


Optimizing the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education Learning: Implementation Study and Challenges

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History: Recieved: 30-04-2025 Revised: 25-05-2025 Accepted: 30-06-2025</p> <p>Keyword: Merdeka Curriculum; Islamic Religious Education; Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5).</p>	<p>This study aims to how the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is carried out at SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro in the learning of Islamic Religious Education in P5 learning. This study uses qualitative research with a phenomenological approach. Data collection was carried out by conducting observations, interviews, and document studies. Data analysis techniques using the Miles and Huberman techniques include data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. The results of the study at SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro stated that the method that is often used is the group discussion method. In addition, there are also P5 activities which are school programs in the Merdeka Curriculum. This P5 is carried out to realize creativity, cooperation, new ideas, responsibility, and good socialization in students. In addition, there are also challenges or problems faced by Islamic Religious Education teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, namely 4 problems, including; Students cannot read the Qur'an yet, textbooks are limited, students are lazy to do assignments and students are lazy to pray. The overall implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA N 1 Wuryantoro is quite good, but there are still several challenges that need strategic solutions.</p>

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INTRODUCTION

The implementation of an effective education system demands substantial transformation aligned with the dynamic development of society. The development of education requires strong and targeted policies to enhance school quality. Schools serve as intermediaries in developing human resources that play a central role in nation-building processes (Hidayati & Rohanah, 2015). Therefore, education must evolve in tandem with the times and the increasingly complex challenges faced by schools in this era of globalization. The advancement of globalization significantly influences the development of science and technology. However, despite its benefits, globalization has also resulted in

adverse effects, such as the erosion of students' moral values, widening social inequalities, and the displacement of local cultures. Wahid (2024) notes that digital integration has redefined religious identities and practices, posing ethical challenges in Muslim societies. On the other hand, globalization has positively contributed to improving teacher quality, stimulating student innovation, and enhancing educational standards (Saodah et al., 2020). To address these diverse challenges, enhancing human resources through quality education remains a critical solution (Fitri, 2016).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Indonesia's education sector underwent substantial disruption. The pandemic not only reduced student achievement levels but also exposed deep-rooted systemic issues in the national education system. Studies have revealed that Indonesia has faced a significant learning crisis in recent years. In response, the Ministry of Education and Culture initiated reforms through the development of the Merdeka Curriculum as a recovery strategy (Khoirurrijal et al., 2022). This curriculum reflects a broader historical trend in Indonesian education policy, following earlier curricular models from 1947 to 2013, including the 2006 KTSP and the 2013 Curriculum (Kurikulum 2013), revised in 2018 (Fauzi, 2022). According to Nawawi et al. (2023), curriculum development involves not only planning and implementation but also systematic evaluation, highlighting the importance of continuous improvement. The Merdeka Curriculum marks a shift towards greater flexibility and student-centered learning, aiming to address both cognitive and character development goals.

Since its rollout in the 2022/2023 academic year, the Merdeka Curriculum has introduced significant changes to formal education in Indonesia. Its emphasis on learner autonomy, holistic character formation, and the integration of Pancasila values through the P5 project represents a transformative approach. In the context of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), the curriculum not only focuses on cognitive domains but also emphasizes moral and spiritual development. However, the practical implementation of P5 has been limited. Teachers often struggle to align P5 themes—such as entrepreneurship, diversity, or mutual cooperation—with Islamic values, leading to inconsistencies in curriculum execution (S. Tuerah & Tuerah, 2023). These challenges are also supported by findings from Sahibe et al. (2025), who emphasize that PAI learning management requires enhanced teacher readiness, structured leadership, and collaborative practices to navigate curriculum reform effectively.

