

The Implementation of the Independent Curriculum Policy in Islamic Religious and Character Education: A Study of Educational Reform in Indonesia

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Abstract: The implementation of the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) in the subject of Islamic Religious and Character Education has recently been initiated across various educational institutions in Indonesia. However, empirical studies examining how this policy is enacted at the school level remain limited. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the stages of policy implementation related to the Independent Curriculum in the teaching of Islamic Religious and Character Education. This research employed a qualitative case study design, focusing on an elementary school selected as the research site. Data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and documentation, and were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The findings indicate that the implementation process has progressed positively, demonstrated by teachers' ability to develop teaching modules, understand and integrate the Pancasila Student Profile, design P5 project modules, conduct assessments, and initiate differentiated learning. Furthermore, the implementation is carried out through classroom learning and through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), which is conducted once each semester. The study concludes that the adoption of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious and Character Education shows promising improvements in instructional practices. These results suggest the need for continued professional development and institutional support to strengthen effective curriculum implementation in Indonesian schools.

Keyword: Character Education; Independent Curriculum; Differentiated Instruction; Pancasila Student Profile

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of information and communication technology has significantly transformed various aspects of modern life, including education (Harini et al., 2024; Büyükbaykal, 2015). These developments have shifted learning paradigms from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction, enabling students to access diverse learning resources beyond traditional classroom limitations. In response to these changes, the Indonesian government introduced the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) as part of a broader educational reform strategy aimed at improving learning quality and strengthening student competencies (Fauzan et al., 2023; Simarmata & Mayuni, 2023).

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum grants educators greater autonomy in designing instructional materials, determining learning pathways, and employing differentiated learning approaches tailored to students' needs and characteristics (Dieudé & Prøitz, 2024; Mustakim et al., 2024). The curriculum also emphasizes the development of the Pancasila Student Profile through project-based learning (P5), as well as the integration of assessment systems aligned with competency development rather than high-stakes examinations. Although the curriculum has been adopted in many schools, empirical evidence suggests that teachers' readiness and institutional capacity remain varied, leading to inconsistent implementation outcomes across regions and subjects (Ministry of Education Report, 2023).

In the context of Islamic Religious and Character Education (PAI), the implementation of the Independent Curriculum presents unique challenges due to the broad scope of instructional content and limited instructional hours available at the elementary level (Latifah, 2025; Mila & Zuhdi, 2025). Several studies have highlighted the need for PAI teachers to strengthen pedagogical skills, curriculum mastery, and assessment literacy in order to integrate character formation with contemporary learning needs (Jafar, 2025; Basri & Rahman, 2025). However, existing research has predominantly focused on conceptual analyses of the curriculum rather than examining practical implementation processes in real school settings. Consequently, there is a lack of empirical studies that explore how PAI teachers apply the Independent Curriculum in classroom practice and P5 project activities, particularly at the elementary school level.

This research seeks to address this gap by investigating the implementation process of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious and Character Education at the elementary school level in Garut Regency, Indonesia. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on analyzing actual implementation stages and teacher practices, providing insights into the extent to which curricular expectations align with classroom realities. The findings are expected to

contribute to the development of more effective implementation strategies and professional development programs for PAI teachers.

This study is grounded in curriculum implementation theory, teacher competency theory, and the pedagogical foundations of Islamic Religious and Character Education. Curriculum implementation involves translating curriculum policy into instructional practice through a dynamic interaction between teachers, learners, institutional resources, and contextual factors. According to Fullan (2007), successful curriculum implementation requires changes in instructional strategies, teacher beliefs, and school culture rather than merely structural or administrative adjustments. Implementation must therefore be interpreted as a gradual process of professional learning and adaptation rather than simple policy compliance.

