ensure continuity between what is taught at school and what is practiced at home. Likewise, the surrounding community plays a vital role in fostering contextual Islamic values through religious and social activities in the local environment. This multi-stakeholder collaboration helps build an educational ecosystem that supports the holistic development of students' character, grounded in Islamic principles.

Accordingly, it is deemed essential to conduct an in-depth study on how the integration of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values can be optimized within the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* at the elementary school level. This research aims to identify the opportunities available to teachers and schools for effectively integrating PAI values, as well as to explore the challenges that continue to hinder this process. The findings of this study are expected to provide constructive recommendations for relevant stakeholders, particularly in formulating curriculum implementation strategies that address contemporary educational challenges while preserving the spiritual and moral values central to national education.

## METHOD

This study employs a library research approach, a method that centers the research process on an in-depth examination of various written scholarly works. This approach is chosen because the topic under investigation is conceptual in nature and requires thorough exploration of theories, regulations, and previous research findings relevant to the integration of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values within the *Merdeka Curriculum* at the elementary school level. Consequently, this study does not involve direct field data collection but instead focuses on the analysis and interpretation of credible and relevant literature. The library research method allows for the comparison of diverse scholarly perspectives and the tracing of intellectual developments in the fields of religious education and curriculum policy in Indonesia.

The primary data sources for this study are derived from various written documents, both primary and secondary. Primary documents include academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, previous research findings, as well as official government policies such as the Ministry of Education and Culture regulations, the national curriculum, and the *Pancasila Student Profile* documents. Secondary sources comprise scholarly opinion articles, educational reports, and other relevant supporting references. To ensure data accuracy and validity, the literature was selected based on specific criteria, including relevance to the research theme, the academic background of the authors, the publisher's reputation, and publication date (with a priority given to works published within the last five years to maintain currency). Literature was accessed through university libraries, digital catalogs, and online databases such as Google Scholar, DOAJ, Garuda, and nationally and internationally accredited e-journals.

The data analysis process was conducted using a content analysis approach, a technique focused on identifying, organizing, and interpreting the meanings contained within various scholarly texts. The initial stage involved intensive reading and careful examination of each document's content, followed by the selection of excerpts or sections closely related to the issue of integrating Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values within the *Merdeka Curriculum*. The selected data were then classified based on specific themes or focal points, such as the concept of PAI values, fundamental principles, and others.

Themes identified include the *Merdeka Curriculum*, value-based learning approaches, and challenges in implementation at the elementary school level. Following the categorization process, a synthesis was conducted to examine the relationships among these concepts and to draw overarching conclusions from the diverse perspectives found in the literature.

Through this method, the researcher aims to construct a strong and in-depth scientific argument by referring to credible and relevant sources. Library research provides the researcher with the opportunity to formulate conclusions based on logical reasoning and the synthesis of various theories and previous studies, without relying on empirical field data. Additionally, this approach enables the researcher to explain the context of integrating Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values into curriculum

policy from broader pedagogical, cultural, and normative perspectives. By prioritizing source accuracy and analytical depth, the findings of this study are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of contextualized religious education aligned with the direction of national educational transformation through the *Merdeka Curriculum*.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### ***The Concept of Integrating Islamic Religious Education Values in the Merdeka Curriculum***

The integration of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values within the *Merdeka Curriculum* is an approach that comprehensively incorporates Islamic teachings into the learning process and school life. Generally, integration refers to the process of uniting two or more distinct elements into a harmonious whole. In the educational context, integration means systematically embedding religious values into the curriculum system, rather than separating them from other educational components. Islamic Religious Education itself is a deliberate effort to instill Islamic teachings through instruction, habituation, and exemplary behavior so that students are able to apply Islamic values in their daily lives. According to Ramayulis (2008), Islamic Religious Education is the process of shaping the personality of a Muslim who is obedient to Allah, possesses noble character, and is capable of living in accordance with Islamic law both individually and socially.