In practice, several obstacles continue to hinder the effective application of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education. Among the most pressing issues are teachers' difficulties in selecting suitable and relevant P5 themes that reflect Islamic principles, a lack of access to guiding literature or models of best practice, and insufficient infrastructure to support meaningful project-based learning (Mustofa et al., 2024). Rumawang et al. (2024) also observed similar challenges in rural and under-resourced schools, noting significant disparities in curriculum implementation. The gap between curriculum design and practical implementation points to the need for deeper research on how PAI teachers adapt the curriculum to local and religious contexts. Although previous studies, such as that by Abdurroziq & Hanif (2024), emphasize the creative potential the

curriculum offers for both students and teachers, these opportunities are often hampered by the lack of thematic and pedagogical support. Jasiah et al. (2024), in their systematic review, reveal varying interpretations and inconsistent applications of Merdeka Curriculum principles by Islamic education teachers across schools, highlighting a critical area for intervention.

Moreover, the evaluation dimension within PAI learning under the Merdeka Curriculum remains underexplored. Rahman et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of aligning learning outcomes with project-based evaluation models to ensure coherence between instructional practices and assessment. However, this remains a significant gap in teacher implementation. Similarly, Sulistyowati et al. (2025) underscore the critical role of continuous professional development and resilience training in helping teachers adapt to curriculum changes, especially in digital and blended learning environments. While these studies provide valuable insights, they often stop short of detailing the specific methods or strategies teachers use to successfully align P5 projects with Islamic values in their classrooms. Therefore, it becomes essential to investigate concrete strategies and instructional practices that PAI teachers apply in real-world contexts.

Given these issues, the current study aims to explore and analyze the strategies employed by PAI teachers in implementing the P5 project within the Merdeka Curriculum framework, ensuring its alignment with Islamic teachings and relevance to students' lives. This research is urgent, especially amidst ongoing curriculum transformations and the heightened need for Islamic education to play a formative role in student character development. Noor et al. (2023) stress the centrality of PAI in shaping students' moral values and personal identity, reinforcing the importance of effectively adapting PAI content to new curricular models. As noted by Ahyat (2017), Islamic Religious Education is not merely the transmission of knowledge but a holistic effort to cultivate faith, practice, and lifelong devotion among students. Consequently, this study provides an important contribution to understanding how Islamic education can be preserved and strengthened through curriculum innovation, equipping teachers to address current educational demands with both competence and cultural sensitivity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Merdeka Curriculum

The Independent Learning Curriculum is a new policy realized by the Minister of Education Nadiem Makarim as a breakthrough in restoring the authority of the management system in the education of school principals and local governments (Hutabarat et al., 2022). The policy of the independent learning curriculum was created with a desire to make Indonesia a smart, smart, and wise country that can realize a more advanced life for its people (Asfiati, 2020). The Merdeka Curriculum is a diverse learning curriculum. In the Merdeka Curriculum, students are more emphasized on content to understand and develop competencies. The Merdeka Curriculum aims to restore power from schools and manage education to suit the conditions in their regions. The Merdeka Curriculum is also considered

to be able to accelerate to achieve the goals of national education (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

The Merdeka Curriculum is a curriculum system that focuses on the personality, interests, and talents of students. Learning focuses on essential content to help learners deepen their understanding and improve their skills. According to Nadiem Makarim, teachers should create an independent learning curriculum before teaching (Aisyah et al., 2022). This Merdeka Curriculum is supported by 3 reasons. First, the education that was implemented before was carried out very rigidly and was too bound by rules, for example bound by the UN, RPP, and so on. The existence of these rules will not support well to achieve the goals of national education. Second, the achievement of ineffective goals can be seen from the results of the tests achieved by students in international tests. Students are still not strong in critical reasoning and the main thing when it comes to literacy and numeracy. Third, the policy of freedom of learning that is not implemented rigidly and implemented flexibly is one of the things that can be a solution to education problems (Azkiya, 2023).