The Independent Curriculum emphasizes school autonomy and differentiated learning, positioning teachers as instructional designers capable of adjusting learning pathways to students' developmental stages and needs (Halimah et al., 2025). This aligns with the theory of teacher professional competency, which includes pedagogical, professional, social, and personal competencies (Rusilowati & Wahyudi, 2020; Caena & Vuorikari, 2022). Within this framework, teachers are expected not only to master content knowledge but also to make informed instructional decisions, manage learning diversity, and conduct authentic assessments that measure competency growth rather than rote memorization.

From the perspective of Islamic Religious and Character Education (PAI), pedagogical approaches are expected to integrate spiritual, moral, and intellectual development based on prophetic education principles. PAI learning emphasizes character formation, critical thinking, and the cultivation of values aligned with Islamic teachings and the Pancasila Student Profile. The Independent Curriculum supports this orientation through project-based learning (P5), which is designed to strengthen students' character, collaboration, creativity, and social awareness through real-life educational contexts.

However, curriculum implementation theory also highlights the role of contextual and institutional variables, including teacher readiness, training availability, resource support, and institutional leadership. Fullan (2020) asserts that variations in implementation outcomes are largely influenced by school culture and the capacity of teachers to engage in reflective practice. This suggests that the success of Independent Curriculum implementation in PAI is dependent on teachers' curriculum literacy, assessment skills, and ability to adapt learning materials and strategies.

Thus, the theoretical framework guiding this study positions curriculum implementation as an interaction among policy directives, teacher competencies, and classroom practices within real educational settings. This perspective

provides a lens to analyze the practical realities of implementing the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious and Character Education at the elementary school level and explains why variations in outcomes may occur.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze the stages of implementing the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious and Character Education and to identify the supporting and inhibiting factors influencing the implementation process at the school level.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a case study design to examine the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious and Character Education (PAI) at the elementary school level (Liu, 2016). The case study methodology was selected to enable an in-depth exploration of implementation processes and teacher practices within natural school settings.

The research was conducted in three public elementary schools in Karangpawitan District, Garut Regency—SDN 2 Situ Jaya, SDN 4 Karangpawitan, and SDN 3 Jatisari. These schools were selected purposively based on their early adoption of the Independent Curriculum and active implementation of PAI learning and P5 project activities, making them relevant cases for examination. The participants consisted of nine PAI teachers and three school principals, who were chosen through purposive sampling to ensure they possessed direct knowledge and experience related to curriculum implementation.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, including teaching modules, assessment instruments, P5 project documentation, and audiovisual recordings of instructional activities. Interviews were conducted with both teachers and principals to obtain comprehensive perspectives on implementation processes and contextual challenges.

The data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (Hashimov, 2015), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Triangulation of data sources and methods was employed to ensure validity and credibility, while member checking was conducted to verify the accuracy of emerging findings (Birt et al., 2016). The methodological choices were aligned with the aim of generating a rich, contextualized understanding of curriculum implementation practices within Islamic Religious and Character Education.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the context of Islamic Religious and Character Education (PAI and Budi Pekerti) within the selected elementary schools in Garut Regency demonstrates a combination of positive progress and notable challenges. Based on questionnaire responses from ten participating teachers, it appears that the level of readiness and perceived difficulty varies significantly among educators. In relation to the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5), the majority of teachers expressed moderate confidence in implementing project-based activities, with six teachers indicating that they agreed with the importance and relevance of P5, while three teachers described experiencing substantial difficulty, and only one participant reported strong confidence. In contrast, teachers demonstrated far greater difficulty in applying differentiated learning, with seven teachers reporting the process as difficult and three stating that it was very difficult to implement within PAI instructional settings. These results suggest that while P5 has begun to be accepted as an integral component of the Merdeka Curriculum, differentiated learning remains a critical pedagogical challenge due to limited understanding and lack of structured training support.

