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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM FOR ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION SUBJECT

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ABSTRACTS

Purpose: The aim of this study is to analyze the planning, implementation, and evaluation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) as part of the Merdeka Curriculum. **Method:** This research employed a qualitative method with a multisite approach at SMA Negeri 1 and SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidempuan. The analysis technique followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), consisting of data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. **Result:** The findings reveal that: (1) lesson planning in both schools adheres to the national Merdeka Curriculum guidelines, yet differs in practice—SMA Negeri 1 combines conventional planning with selective innovations, while SMA Negeri 4 emphasizes project-based and contextual approaches tailored to student needs; (2) the implementation stage shows strong institutional commitment, use of the Merdeka Teaching Platform, and student-centered learning, although challenges persist in aligning Islamic values with new pedagogical models; and (3) evaluation incorporates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor assessments, but teachers face difficulties in ensuring fairness and meaningfulness, particularly in online and hybrid settings. **Conclusion:** These results indicate that successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum depends on adaptability to local school contexts, availability of resources, and continuous teacher training. The study recommends enhancing professional development, strengthening school-community collaboration, and developing more holistic assessment strategies to ensure that Islamic Religious Education under the Merdeka Curriculum achieves its transformative goals.

A. INTRODUCTION

The curriculum is a dynamic element that continuously evolves in response to societal changes and evaluations (Abdillah and Hamami 2021). Its development aims to address deficiencies in previous systems and ensure that education remains relevant to the needs of both students and society. In the 21st century, rapid technological progress has profoundly shaped many aspects of life, including education. Learning today is inseparable from technology, which has become an integral tool for creating interactive and innovative educational experiences.

In the context of education, the curriculum is one of the main elements that plays a crucial role in shaping the direction and goals of education at every level and within every educational institution. The curriculum not only serves as a guideline for teaching and learning activities but also as an instrument that determines the quality of graduates from an educational institution. Therefore, reviewing curriculum innovations is essential to ensure that the education system implemented can anticipate future challenges. As the primary foundation of the education system, the curriculum holds a strategic role in determining the intellectual, social, and emotional development of students. The curriculum functions as a guide that outlines the objectives, content, and educational processes that students will undergo. Ultimately, the curriculum influences the character, skills, and competencies of graduates from an educational institution. Additionally, the curriculum encompasses both planning and implementation of education, not only limited to classroom learning but also extending beyond the classroom at local, regional, and national levels. This demonstrates that the curriculum has a broad impact on various social, economic, and cultural aspects of society. All elements of society, including parents, formal and informal leaders, as well as community members, have a vested interest in the curriculum as they expect future generations to be more intelligent, capable, and prepared to face the challenges of the times.

The critical role of the curriculum in the education system and student development necessitates a well-directed and well-planned curriculum development process. Curriculum development cannot be carried out arbitrarily but must be based on clear objectives that align with societal needs and advancements in science and technology. A well-structured curriculum should reflect the needs of students and society while focusing on developing competencies relevant to global challenges. Therefore, the curriculum design process must involve various stakeholders, including the government, schools, education experts, and educators who play a direct role in implementing the curriculum in the field.

In the effort to design a curriculum that aligns with the progress of the times, various stakeholders have a significant role. The government, as the policymaker, must provide clear regulations and guidelines for curriculum development. Schools, as educational institutions, must have the flexibility to adapt the curriculum to the needs of students and local characteristics. Education experts must contribute insights based on research and academic studies to ensure that the curriculum implemented has a strong theoretical foundation. Meanwhile, teachers, as the implementers in the field, hold a crucial role in effectively applying the curriculum in the classroom. Therefore, competency in curriculum innovation is essential for every stakeholder in the field of education. Curriculum innovation at the institutional level is one of the efforts to enhance the quality and relevance of education within the national education system.

Over the past few decades, the field of education has undergone numerous innovations, particularly in curriculum development. Educational innovations often present challenges for educators, especially due to the dynamic nature of these changes, which require adaptability in adopting new teaching models. The grassroots model of educational innovation, where schools and teachers have greater autonomy in determining learning strategies tailored to students' characteristics, has become increasingly prevalent.