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum can be carried out in each educational institution according to the readiness of the school. In the current reality, this Merdeka Curriculum is seen as a more flexible curriculum when compared to the previous curriculum. Because in the application of learning, teachers, students and schools feel that there is more confusion. For example, students when studying in class are not required to read or memorize, but they can also learn how to make a project to apply from the P5 (Idhartono, 2022)

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum expects all schools at every level to facilitate decent learning facilities for students that can be used to support their success (Pratikno *et al.*, 2022). This is done so that the Merdeka Curriculum implemented can be carried out properly. The Merdeka Curriculum also has certain characteristics, including: 1) based on projects and characters 2) focusing on essential materials 3) flexible for teachers and students. (Redana & Suprpta, 2023)

Islamic Religious Education

Islamic religious education is considered one of the main supporters in the national education system to improve the quality of human beings in increasing faith and piety. In the academic world, Islamic religious education lies in the scope of discovery, not only in the scope of justifiers (Noor, 2014). In the book Drajat (2000) it is stated that Islamic religious education is a teaching that parents want to convey to their students so that they can understand, practice Islamic teachings, and make it a guideline for life and education.

Islamic Religious Education is a form of learning process with the aim of instilling Islamic religious, moral and ethical values in students. The main purpose of Islamic religious education is to realize a personality who has strong faith, piety, has noble morals and is able to implement Islamic teachings in their daily lives. Islamic religious education also teaches its students to socialize in society well, which is taught in muamalah learning about social interaction (Salisah et al., 2024).

Islamic Religious Education is a subject given to students at various levels from elementary school to high school. In the context of a wide scope of material and the availability of a limited number of lesson hours, this Merdeka Curriculum can be a solution to various problems faced by teachers in teaching Islamic Religious Education subjects. Implementing an Merdeka Curriculum requires several things that must be considered, including (Rifa'i et al., 2022): In learning, Islamic Religious Education must be able to move students' critical attitude and creativity to develop. In a critical context, Islamic Religious Education that is taught must be related to or in accordance with the current context and also have its benefits. In the creativity contest, Islamic Religious Education must be able to make students can collaborate and interact well. In addition, Islamic religious education also teaches students to build confidence in themselves (Darise, 2021).

In addition, Islamic religious education teachers are required to be able to analyze the learning outcomes that have been stipulated in the BSKAP Decree no. 33 of 2022 to be a learning goal to be achieved according to the level and phase of students. In this learning achievement, it is not limited to the school year but will be grouped according to the form of the phase so that the implementation can be flexible. However, if the Islamic Religious Education teacher does not provide initial screening for his students, then later it will determine the learning goals that will be achieved during learning, it will be difficult. Therefore, Islamic religious education teachers are required to make assessments whose results from the assessment will be used to see and measure the achievement of the goals that have been made (Uswatun, 2021). Based on some of the opinions above, it can be concluded that Islamic Religious Education is an effort to guide students in learning to continue to learn Islamic teachings and practice them in daily life.

METHOD

This research was conducted at SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro using a qualitative research method. Qualitative research is used to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems. It emphasizes detailed, interactive, and two-way communication to uncover phenomena based on the experiences and perspectives of participants. The approach used in this study is phenomenological, which focuses on describing how individuals experience a particular phenomenon. The phenomenological approach is appropriate for this study because it seeks to understand how PAI teachers and students perceive and make sense of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, addressing not only what happens but also how and why it happens.

The data in this study were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data sources included direct observations and semi-structured interviews with Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers and students. Observations were conducted at the beginning of the semester, specifically during the implementation of the P5 project activities in school. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with PAI teachers across grades X to XII to gain insights into their strategies, experiences, and challenges. In addition, interviews were also conducted with three selected students to validate the findings from the teacher interviews and to capture student perspectives the implementation of the curriculum.

Secondary data sources were collected from relevant school documents, such as the Merdeka Curriculum implementation guidelines, syllabi, and evaluation reports. To ensure the validity and credibility of the collected data, the researcher employed the data analysis model by Miles and Huberman, which involves three main steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This analytical process was conducted interactively and continuously throughout the research period. By following these procedures, the researcher ensured that the data obtained from multiple sources were authentic, reliable, and accurately reflected the realities of curriculum implementation in the field.

RESULTS

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education Learning at SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro has been progressing relatively well each academic year. The school has adopted the core characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum, where learning is centered on essential competencies and student needs. The delivery of PAI material has become more focused, emphasizing core concepts that integrate religious values with real-life relevance. PAI teachers often use group discussion methods to encourage students' active participation and deepen their understanding of religious teachings. This shift toward essential material delivery not only simplifies content but also strengthens students' ability to reflect on their spiritual growth and values.