The *Merdeka Curriculum*, as a new policy within Indonesia's education system, signifies a considerable shift in direction. This curriculum is designed with the principles of flexibility, differentiation, and contextualization, allowing educational units and teachers to develop learning processes tailored to the characteristics of their students. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (2022), the *Merdeka Curriculum* emphasizes student-centered learning, focuses on essential competencies, and prioritizes character strengthening through the *Pancasila Student Profile*. This highlights the importance of integrating Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values, as Islamic principles such as honesty, justice, responsibility, mutual assistance, and peace-loving are inherent components of the religiosity and morality dimensions that the curriculum aims to cultivate.

According to Al-Attas (1979), Islamic education is not merely a process of knowledge transmission but also the formation of *adab* attitudes that reflect Islamic behavioral ethics in life. Therefore, the integration of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values should not only occur through formal IRE instruction but must also be reflected in teachers' behavior, patterns of school interaction, and a school culture that supports the comprehensive internalization of values. In other words, religious values must be embedded within all educational elements: curriculum, methods, media, and evaluation. Within the *Merdeka Curriculum*, this can be realized through intramural activities such as strengthening project-based PAI learning, co-curricular activities in the *Pancasila Student Profile* Strengthening Project (P5), as well as extracurricular activities that support religious practice and social engagement.

Educational experts such as Tilaar (2004) argue that the curriculum should not be confined merely to knowledge transfer but must aim to develop holistic individuals those who are aware of their social, moral, and spiritual responsibilities. Therefore, the integration of religious values into the curriculum should go beyond mere content inclusion and be realized through learning experiences that concretely shape students' character. According to Zuhairini et al. (1993), successful religious education is not measured by students' ability to memorize numerous verses or hadiths but by their capacity to demonstrate behavior consistent with Islamic teachings in daily life. This aligns with the *Merdeka Curriculum* approach, which emphasizes authentic learning experiences through contextual and reflective projects.

In practice, the concept of integration requires synergy among teachers, particularly in designing thematic learning that combines religious content with general subjects. For example, social studies lessons that explore the theme of Indonesia's cultural diversity can be linked to Islamic teachings on tolerance, respect for differences, and *ukhuwah* (brotherhood). Similarly, in science classes, the values of *tauhid* (monotheism) and the majesty of God's creation can be integrated into lessons about the universe. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers and other subject teachers can collaborate to design modules that not only meet academic requirements but also strengthen students' moral foundations. This collaboration is essential to ensure that religious values are not confined exclusively to PAI classes but are embedded throughout the entire learning process at school.

The concept of integration is also inseparable from the role of teachers as role models. According to Hasan Langgulung (1986), the success of Islamic education is greatly determined by the attitudes, behavior, and integrity of teachers who serve as exemplars for students. Within the *Merdeka Curriculum*, teachers are expected not only to act as instructors but also as character mentors who facilitate students' spiritual growth through dialogue, guidance, and habituation. Through daily interactions, teachers can naturally and contextually convey Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values, enabling students to internalize these principles meaningfully students do not feel lectured to but are guided with empathy. Therefore, the success of integrating religious values into the curriculum is also highly influenced by the personal qualities of the educators.

Thus, the concept of integrating Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values within the *Merdeka Curriculum* represents an effort to holistically and contextually embed Islamic teachings across all dimensions of elementary education. The goal is not only to produce knowledgeable students but also to cultivate a strong value orientation in their social and spiritual lives. This integration is comprehensive rather than partial, encompassing lesson planning, the implementation of learning activities, social interactions within the school, and moral reflection on life. If applied consistently, this concept has great potential to nurture a generation that excels academically while embodying strong Islamic character, as envisioned by a value-based national education system.

#### ***Implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Values in Primary Schools***

The implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values in elementary schools is an integral part of efforts to shape students' character based on moral, spiritual, and social values. At this level, children are in a critical early developmental stage, making it a strategic period for receiving and internalizing life values. Religious education is not merely understood as the delivery of dogma or religious teachings in a textual manner but as a personality development process that integrates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. Values such as honesty, patience, trustworthiness, discipline, tolerance, and responsibility are taught progressively so that students not only understand them conceptually but are also capable of practicing them in daily life. In this context, Islamic education serves as a foundational pillar in character formation from an early age, enabling students to face future moral and social challenges effectively.