In Indonesia, this curriculum innovation is also reflected in the subject of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), which plays a strategic role in shaping students' character. PAI is an integral part of the curriculum implemented in educational institutions under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia. Islamic Religious Education is not only intended to provide knowledge about Islamic teachings but also to cultivate attitudes and character in students that align with noble Islamic values. PAI aims to develop a deep understanding of Islamic teachings while encouraging students to implement them in their daily lives.

According to Daradjat (2002), Islamic Religious Education is a form of guidance provided to students so that they can understand, internalize, and practice Islamic teachings in their lives. The primary goal of PAI instruction is to shape individuals who have faith, devotion to Allah SWT, and commendable morals. Islamic Religious Education also aims to instill moral and ethical values in students' lives, enabling them to become individuals who contribute positively to society and their surroundings. Therefore, the PAI curriculum must be carefully designed to provide a comprehensive and relevant learning experience for students.

In the era of globalization, which is marked by rapid technological and informational advancements, challenges in teaching Islamic Religious Education have become increasingly complex. Students are exposed to various external influences that can shape their mindset, attitudes, and behaviors. Thus, the PAI curriculum must be able to provide relevant solutions in guiding students to maintain a strong moral foundation. The integration of technology in PAI instruction can be an effective strategy to enhance students' understanding of Islamic teachings. Technology-based learning enables students to access a variety of learning resources that are more diverse and interactive.

Moreover, experience-based and contextual learning approaches are essential aspects of developing the PAI curriculum. Students should not only comprehend Islamic teachings theoretically but should also be guided to implement them in real life. Project-based and collaborative learning can be effective methods to enhance students' understanding and skills in applying Islamic values in their daily lives. Consequently, PAI instruction should not only focus on cognitive aspects but also on affective and psychomotor aspects.

In addressing curriculum innovation, PAI teachers play a vital role as facilitators in the learning process. Teachers must possess adequate pedagogical and professional competencies to adapt instructional strategies to the characteristics of their students. Additionally, teachers should be able to develop creative and innovative learning materials to make PAI lessons more engaging and meaningful for students. In this context, professional training and development for PAI teachers are essential to help them enhance their capacity and the quality of instruction they provide to students.

Thus, the PAI curriculum must be designed comprehensively and adaptively to the developments of the times. A well-structured curriculum should provide students with opportunities to explore and deeply understand Islamic teachings while encouraging them to apply these teachings in their daily lives. Through innovative and technology-based approaches, PAI instruction can become more effective and relevant to the needs of students in the digital era. Therefore, the development of the PAI curriculum should be a primary focus in efforts to improve the quality of Islamic religious education in the digital era.

B. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a multisite research design (Stake 2006) involving two senior high schools as research locations: SMA Negeri 1 Padangsidempuan and SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidempuan. The selection of the multisite qualitative method aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the subject of PAI in both schools, as well as to identify similarities and differences in its application.

The selection of the two schools was based on several criteria (Patton 2015): (1) both schools are public senior high schools under the same regional education authority, which ensures comparability; (2) they represent different school environments, SMA Negeri 1 is a city-based school with relatively greater access to educational resources, while SMA Negeri 4 is located in a semi-urban area with more limited facilities, thus allowing the study to capture diverse implementation contexts; and (3) both schools have been designated as early adopters of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI, making them suitable for exploring the practical dynamics of curriculum implementation.

The participants in this study consisted of 12 individuals drawn from the two schools. These included 4 PAI teachers, 2 school principals/vice principals in charge of curriculum, and 6 students who were directly involved in the learning process. The variation in participant backgrounds was intended to provide rich, triangulated data that could capture perspectives from different stakeholders.

The data analysis process was conducted in two main stages, as explained by Yin (2004): (1) individual site analysis and (2) cross-site analysis. The first stage, individual site analysis, was carried out to understand the specific conditions and characteristics of each school in detail. Following this, the second stage, cross-site analysis, was used to compare and identify patterns and differences between the two schools.

In the individual site analysis stage, this study followed the interactive analysis model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014). This model consisted of four main stages:

1. Data Collection: Data was gathered through observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted in PAI classes to directly examine how the Merdeka Curriculum was implemented. Interviews were conducted with PAI teachers, school principals, and students to obtain broader perspectives on curriculum application. Document analysis involved reviewing school policy documents, syllabi, and relevant academic records.
2. Data Condensation: The collected data were then selected, simplified, and categorized into specific themes relevant to the research focus. This data

reduction aimed to filter essential information and eliminate irrelevant data, facilitating further analysis.