From classroom observations and interviews, it was found that learning activities cover the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Cognitively, students are not only encouraged to memorize concepts but are also guided to engage with various sources, both conventional and digital, to enhance critical and reflective thinking skills. This is aligned with Kruskopf et al. (2024), who argue that building cognitive mastery in the digital age requires diverse learning exposure and strong academic self-efficacy. Psychomotor development is also promoted through school religious activities, such as dhuha prayer, congregational prayer, and Friday prayer. In the affective domain, students demonstrate the application of Islamic teachings in social life both at school and at home, suggesting that religious instruction is being internalized meaningfully.

1. Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5)

The implementation of P5 within the context of PAI learning at SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro shows significant integration, particularly with themes such as entrepreneurship and mutual cooperation. Teachers make an effort to contextualize Islamic values within the framework of each P5 theme. For instance, under the theme of entrepreneurship, students are taught the importance of honesty, trustworthiness, and sharia-based economic principles. These values are not only discussed theoretically but also applied in practice through student-organized mini-markets and project-based simulations of Islamic business ethics.

However, the implementation of P5 is not without its limitations. Although teachers are motivated to align religious teachings with project themes, there is still a lack of concrete guidance and structured examples. As noted by Jasiah et al. (2024), teachers often rely on personal initiative and interpretation due to limited standardized modules or support systems. The gap between national curriculum expectations and classroom realities necessitates stronger institutional support. Rahman et al. (2024) emphasize that effective project-based learning in PAI requires clear evaluative models and pedagogical training to ensure alignment with both academic and character development goals.

2. Development of soft skills

Soft skills development is another core emphasis of the Merdeka Curriculum as implemented in Islamic Religious Education. At SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro, teachers report positive improvements in students' collaborative skills, public speaking, responsibility, and empathy through regular involvement in classroom discussions, peer teaching, and P5 projects. Group tasks and presentations encourage students to take initiative, communicate ideas clearly, and build mutual respect. These findings align with Sahibe et al. (2025), who state that effective learning management in PAI fosters not only spiritual growth but also practical competencies essential for real-world engagement.

Moreover, religious practices such as organizing school prayer sessions, participating in Islamic competitions, and managing charity initiatives are used as tools to cultivate leadership, discipline, and civic engagement. Teachers play a mentoring role, guiding students to connect Islamic teachings with their behavior and attitude. Sulistyowati et al. (2025) point out that teacher readiness and resilience play a vital role in this process, especially in adapting to new methods and tools introduced by the Merdeka Curriculum. The school's approach indicates that PAI learning has begun to transcend rote memorization and now serves as a platform for nurturing future leaders grounded in faith and ethics.

3. Learning methods

In terms of instructional strategies, PAI teachers at SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro predominantly employ interactive and student-centered methods. Group discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and role plays are used to enhance classroom engagement. Teachers also design contextual projects that integrate religious content with students' daily lives, fostering deeper understanding and practical application of the material. The entrepreneurship-themed P5 project, for instance, blends theoretical concepts of Islamic finance with experiential learning activities such as product marketing based on Islamic principles.

The effectiveness of these methods, however, is influenced by ongoing teacher development. Teachers are encouraged by school leadership to regularly participate in workshops and training sessions related to the Merdeka Curriculum. This initiative is essential for building pedagogical capacity and addressing content delivery challenges. As Rumawang et al. (2024) highlight, schools need to provide adequate support structures and resources to ensure consistent implementation across all learning areas, especially in subjects like PAI that carry moral and spiritual weight. The school's policy of shifting away from

mid-semester exams towards performance-based assessment also reflects this paradigm, emphasizing learning processes and authentic outcomes.