One of the main approaches to implementing Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values in elementary schools is through contextual and interactive learning that involves direct student experiences. Teachers can deliver material in enjoyable and easily understandable ways, such as using exemplary stories from the prophets, accounts of the companions, or everyday illustrations related to Islamic values. For instance, when discussing the concept of honesty, teachers do not merely explain its definition but also connect it to concrete examples, such as refraining from cheating during exams or returning lost items. This approach is proven more effective as it engages both the reasoning and emotions of children in understanding the value. Additionally, methods such as role-playing, group discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and mini-projects can be employed to strengthen students' understanding of how religious values are applied in real life. Such learning experiences facilitate gradual and profound internalization of values.

Besides learning and habituation, teacher exemplarity is also a key factor in the successful implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values. In Islam, exemplarity, or *uswah hasanah*, is the most effective educational method, as demonstrated by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). In elementary schools, teachers serve as central figures who are closely observed and emulated by students. Teachers' behaviors that demonstrate honesty, compassion, patience, and discipline are more readily imitated by children than mere verbal instructions.

Therefore, teachers not only serve as conveyors of knowledge but also as role models of values in daily life. When teachers demonstrate consistency between their words and actions, students learn through observation and imitation, which ultimately shapes their character indirectly yet effectively. Hence, strengthening religious values within teachers themselves is an inseparable part of the success of character education in elementary schools.

The implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values can also be expanded through collective school activities such as celebrating Islamic holidays, social service projects, environmental care, orphan sponsorship, and charity fundraising. These activities function not only as ceremonial events but also as forms of socio-spiritual education that teach students the importance of sharing, caring for others, and upholding humanitarian values from an Islamic perspective. By involving students in such

activities, they learn firsthand the essence of Islamic teachings in communal life. Schools that successfully foster a participatory culture in religious activities actively contribute to the development of students' attitudes and empathy. Furthermore, the involvement of parents and the wider community in supporting these activities is crucial to ensure that the values taught at school align with those upheld in the students' external environments.

Nevertheless, the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values in elementary schools is not without challenges. Some teachers still face difficulties integrating religious values into cross-curricular learning. At times, the teaching approaches used remain traditional, centered on memorization and lecturing, which limits students' opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of values. Additionally, not all schools have policies or programs that systematically support religious activities. A lack of teacher training in value-based learning approaches, limited supporting facilities, and suboptimal collaboration between PAI teachers and classroom teachers also hinder this process. Therefore, a comprehensive strategy is needed from schools to strengthen value integration, including regular training, the provision of habituation programs, and the establishment of school task forces focused on character strengthening.

Thus, the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values in elementary schools must be viewed as a comprehensive process involving an integrated pedagogical, psychological, and socio-cultural approach. Effective religious education not only teaches what is right but also nurtures students' willingness and ability to apply these values in real life. Through enjoyable learning experiences, repeated habituation, living exemplars, and meaningful collective activities, religious values can be naturally internalized within students. Elementary schools serve as a strategic starting point in shaping holistic Muslim personalities students who are not only intellectually capable but also wise in attitude and behavior in accordance with Islamic teachings. Therefore, the roles of teachers, principals, parents, and the entire educational environment are crucial to the long-term success of this process.

#### ***Challenges and Opportunities in the Implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Values in Primary Schools within the Merdeka Curriculum***

The implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values within the *Merdeka Curriculum* in elementary schools presents significant strategic opportunities while facing considerable complexities. The *Merdeka Curriculum*, which emphasizes value-based learning, independence, and differentiation, provides ample space for religious education to be integrated not merely as a separate subject but throughout the entire educational process. One major opportunity lies in the ease of linking Islamic values with the dimensions of the *Pancasila Student Profile*, particularly aspects of faith, devotion to God Almighty, and noble character. This opens avenues for PAI teachers to design learning experiences that not only target religious knowledge but also shape attitudes and character consistent with Islamic teachings. Through the Character Strengthening Project (P5) as an implementation platform, teachers have the opportunity to embed values such as honesty, tolerance, trustworthiness, and responsibility within cross-curricular activities.