3. **Data Display:** The reduced data was then presented in the form of narratives, tables, or matrices to enhance comprehension and interpretation. Data presentation allowed researchers to identify emerging patterns in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the PAI subject in each school.
4. **Conclusion Drawing/Verification:** Once the data was presented, the next step was to draw conclusions based on the analyzed findings. These conclusions were then verified through data triangulation, including confirmation from respondents, comparison with other data sources, and discussions with fellow researchers to ensure the validity and reliability of the research results.

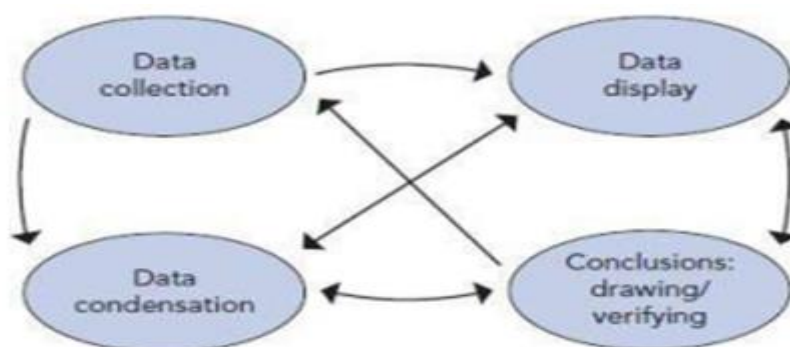


Figure 1. Interactive Analysis Model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014)

After completing the individual site analysis stage, the study proceeded to the cross-site analysis stage. In this stage, data from both schools were compared to identify similar patterns and differences in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the PAI subject. Cross-site analysis enabled researchers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influenced curriculum implementation in different school contexts.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Lesson Planning for the Independent Curriculum

At SMA Negeri 1 Padangsidempuan, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is based on Permendikbudristek No.12 of 2024. The references used in lesson planning include the curriculum and learning outcomes, student learning conditions and needs, learning media, and instructional models. Lesson plans are prepared at the beginning of each semester or academic year. The planning process involves several stages: analyzing learning outcomes, conducting needs analysis, formulating learning objectives, setting indicators for learning achievement, and developing assessment instruments and evaluation plans. The format for lesson module development consists of general information, initial competencies, learning objectives, instructional models, guiding questions, core activities, assessment instruments, and references.

Similarly, at SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidempuan, lesson planning is also guided by Permendikbudristek No.12 of 2024. The primary reference in planning is the learning outcomes set by the government, which are then adjusted to students' conditions.

Lesson plans are prepared at the beginning of each semester or academic year. The planning stages include understanding the material within the learning outcomes, determining learning objectives, designing a sequence of learning objectives, preparing learning steps, and developing assessment strategies. The format for lesson modules includes module identity, learning outcomes, learning objectives, learning materials, Pancasila Student Profile, learning assessments, learning steps, learning resources and media, as well as enrichment and remedial activities.

The Implementation of the Independent Curriculum

At SMA Negeri 1 Padangsidempuan, the school demonstrates a strong commitment to implementing the Independent Curriculum through strategic measures such as teacher self-directed learning, collaboration within learning communities, sharing best practices with experts, utilizing support centers (helpdesk), and providing digital infrastructure. Learning activities are conducted using the Merdeka Mengajar (Independent Teaching) platform, utilizing its various features. The instructional process is carried out through the selection of teaching models and strategies tailored to students' learning needs. The learning process follows a systematic sequence comprising introductory activities, core activities, closing activities, teacher reflection, student reflection, and formative assessments.

At SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidempuan, the school fully supports the implementation of the Independent Curriculum through various strategic steps, including teacher self-learning, teacher collaboration, good practice mentoring, competency development programs, provision of facilities and infrastructure, facilitation of P5 (Project-Based Learning on Pancasila Student Profile), and ensuring internet access. Similar to SMA Negeri 1, learning activities utilize the Merdeka Mengajar platform, and the selection of instructional models and strategies is flexible, taking into account students' characteristics, lesson complexity, and school conditions. The learning steps consist of introductory activities, core activities, closing activities, teacher reflection, student reflection, and formative assessments.