Challenges in the Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum In Islamic Religious Education Learning

Despite the progress observed in curriculum implementation, several challenges persist in the delivery of Islamic Religious Education under the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro. One primary issue is the limited availability of printed textbooks for students. Observations revealed that only around 50% of the students receive physical books, while the rest rely on digital formats. Although teachers attempt to bridge this gap by distributing PDF versions of the texts, they express concerns that digital materials do not sufficiently support interactive and effective learning experiences, especially for students with limited access to technology or lower digital literacy (Jasiah et al., 2024).

Another significant challenge is the variation in students' ability to read and recite the Qur'an. Some students struggle with basic Qur'anic literacy, which hampers their ability to engage fully with the subject matter. Considering that PAI learning hours are limited to just three hours per week—one of which is allocated for Qur'an reading—the time constraint further complicates content delivery. According to Sahibe et al. (2025), the success of curriculum implementation is highly dependent on the balance between content scope and time allocation. These limitations require innovative solutions, such as differentiated instruction and supplementary mentoring sessions, to ensure that all students can access and benefit from the curriculum.

Furthermore, teacher constraints also present obstacles. Many PAI teachers are still in the process of adapting to the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum. As highlighted by Sulistyowati et al. (2025), training and support systems for teachers must be continuous and context-specific, especially for religious education teachers who must navigate both pedagogical and theological dimensions. Without structured guidance, the risk of inconsistent interpretation and application of P5 themes increases. Therefore, there is an urgent need for collaborative learning communities among educators, where teachers can share strategies, develop model lesson plans, and receive regular feedback to strengthen curriculum execution in Islamic Religious Education (Rahman et al., 2024).

DISCUSSION

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education learning at SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro

An Merdeka Curriculum has been applied to all grade levels from grade 10 to grade 12. In its implementation, efforts have been made to the maximum. The application of this self-paced curriculum to all subjects is more focused on student practice in the classroom, not just teaching theory. In learning, teachers play the role of facilitators and students are required to be more active (Haan & Ani, 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum is more optimal in content so that students have a grace period to explore concepts and improve skills, and

for teachers to facilitate learning that meets the needs of students' interests will have the freedom to choose from a variety of tools (Khoirurrijal, 2022).

In PAI learning, the delivery of material is carried out by the teacher using group discussion methods and direct practice. For example, in fiqh material on body management, students are divided into several groups to understand the material on body management. Once they understand together with their groups, students are asked to practice it directly. With this method, students can understand from theory and also practice that can be applied in their social life. Practical learning methods are considered effective learning methods, because they can make it easier for students to understand the material by showing students the process of certain circumstances (Sugiyantoro et al., 2024).

In the application of PAI subject learning, maximum differentiation learning has not been carried out. In the use of the group discussion method, students who have been able to help their friends are asked to help their friends who are not able to do so. So the goal of each group is the same. Meanwhile, in differential learning, it accommodates the different needs and abilities of students. This is in line with the research of Azkiyah (2023) who states that learning carried out by the group discussion method with the same needs is not optimal is said to be different learning.

In this Merdeka Curriculum learning, there are also P5 activities. In addition to students participating in theoretical and practical learning in the classroom, they are also required to participate in P5 activities as this is also a program from the school. In this P5 activity, it can be measured whether students are really active in learning or just playing around. This P5 activity will realize creativity, cooperation, new ideas, accountability, and good socialization. The P5 curriculum in Islamic Religious Education is adjusted to the learning theme. One of the themes in P5 is the theme of entrepreneurship. The implementation of PAI in P5, especially on the theme of entrepreneurship at SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro, is carried out to improve and teach students how to do business honestly and inseparably from Islamic values.

Then in carrying out P5 activities, it can be seen that the characteristics of students are in accordance with the P5 criteria or not. In addition, worship will also always be monitored in this P5 activity with the provision of the presence of P5 prayers. Islamic religious education aims to teach Islamic teachings and values through training and teaching in the classroom so that students acquire and practice faith, piety and noble character. (Sinaga, 2020)

1. Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5)

In the Merdeka Curriculum, P5 or *Pancasila Student Profile* is one of the important pillars of student character formation. The theme of entrepreneurship in the P5 project aims to foster business spirit, creativity, and independence. PAI plays an important role in ensuring that this spirit is accompanied by ethical and spiritual values.