Interview results reinforce the quantitative findings, revealing systemic issues concerning teacher capacity and practical barriers in curriculum implementation. Teachers frequently reported difficulties in identifying project themes that align meaningfully with PAI content and in designing assessment systems that reflect diverse student learning needs. Several participants highlighted a lack of concrete examples and structured guidance from policy authorities, which has led to uncertainty in planning learning activities. As one teacher explained, selecting projects relevant to Islamic values, moral behavior, and community engagement requires deeper conceptual clarity and professional mentoring—resources that have not yet been adequately provided. Another teacher expressed concern regarding the extensive time and planning required to develop differentiated instruction, particularly considering heavy administrative workloads and limited familiarity with differentiated pedagogy.

The findings align with theoretical perspectives emphasizing that the success of curriculum reform is contingent on teacher competency and institutional support. Tomlinson (2017) notes that differentiated learning requires teachers to possess the ability to design instruction that is responsive to student readiness, learning profiles, and interests. The struggle observed among teachers reflects insufficient professional development and the need for structured instructional scaffolding. Similarly, Breaux and Magee (2010) argue that differentiation involves complex decision-making processes concerning learning content, strategies, and assessment, which cannot be mastered without sustained practice and mentoring (Sabb-Cordes, 2016).

In the case of P5, implementation challenges may be attributed to its nature as an experiential and contextual learning model that requires project-based methods and authentic situations (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Teachers appear to conceptualize P5 as a separate administrative requirement rather than a transformative learning approach intended to shape character and civic engagement. This finding corresponds with global literature suggesting that project-based learning is often misunderstood when introduced without adequate demonstration or collaborative modelling. Although progress is observable—evidenced by teachers beginning to integrate project themes and demonstrate awareness of Profil Pelajar Pancasila competencies—the implementation has yet to achieve optimal effectiveness.

Overall, the findings affirm the research objective, indicating that while there is growing adaptation toward Merdeka Curriculum implementation within PAI and Budi Pekerti instruction, important structural and pedagogical issues remain unresolved. These include insufficient teacher training, a lack of access to instructional exemplars, limited collaboration across disciplines, and weak institutional support systems. For effective transformation, curriculum implementation must be accompanied by sustainable professional learning communities, continuous mentoring, and the provision of clear implementation guidelines.

The implications of this study highlight the urgent need for strengthening teacher capacity through systematic, practice-based training focused on differentiated learning design, authentic assessment, and integrated project-based learning development. Schools must foster collaborative instructional design teams that allow teachers to co-develop P5 project models relevant to Islamic education themes such as tolerance, environmental responsibility, community service, and anti-radicalism. Furthermore, assessment literacy should be prioritized as a professional learning agenda, ensuring that teachers can design assessment practices aligned with Merdeka Curriculum principles.

Thus, the results of this research reinforce that successful curriculum reform requires more than policy implementation—it requires deep pedagogical transformation supported by structured institutional capacity-building. Without such support, the goals of producing autonomous, competent, and character-driven learners, as intended by the Merdeka Curriculum, may remain unrealized.

Teacher responses to the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education and Character Education, related to the Strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile Project, were highly varied. Of the 10 respondents, three indicated difficulties in implementing the Strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile Project, six respondents gave a score of 3, and one respondent strongly agreed with the development of the Strengthening of the

Pncasila Student Profile Project in Islamic Religious Education and Character Education (PAI) and Character Education (Budi Pekerti).

In the implementation of Islamic Religious Education and Character Education (Budi Pekerti), particularly the Strengthening of the Pncasila Student Profile Project, difficulties were encountered. Among the challenges was the difficulty teachers had in finding project activities that were appropriate for the PAI and Character Education subjects. This was because the Strengthening of the Pncasila Student Profile Project was a new element in the Independent Curriculum. Over the past few decades, educators and education practitioners around the world have begun to recognize that learning outside the classroom can help students understand the connection between learning in educational institutions and their daily lives. Long before that, Ki Hajar Dewantara emphasized the importance of students learning outside the classroom, but unfortunately, this has not been optimally implemented.

The Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project, as a means of achieving the Pancasila Student Profile, provides students with the opportunity to "experience knowledge" as a character-building process and an opportunity to learn from their surroundings (Parwati & Suastra, 2024). In this profile project, students have the opportunity to study important themes or issues such as climate change, anti-radicalism, mental health, culture, entrepreneurship, technology, and democratic living, enabling them to take concrete action to address these issues according to their learning stage and needs (Mulyadi & Ramadhani, 2024; Lasena et al., 2024).

The Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project is expected to inspire students to contribute to their environment. Within the curriculum framework, the implementation of the Pancasila student profile strengthening project is outlined in the Decree of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology No. 56/M/2022 concerning Guidelines for Curriculum Implementation within the Framework of Learning Recovery, which states that the curriculum structure at the Early Childhood Education (PAUD) and Elementary and Secondary Education levels consists of intracurricular learning activities and a Pancasila student profile strengthening project (Ummah et al., 2024; Arnanda et al., 2025; Budimayansah et al., 2025). Meanwhile, in Equivalency Education, it consists of general group subjects and empowerment and skills programs based on the Pancasila student profile. The Pancasila student profile strengthening project is expected to be an optimal means of encouraging students to become lifelong learners who are competent, have character, and behave in accordance with Pancasila values (Pangestu et al., 2024).

Several principles that teachers can implement in implementing the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project are as follows:

Holistic means viewing something as a whole and comprehensive, not in parts or in isolation. In the context of designing a Pancasila student profile strengthening project, a holistic framework encourages us to examine a theme holistically and see the interconnectedness of various aspects to understand an issue in depth. Therefore, each profile project theme is not a thematic platform that brings together various subjects, but rather a platform for integrating diverse perspectives and knowledge content. Furthermore, a holistic perspective also encourages us to see meaningful connections (Ratnawati et al., 2024; Hikmatyar, 2024).

The contextual principle relates to efforts to ground learning activities in real-life experiences. This principle encourages educators and students to utilize their surrounding environment and the realities of daily life as the primary learning material. Therefore, educational units, as organizers of profile project activities, must provide space and opportunities for students to explore various issues beyond the scope of the educational unit. The profile project themes presented should, as far as possible, address and address local issues in their respective regions. By basing profile projects on real-life experiences and problem-solving, the profile project is based on learning strategies that encourage students to become active learners who manage their own learning process, including having the opportunity to choose and propose profile project topics based on their interests. Educators are expected to reduce their role as the main actors in teaching and learning activities who explain

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the subject of Islamic Religious Education and Character (PAI-BP) has begun to progress in a positive direction toward meaningful pedagogical transformation. This is demonstrated by teachers' increasing capacity to independently develop teaching modules, design assessment strategies, and apply differentiated instruction to meet diverse student needs. Additionally, PAI-BP teachers have shown a growing understanding of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila and have successfully integrated it into both classroom instruction and the Project for Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile (P5), conducted once every semester. These developments reflect an emerging shift from traditional teacher-centered practices toward a more student-centered and competency-oriented approach, which aligns with the core objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum. However, continued professional development, collaborative learning communities, and systematic evaluation are necessary to ensure that implementation becomes more consistent, measurable, and sustainable across educational settings.

Implication

The results of this study imply that the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum within Islamic Religious Education and Character (PAI-BP) requires not only structural policy support but also sustained pedagogical capacity building for teachers. The demonstrated progress in teachers' ability to design instructional modules, conduct differentiated learning, and integrate the Profil Pelajar Pancasila highlights the importance of empowering educators as curriculum implementers rather than passive policy recipients. These findings emphasize that curriculum reform must be accompanied by systematic professional development programs, collaborative teacher learning communities, and school-based mentoring to strengthen instructional competencies. In addition, the integration of P5 projects as a complementary learning component implies that schools must ensure adequate planning time, resource allocation, and evaluation mechanisms to optimize learning outcomes. Therefore, policy stakeholders should consider more targeted support strategies to enhance teacher readiness and long-term sustainability of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation across diverse educational contexts.

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