The Evaluation of the Independent Curriculum

At SMA Negeri 1 Padangsidempuan, the evaluation system is comprehensive and adheres to assessment guidelines, encompassing diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments. The level of curriculum achievement at this school is considered satisfactory, as students' learning outcomes meet the minimum competency standards. Evaluation is conducted through various test formats, including written tests, oral tests, and portfolio assessments. Teachers regularly assess their teaching methods by gathering student feedback on which instructional approaches are most effective for their understanding. The tests are designed to align with the learning material to accurately measure students' knowledge and comprehension. A diverse range of assessment formats is applied to ensure that evaluation covers all necessary skills and understanding while accommodating students' different learning styles and individual needs.

At SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidempuan, the evaluation system follows a holistic approach with flexible methods tailored to students' characteristics. To measure the achievement of curriculum targets, evaluation is conducted based on several indicators,

including students' attainment of learning outcomes and their progress in P5 activities. The evaluation process assesses not only cognitive aspects but also character development and skills. Various types of assessment, such as essay tests, oral tests, and skill-based tests, are employed to gain a clearer picture of students' understanding and problem-solving abilities. The choice of assessment formats is based on considerations such as ease of preparation and avoidance of speculative answers. The evaluation process is further supported by student reflections and peer discussions. Through this structured and holistic approach, SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidimpuan ensures that assessments not only measure final student achievements but also provide a comprehensive understanding of their learning journey, including cognitive, skill-based, and character aspects.

DISCUSSION

Both SMA Negeri 1 Padangsidimpuan and SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidimpuan follow the guidelines of the Merdeka Curriculum as per Permendikbudristek No. 12 of 2024. However, each institution adopts different approaches in designing its teaching plans and modules, tailoring them to its respective institutional needs. Referring to this, it can be understood that planning involves determining what needs to be done and how it should be carried out. Planning is the initial step in the learning process and must be conducted by individuals who are fully aware of all elements involved in the learning process. The success of planning significantly contributes to the overall success of learning activities; therefore, it must be executed meticulously.

Taufiqurrohman (2018) emphasizes that planning is a comprehensive thought process involving careful determination and written documentation of what will be undertaken in the future to achieve predetermined institutional goals. Similarly, Handoko (2019) defines planning as selecting a series of activities and making decisions regarding what should be done, when, how, and by whom.

The detailed stages of learning planning undertaken by Islamic Religious Education teachers at SMA Negeri Padangsidimpuan include: (1) understanding learning outcomes, (2) conducting needs analysis, (3) formulating learning objectives, (4) defining indicators of learning achievement, and (5) developing assessment instruments and evaluation plans. The structured lesson planning format includes the following components: (1) general information such as school name, class, semester, learning materials, and meeting duration, (2) initial competencies, (3) learning objectives, (4) learning models, (5) stimulating questions, (6) core activities, (7) assessment instruments, and (8) references.

The urgency of lesson planning lies in its role as a rational decision-making process concerning specific learning goals, behavioral changes, and the sequence of activities necessary to achieve these goals while utilizing all available learning resources (Majid 2017; Sanjaya 2019).

These findings align with previous research conducted by Rifa'I, Asih, and Fatmawati (2022), Jannah, Fathuddin, and Zahra (2022), and Darise (2021), which

emphasized that the Merdeka Curriculum is designed to cultivate students' critical thinking, creativity, communication skills, and collaboration abilities. This approach prepares students to develop mature, wise, and precise thought processes, enabling them to understand, develop, and apply Islamic teachings in daily life.