Tables 1. PAI Value Integration

Aspects of PAI	Explanation
Morals in trading	Students are taught how to do honest and trustworthy Islamic business.

Concepts of halal and haram	Students learn some halal products, and how to get halal sustenance
Alms and sharing	Students are taught to always give alms to people in need by setting aside part of the proceeds from their efforts
The Story of the Prophet Muhammad	Imitating the story of Rasalullah as a successful and honest and trustworthy trader.

In its implementation, PAI teachers at SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro implemented several steps in carrying out the P5 project in the theme of entrepreneurship.

Tables 2. Project activity steps

Theme	Activity
Material PAI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PAI teachers delivered material on trading in Islam and halal sustenance to students. Students learn related to hadith about honesty and responsibility in business.
Business Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students are divided into several groups Students plan a simple business for each group Students determine the name of the business, capital, and profit distribution
Entrepreneurial Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students do their business in the school environment (either during market day activities or selling during break hours) Students serve buyers and record transactions well and politely.
Sharing and Reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some of the efforts made by students are distributed for social activities (either during Friday blessing activities or to people who are close to the school environment in need) Students reflect on their values: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are some experiences they can take from these activities? What is the relationship between Islam and Pancasila?

Then, for the assessment aspect of the P5 project, PAI teachers take it in 3 domains, namely related to the assessment of attitudes, knowledge and skills. The attitude assessment includes honesty, responsibility, cooperation, and concern for students. Kemduain, in the assessment of knowledge includes an assessment of students' understanding of the material of trading ethics in Islam. The skill assessment includes assessments in business planning, presentation of products sold and business reports.

2. Development of soft skills

The Merdeka Curriculum provides ample opportunities for students to develop soft skills alongside cognitive competencies, especially through Islamic Religious Education

(PAI) learning. At SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro, students engage in group discussions, public speaking, and collaborative projects, which hone their communication, critical thinking, and leadership skills. These activities are aligned with the holistic development approach advocated by the Merdeka Curriculum, where education is not only about knowledge transfer but also about shaping behavior and social competence (Ali Abdurroziq & Hanif, 2024). Teachers intentionally design lesson plans that incorporate real-life contexts, enabling students to practice empathy, honesty, and teamwork in both academic and social settings. These soft skills are essential in preparing students to be responsible citizens and ethical leaders. As emphasized by Ahyat (2017), Islamic education is not merely doctrinal but also developmental, aiming to form individuals who serve Allah with integrity and social responsibility. The reinforcement of soft skills through religious practice—such as organizing prayer groups or charity drives—makes learning more meaningful. Such practices reflect Daradjat's (2000) view that religious education must touch the soul and behavior of learners. Thus, soft skill development in PAI becomes a concrete vehicle for realizing character education in era freedom to learn.

The development of students' soft skills is further supported through the P5 project themes, which allow students to apply Islamic values in practical and collaborative environments. For instance, under the entrepreneurship theme, students learn about integrity and fairness in business, and in diversity themes, they practice mutual respect and tolerance. These projects reinforce values while promoting leadership and problem-solving. According to Haan & Ani (2024), project-based learning under the Merdeka Curriculum enhances student engagement and character development when properly facilitated by trained educators. However, the effectiveness of this approach depends on the readiness and creativity of teachers in designing meaningful activities. Jasiyah et al. (2024) found that many PAI teachers still lack adequate models and references for aligning religious content with project themes, which sometimes causes project implementation to miss character targets. Therefore, school leadership must provide training and resource support for teachers, especially in PAI subjects, to connect religious values with applicable soft skills in a contextual and measurable way. As Amelia Rizky Idhartono (2022) argues, digital and character literacy must go hand-in-hand in developing a responsive and future-ready generation. When PAI is implemented creatively, it can foster not only religious knowledge but also resilience, cooperation, and adaptability in students. This underscores the strategic role of PAI in embedding life skills that are rooted in Islamic moral teachings.