Furthermore, the *Merdeka Curriculum* policy, which grants educational units the flexibility to develop their own School Operational Curriculum (KOS), presents a strategic opportunity. This allows schools to design religious learning activities that are more contextual and relevant to students' lives. Elementary schools can develop flagship religious programs such as Qur'an literacy, daily worship practices, moral character strengthening, and social activities based on Islamic values. This flexibility positions Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers not only as instructors but also as drivers of a religious culture within the school environment. Even in the context of educational digitalization, technology can be utilized to enrich IRE materials through interactive media, children's dawah videos, and Islamic applications that support enjoyable and meaningful learning experiences for students.

However, despite these various opportunities, significant challenges remain in implementation. One of the main challenges is the limited understanding among some teachers regarding the *Merdeka Curriculum* approach itself, particularly in integrating religious values into interdisciplinary learning. Many Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers have yet to receive adequate training in developing project-based teaching modules or designing learning activities that embed values contextually. Reliance on lecturing and memorization methods hinders the development of living and applicable values. Additionally, high administrative burdens and minimal collaboration among teachers result in suboptimal integration of religious values in daily practice. This situation underscores the need to

strengthen the capacity of IRE teachers through ongoing training, mentoring, and professional learning communities.

Another challenge lies in the diverse social environments of students. Family background, household values, and the influence of digital media are external factors that contribute to shaping students' character. When the religious values taught at school are not supported by the home environment or even contradict the social realities students face the internalization process of these values may be hindered. Therefore, the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values requires the active involvement of parents and the broader community. Schools need to establish stronger partnerships with families to build a synergy of values, for instance through intensive communication, Islamic parenting activities, or the involvement of parents in religious programs at school. Through this collaborative approach, Islamic values taught in the classroom can extend beyond the school walls and become an integral part of students' everyday lives.

Infrastructure challenges also pose significant issues in several primary schools, particularly those located in underdeveloped, frontier, and outermost (3T) regions. Limitations in facilities such as prayer spaces, supplementary Islamic Religious Education (PAI) books, and access to technology can hinder teachers from developing innovative models of religious instruction.

On the other hand, the disparity in quality between urban and remote schools has the potential to create inequality in the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values. This situation calls for affirmative policies from the government, including budgetary support, equitable distribution of learning resources, and the strengthening of the role of Islamic education supervisors in each region, to ensure that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum can proceed fairly and uniformly.

Despite these complex challenges, there remains a wide-open opportunity to realize a holistic and grounded approach to religious education in primary schools. It requires a shared commitment among teachers, school principals, supervisors, parents, and the government to position Islamic education not merely as a component of the formal curriculum, but as a set of values embedded within the school culture. The Merdeka Curriculum, with its flexibility and character-oriented focus, offers ample space to authentically and comprehensively integrate Islamic values into the educational process. With strong intention, appropriate training, and sustained collaboration, Islamic education in primary schools will not only endure but evolve into a moral force that shapes the future generation of the nation.

## **CONCLUSION**

The integration of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values into the Merdeka Curriculum at the primary school level represents a crucial effort to systematically instill moral and spiritual values from an early age. Primary education is the earliest and most strategic phase in shaping students' character, making the continuous cultivation of Islamic values—such as honesty, trustworthiness, responsibility, compassion, simplicity, and tolerance especially important. The Merdeka Curriculum, with its emphasis on learning freedom and differentiated instruction, offers significant opportunities for teachers and schools to design educational experiences that not only prioritize academic achievement but also foster noble values in students in a concrete and contextually relevant manner.

The concept of integrating Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values into the Merdeka Curriculum is no longer partial or separated from general subjects, but rather embedded within the entire educational process. This integration can be implemented through three main approaches: intracurricular learning that connects religious values with subject content, cocurricular activities such as the Pancasila Student Profile projects that instill character values based on Islamic principles, and extracurricular programs that support the habituation and application of values in students' real-life experiences. Teacher role modeling, daily routines, and the reinforcement of a religious school culture serve as highly effective instruments in instilling Islamic values among students.

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