Regarding the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA Negeri 1 and SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidimpuan, the similarities found include:

1. Strong Institutional Commitment – Both schools demonstrate full support for the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum through strategic steps such as independent teacher learning, collaboration within learning communities, utilizing best practices from experts, and providing digital infrastructure. SMA Negeri 4 further reinforces this commitment by facilitating projects to strengthen students' Pancasila profiles.
2. Utilization of the Merdeka Teaching Platform – Both schools rely on various features from the Merdeka Teaching Platform, such as independent training, teaching materials, student assessments, and learning portfolios.
3. Student-Centered Learning Strategies – In determining learning models and strategies, both schools consider student needs, learner characteristics, subject complexity, and school conditions.
4. Systematic Learning Steps in Islamic Religious Education – The Islamic Religious Education learning process follows a structured approach, including introductory activities, core learning, concluding activities, teacher reflection, student reflection, and formative assessments.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in SMA Negeri 1 Padangsidimpuan and SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidimpuan reflects both alignment with national guidelines and adaptation to local contexts. Planning in both schools was carried out systematically through stages such as needs analysis, formulating objectives, setting indicators, and preparing assessment instruments. This aligns with the notion that planning is a rational and strategic decision-making process that lays the foundation for instructional success. However, the approaches differed in terms of how lesson plans and teaching modules were contextualized to the schools' unique environments. Such variations are consistent with findings that the Merdeka Curriculum provides autonomy for teachers and schools to adjust content based on student diversity and institutional needs (Yunita and Widodo 2023). In addition, the benefits of the Merdeka Curriculum in enhancing students' creativity and learning motivation (Sa'diyah et al. 2023; Sumarsih et al. 2022)

At SMA Negeri 1, lesson plans emphasized traditional classroom structures combined with selected innovations, while SMA Negeri 4 placed greater emphasis on project-based learning and contextual teaching. The latter approach resonates with previous studies, which highlight that problem-based and project-based learning models contribute to higher levels of student engagement and critical thinking in Islamic Religious Education (Annisyah 2024). This difference suggests that schools that invest in student-centered innovations tend to foster deeper student participation,

although the impact on measurable learning outcomes still requires further investigation.

Institutional commitment emerged as a key similarity between the two schools. Both SMA Negeri 1 and SMA Negeri 4 demonstrated readiness to implement the Merdeka Curriculum by supporting teacher training, facilitating collaboration in learning communities, and utilizing digital platforms for resource sharing. Prior studies confirm that strong institutional commitment is one of the decisive factors in ensuring successful curriculum implementation (Hafiz et al. 2024){11}. SMA Negeri 4 further distinguished itself by introducing projects to strengthen students' Pancasila profiles, which are in line with the transformative vision of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The utilization of the Merdeka Teaching Platform also marked a significant advancement in both schools. Teachers accessed independent training modules, digital learning resources, and assessment tools through the platform, enabling them to develop more structured lesson plans. This finding aligns with earlier studies emphasizing that technology-supported platforms enhance both teacher preparation and student engagement (Wijayanti and Hamami 2023). Nevertheless, challenges remained in terms of technological infrastructure and teacher proficiency, which echoes broader implementation difficulties across Indonesian schools (Rumawang et al. 2024).

A common pedagogical orientation in both schools was the adoption of student-centered strategies, reflecting the shift from traditional teacher-centered methods to active learning models (Mardianto 2016; Mulyasa 2017). Both institutions emphasized consideration of learner characteristics, subject complexity, and contextual factors in determining instructional approaches. Previous related studies confirm that such student-centered learning approaches are crucial to fostering creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking among learners (Wasehudin et al. 2023). The shift indicates teachers' awareness of the transformative goals of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Despite these similarities, the intensity and depth of implementation varied. For instance, SMA Negeri 4's stronger reliance on project-based learning demonstrated a more practical application of the principles of contextual and experiential education. In contrast, SMA Negeri 1 retained a relatively cautious approach, balancing innovations with conventional practices. This reflects findings from earlier research that not all institutions adopt innovations at the same pace, and such variations influence the degree of student engagement and skill development (Rohmah and Saerozi 2024).

In terms of classroom implementation, both schools followed systematic steps in PAI instruction, including introductory activities, core teaching, concluding reflections, and formative assessments. These structured steps ensured consistency and alignment with curriculum standards. Such a systematic design corresponds with the transformative and liberating vision of the Merdeka Curriculum, which seeks to integrate experiential and contextual learning models (Ainiyah 2018). However, the degree to which students developed independent learning competencies differed, suggesting that implementation quality has a direct bearing on learning outcomes.