Nevertheless, the development of soft skills within the PAI framework still faces several practical challenges. Some students, particularly those with low motivation or weak religious foundations, struggle to internalize values without sustained mentoring and feedback. According to Sahibe et al. (2025), effective learning management in Islamic education requires ongoing assessment, not only of students' knowledge but also their emotional and social growth. This calls for a shift in teacher mindset—from content transmitters to facilitators of personal development. Additionally, as noted by Rumawang et al. (2024), infrastructure limitations and the absence of a standardized soft skills rubric in religious education often cause inconsistency in outcomes across schools. Teachers need

guidance in evaluating aspects like empathy, honesty, or discipline without relying solely on subjective observation. This can be achieved through peer-assessment tools, self-reflection journals, and behavior-based rubrics. Furthermore, as Nawawi et al. (2023) note, curriculum implementation in the Society 5.0 era must embrace character, culture, and competence simultaneously. With proper support, the integration of soft skills in PAI learning under the Merdeka Curriculum can be refined to not only create morally grounded individuals but also socially competent leaders of the future. In this regard, the school, community, and educational policymakers must collaborate to optimize the potential of PAI in character formation and national development.

3. Learning methods

The application of learning methods in the Merdeka Curriculum for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro reflects an adaptive and contextualized approach. PAI teachers often use group discussions, question-and-answer sessions, student presentations, and case studies to actively involve students in exploring subject matter. This strategy aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum's philosophy that places students as active agents in the learning process. During lessons, teachers relate Islamic material to real-life situations, enabling students to internalize values in a meaningful way (Ali Abdurroziq & Hanif, 2024). Practical activities such as congregational prayers, entrepreneurship-themed P5 projects, and social projects are also integrated into learning. Teachers no longer rely solely on lectures but instead foster a more participatory environment. Noor et al. (2023) argue that contextual teaching strategies in Islamic education strengthen religious character and student independence. At the same time, teachers' ability to manage classroom dynamics plays a vital role in the success of these methods. Therefore, ongoing pedagogical training and support are essential for designing instructional methods that meet the evolving needs of students.

Learning methods under the Merdeka Curriculum also emphasize the development of 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and effective communication. PAI teachers incorporate digital tools into the learning process through videos, online quizzes, and digital learning resources. This shift supports the need to improve students' digital literacy competencies (Idhartono, 2022). Nevertheless, challenges persist regarding access to digital infrastructure and teacher preparedness. Some teachers still face difficulties in designing technology-based lessons effectively (Jasiah et al., 2024). Thus, consistent efforts are needed to enhance digital pedagogical skills among educators. Haan & Ani (2024) note that the success of the Merdeka Curriculum heavily depends on teachers' readiness in both pedagogy and digital fluency. Moreover, the flexible nature of the Merdeka Curriculum allows teachers to tailor their approach based on students' individual learning needs. In this way, the curriculum promotes instructional innovation that is responsive to students' diverse learning profiles.

Furthermore, the implementation of project-based learning (PBL) and collaborative methods strengthens the internalization of Islamic values among students. PAI teachers adopt these approaches not only to increase conceptual understanding but also to foster spiritual and social attitudes. According to Darise (2021), Islamic Religious Education should bridge

scientific knowledge with moral and ethical development. One such example includes involving students in charitable activities like fundraising and community service grounded in Islamic principles. This aligns with Daradjat's (2000) view that religious education should not only teach doctrines but also shape moral character. In these learning settings, the teacher acts as a facilitator, motivator, and moral guide. As Ahyat (2017) states, effective Islamic educators are those who inspire students to live out Islamic values through their actions. Through the application of these diverse teaching methods, PAI learning under the Merdeka Curriculum becomes more meaningful and holistic. Therefore, continuous improvement in instructional design and classroom strategies remains essential to maintain the quality and relevance of religious education in today's dynamic educational landscape.

Challenges and Solutions in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education Learning

First, in Islamic Religious Education it will always be related to reading the Qur'an, the point is that they must be able to read the Qur'an. The experience of the Islamic Religious Education teacher at SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro when in grade 11 there were students who were not fluent and could not read the Qur'an. So that it becomes an obstacle for students in pursuing a fairly wide range of material (Najamuddin, 2024).