The challenges faced by teachers highlight critical barriers to effective implementation. Both schools reported difficulties in adapting lesson plans and integrating Islamic values with modern pedagogical models. This resonates with findings that teachers often struggle with reconciling traditional values with innovative strategies (Maulisa et al. 2025). Teachers at SMA Negeri 1 expressed concerns about the compatibility of new methods with existing cultural and religious practices, whereas SMA Negeri 4 teachers reported difficulty in designing authentic project tasks that truly integrated Islamic teachings.

Resource limitations also emerged as a significant issue. Teachers from both schools noted the scarcity of textbooks and learning materials aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum, echoing challenges reported in prior research (Sahibe et al. 2025). While the Merdeka Teaching Platform helped alleviate some gaps, the absence of locally relevant materials remained a hindrance. SMA Negeri 4 managed this constraint by encouraging teachers to develop their own learning modules, whereas SMA Negeri 1 relied more heavily on existing resources, potentially limiting contextualization.

Teacher training played a pivotal role in determining implementation quality. Both institutions invested in independent teacher learning, yet differences in teacher capacity were evident. Teachers who actively participated in training programs showed greater readiness to employ innovative models, while others remained hesitant. This reflects broader findings that inadequate training and professional development are persistent challenges in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Empaldi 2023). Effective training is therefore essential for ensuring teachers' confidence and competence in applying new pedagogies.

Evaluation and assessment were among the most complex aspects of implementation. Both schools recognized the importance of assessing affective, cognitive, and psychomotor domains. However, teachers often struggled to apply fairness, transparency, and meaningfulness in assessments, as suggested by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001). These findings align with previous studies indicating that holistic assessments are challenging to conduct within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum (Fitria et al. 2024). The difficulty was particularly evident in distinguishing between genuine student understanding and assistance received from adults in completing assignments.

Online learning, which occasionally complements face-to-face teaching, further complicates assessment practices. Teachers could not easily evaluate affective aspects such as communication, social interaction, and collaboration among students, as these naturally occur in physical settings. Previous related studies have highlighted this issue, noting that technological and infrastructural constraints exacerbate the difficulty of holistic evaluation (Rahayu and Istikomah 2024). Consequently, both SMA Negeri 1 and SMA Negeri 4 faced uncertainties in accurately gauging students' affective development.

From the perspective of learning outcomes, students at SMA Negeri 4 demonstrated higher engagement levels due to the frequent use of project-based and contextual learning models. This echoes findings that innovative methods foster deeper

understanding and long-term retention of PAI material (Pratiwi et al. 2024). In contrast, students at SMA Negeri 1 benefited from structured traditional methods but showed less initiative in collaborative and critical thinking tasks. These outcomes underscore the importance of carefully selecting instructional strategies to optimize learning achievements.

Nevertheless, both schools reported difficulties in measuring whether improved engagement directly translated into higher academic performance. Prior studies have similarly noted that while innovations increase student activity and motivation, their measurable impact on academic outcomes remains underexplored (Mansur et al. 2024). This suggests a research gap that future studies should address by critically analyzing the correlation between instructional strategies and student achievement in PAI.

Mindset shifts among teachers and students also presented challenges. Teachers needed to move beyond the comfort zones of traditional pedagogy, while students were expected to take greater responsibility for their own learning. Both groups occasionally resisted these shifts, reflecting broader findings that mindset transformation is essential but difficult in the context of Merdeka Curriculum implementation (Astuti et al. 2024). SMA Negeri 4 reported greater success in fostering student independence, possibly due to its consistent emphasis on projects and contextual learning.

Harmonizing diverse Islamic values in classroom practice emerged as another challenge. Teachers needed to navigate between universal curriculum standards and localized religious interpretations. This mirrors findings from previous studies indicating that integrating Islamic values within modern pedagogical frameworks requires careful balance (Marlina et al. 2023). SMA Negeri 1 tended to emphasize doctrinal instruction, while SMA Negeri 4 attempted to contextualize values through practical projects, creating different dynamics in classroom learning.

Collaboration with communities and stakeholders also influenced implementation quality. SMA Negeri 4 actively engaged local communities in supporting project-based initiatives, thereby enriching contextual learning. SMA Negeri 1, however, maintained a more school-centered approach, limiting external involvement. Previous research has emphasized the importance of community collaboration in addressing resource limitations and strengthening curriculum relevance (Annisyah 2024). Thus, fostering school-community partnerships could serve as a critical lever for improving implementation outcomes.