In the context of optimizing Islamic Religious Education learning under the Merdeka Curriculum, the approach taken by the PAI teacher at SMA N 1 Wuryantoro such as allocating specific lesson time to focus on improving students' Qur'an reading skills reflects a practical adaptation in addressing students' fundamental skill challenges. This strategy aligns with the findings of Marini et al. (2025), who state that contextually adapted learning models that emphasize creativity and student needs can significantly enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

Second, in this Merdeka Curriculum, the printed teaching material module or package book is only limited. The available package books are only half of the number of students. So it also hinders the learning process. The solution to the limited number of package books distributed to students, Islamic religious education teachers at SMA N 1 Wuryantoro encourage their students to be literacy virtually by using pdf files of package books on their respective cellphones, but it is considered that it is not optimal (Jasiah et al., 2024)

Third, in one class, there will definitely be a variety of characters from students. There are students who are very diligent and there are also those who are very lazy. Then in the assessment of the Merdeka Curriculum, there is only one assessment. Cognitive, affective and psychomotor values are included into one. In giving grades for PAI subjects themselves, they must be above other subjects, for example, other subjects dare to give a score of 70, then PAI learning does not dare to give a score of 70, it must be above 70. Then for students who are lazy, of course, it will affect their grades as well, because they are tired of doing assignments, rarely collect assignments, when doing them must be pursued continuously. So this is a challenge for PAI teachers when they will give grades to these students (Najamuddin, 2024).

The solution for students who are lazy to do and collect assignments from the PAI teacher will definitely always pursue their assignments when every meeting is in class. Then the teacher will also always mention who are the students who have not collected assignments and who have collected assignments. So that students who have collected feel that they are appreciated for collecting and motivating other students who have not collected to immediately collect their assignments.

Fourth, there is still a low awareness of students to carry out prayers. Even though they have been given strict orders, there are still some students who are lazy to do it. Whether it's for 5 prayers or Friday prayers at school. If the teacher is not firm, there are still many students who are only in the classroom, even though it has been stated and the presence of prayer has been provided, which will support their grades as well. Because if you look at it today, students prefer to play mobile phones in class rather than they pray together.

The solution for students who are lazy to pray, teachers will also not stay silent, either from PAI teachers or teachers of other subjects to remind and invite. Then the PAI teacher himself will also always mention who are the students who are diligent in praying, whether it is the dhuha prayer or the 5 time prayer. So that this makes it a motivation for themselves. Kemudian, during Friday prayers, PAI teachers always go around to each class to ensure that all students follow Friday prayers. In addition, in the mosque at the school, there was also a Friday blessing program which has only been running for about 2 years. Every Friday, alms in the form of food will be provided for students who take part in Friday prayers at the school mosque. The Friday blessing is provided by teachers who are made in groups per Friday. With the Friday blessing, the percentage of students who pray Friday at school has increased greatly from before.

CONCLUSIONS

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro shows a shift in the teacher's role from a source of knowledge to a facilitator who encourages student participation through interactive methods, such as group discussions. Additionally, the integration of the P5 program serves as an essential platform to develop students' creativity, collaboration, responsibility, and social interaction. The P5 project in PAI is designed to build character and is integrated into both regular learning activities and special school programs relevant to religious values. These efforts indicate Merdeka Curriculum is not only focused on academic achievement but also on fostering holistic student development.

However, the implementation process still faces several challenges that require strategic solutions. Some students struggle with basic religious competencies, such as fluency in reading the Qur'an, which can hinder their understanding of PAI material. The availability of learning resources, such as limited printed textbooks, also poses a barrier, especially for students who rely on physical materials rather than digital formats. In addition, behavioural issues such as students' reluctance to complete assignments or participate in prayers reflect the need for stronger character development and motivation strategies. These obstacles highlight the importance of continuous support from all stakeholders—teachers,

school management, and parents—to ensure the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented effectively and meets its intended goals in Islamic education. The author also expressed hope that this research can be used as a reference for the next author to develop a broader research.

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