In sum, the comparative analysis of SMA Negeri 1 and SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidimpuan highlights both convergence and divergence in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum for PAI. Both schools shared strong institutional commitment, use of digital platforms, and adoption of student-centered approaches. However, differences were evident in the extent of innovation, resource utilization, community involvement, and assessment practices. These findings reinforce prior studies that successful implementation requires not only structural support but also contextual adaptation (Lathif 2023). A deeper analysis of student learning outcomes, coupled with

strategies to overcome challenges, is essential to fully realize the transformative goals of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The implications of these findings suggest that policy support must be accompanied by continuous teacher training, sufficient resource provision, and a stronger emphasis on mindset transformation. Without these, the vision of liberating and contextual education risks being undermined by structural and cultural barriers. Prior studies have repeatedly stressed that collaboration among educators, schools, and communities is indispensable in overcoming challenges. Both schools stand to benefit from reinforcing such partnerships as part of their curriculum implementation strategy.

Ultimately, the study reveals that while planning, implementation, and evaluation processes in both schools were aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum, the effectiveness of these processes depended heavily on teacher readiness, institutional priorities, and contextual adaptation. The challenges faced are not unique to these schools but reflect broader national trends reported in related research. Addressing these issues requires not only technical solutions but also cultural and pedagogical shifts, ensuring that the Merdeka Curriculum truly empowers both teachers and students in the learning of Islamic Religious Education.

The comparative findings between SMA Negeri 1 and SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidimpuan underline that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education involves a complex interplay of planning, implementation, and evaluation stages. While both schools demonstrate institutional commitment, digital adaptation, and student-centered approaches, differences in innovation intensity, community collaboration, and evaluation practices produce varied impacts on student engagement and learning outcomes. These results echo national-level challenges documented in previous studies, indicating that schools often share similar obstacles, particularly in teacher training, resource availability, and holistic assessment.

Therefore, the discussion points toward the necessity of contextualized strategies that not only align with policy directives but also respond to local realities of each institution. Strengthening teacher capacity, fostering collaborative networks, and addressing infrastructural gaps emerge as pivotal recommendations for sustaining curriculum reform. In this way, the findings of this study do not stand in isolation but contribute to a broader discourse on how Islamic Religious Education can be meaningfully transformed under the Merdeka Curriculum, thereby setting the stage for the subsequent conclusion.

D. CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed the planning, implementation, and evaluation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA Negeri 1 Padangsidimpuan and SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidimpuan. The findings show that planning in both schools was carried out systematically, beginning with needs analysis, formulation of learning objectives, and development of assessment instruments. However, the degree of contextualization varied, with SMA Negeri 4 adopting more innovative and project-based approaches, while SMA Negeri 1

maintained a balance between conventional structures and selected innovations. These findings reaffirm that planning is not merely administrative but forms the foundation for effective learning outcomes.

The implementation stage demonstrated both similarities and differences. Both schools emphasized student-centered learning, digital platform utilization, and structured learning steps, yet SMA Negeri 4 applied a stronger project-based orientation, resulting in higher student engagement. On the other hand, SMA Negeri 1 retained more traditional methods, which ensured structure but limited creativity. Challenges such as insufficient resources, limited teacher training, and difficulties in harmonizing Islamic values with modern pedagogies reflected broader issues in curriculum reform nationally. These insights indicate that effective implementation requires not only institutional commitment but also adequate teacher capacity, resource availability, and mindset transformation.

Evaluation of student learning revealed persistent complexities in balancing affective, cognitive, and psychomotor aspects. Teachers often struggled to ensure fairness, transparency, and meaningfulness in assessments, especially in online and hybrid contexts. The findings highlight the urgent need for more effective assessment models that can genuinely capture student competencies in line with the holistic vision of the Merdeka Curriculum. As a call to action, stronger teacher training, development of locally relevant resources, and broader school-community collaboration are recommended. Future research should focus on measuring the direct impact of different pedagogical strategies on student learning outcomes, thereby bridging the current gap between innovation and academic achievement.

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