

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education as an Effort to Strengthen Students' Religious Character at State Junior High School 1 Bendosari

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) as an effort to strengthen students' religious character at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari, and to analyze its supporting and inhibiting factors. This research employed a qualitative descriptive method with a field research approach. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation involving the principal, Islamic Education teachers, and students. The results revealed that the Merdeka Curriculum has been implemented through intraclass, co-curricular, and religious habituation activities such as Qur'an memorization (*tahfidz*), congregational prayers, daily supplications, and the *smile, greeting, and respect* program. The key supporting factors include school policy support, teacher exemplarity, a strong religious culture, and parental involvement. In contrast, the main obstacles are limited time, insufficient worship facilities, and diverse religious backgrounds among students. The findings imply that Islamic Religious Education within the Merdeka Curriculum framework effectively fosters students' moral and spiritual character, reinforcing the *Pancasila Student Profile* of faith and noble character.

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Introduction

Education plays a central role in shaping students' character, not only in the cognitive domain but also in affective and spiritual aspects. In the era of globalization and rapid advances in information technology, moral and social challenges are becoming increasingly complex. Phenomena such as juvenile delinquency, declining social concern, and behavior that deviates from religious values indicate the need for an education system that does not merely focus on the transfer of knowledge, but also on the formation of character and personality (Sukiyat, 2020). This is in line with Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which emphasizes that national education functions to develop capabilities and shape dignified national character and civilization.

As a response to these challenges, the government, through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, introduced the Merdeka Curriculum. This curriculum offers a

more flexible learning concept, is learner-oriented, and emphasizes character strengthening through the Pancasila Student Profile. One of the main dimensions of this profile is being faithful to and pious before God Almighty and possessing noble character. This dimension directly intersects with the objectives of Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam, PAI), which not only teaches cognitive aspects of religion but also aims to shape religious character such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, and social concern (Hasan et al., 2023).

However, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI learning has not yet been fully optimal. Many PAI teachers have not thoroughly understood the basic principles and implementation strategies of this new curriculum, so the learning process often does not fully align with the student-centered learning approach promoted by the Merdeka Curriculum. In addition, limitations in facilities, infrastructure, and learning materials present their own obstacles, particularly in schools with restricted resources. On the other hand, the integration of Islamic values into project-based learning (Project-Based Learning) remains a challenge for some teachers (Rochmawan, Abbas, Ulfah, Nashir, & Nashihin, 2024).

This reality shows a gap between the ideal objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum and its practice in the field, especially in PAI learning which is intended to shape students' religious character. Therefore, it is important to examine how this curriculum is implemented, particularly at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari, which has become one of the schools that independently implement the Merdeka Curriculum. This school has strong religious traditions through activities such as congregational prayers, monthly religious gatherings (*pengajian*), and *tahfidz* programs that support the strengthening of students' character.

The Merdeka Curriculum policy has been widely studied from theoretical perspectives and in terms of general implementation. However, research that specifically highlights its implementation in the context of Islamic Religious Education for strengthening religious character remains limited. Most previous studies have focused on learning effectiveness, curriculum evaluation, or enhancing student creativity, rather than on the dimension of religiosity and the internalization of Islamic values in junior high schools. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by empirically examining the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI learning at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari and its influence on the formation of students' religious character.

Several relevant studies have examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. One such study emphasizes the importance of continuous evaluation in PAI learning to improve the effectiveness of the learning process (Zubair, Kurnia, & Bashith, 2024). Meanwhile, Susilowati explores character formation within the Merdeka Curriculum yet does not discuss the religious aspect in depth (Susilowati, 2022). In addition, Pitaloka and Arsanti (2022) analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar program across various fields of study, while Prastowo examines the influence of this policy on students' creativity in religious subjects (Prastowo, 2021). From these studies, it can be concluded that although the Merdeka Curriculum provides innovative space for teachers, its implementation in the realm of religious education and spiritual character formation remains suboptimal.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study encompasses three main concepts. First, the Merdeka Curriculum, namely an education policy that emphasizes flexibility in learning, character strengthening, and essential competencies based on the principles of *learning by doing* and student agency (Setiadi, 2024). Second, Islamic Religious Education (PAI), defined as a process

of physical and spiritual guidance based on Islamic teachings to form human beings who are faithful, pious, and possess noble character (Mulyasana, 2020). Third, religious character, understood as human behavior grounded in religious values, reflected in faith, worship, morals, and harmonious relationships between humans and God, fellow human beings, and the environment (Hidayah, 2015). The synergy among these three concepts serves as the theoretical basis for understanding how the Merdeka Curriculum can be implemented to strengthen students' religious character through PAI learning.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the synchronization between the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and Islamic Religious Education in shaping religious character at the junior high school level. This research does not merely assess the success of the curriculum from administrative or academic perspectives, but also examines in depth the spiritual and moral dimensions of students as indicators of successful implementation. Moreover, this study is conducted in an empirical context at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari, an independently implementing Merdeka Curriculum school with an active religious ecosystem, thereby providing a concrete and applicable picture of both the successes and challenges of its implementation.

Based on the above background and theoretical review, the main problems formulated in this study are: (1) How is the Merdeka Curriculum implemented in Islamic Religious Education learning as an effort to strengthen students' religious character at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari? (2) What supporting and inhibiting factors affect the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education learning at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari?

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a field research design (Darmawati & Hidayati, 2018). The aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) as an effort to strengthen students' religious character at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore social phenomena in a natural and contextual manner, and to grasp the meanings embedded in the behavior, interactions, and experiences of the research subjects.

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari, located in Mulur Village, Bendosari District, Sukoharjo Regency, Central Java. The school was selected purposively because it is one of the educational institutions that has independently implemented the Merdeka Curriculum and organizes various religious activities that support students' character formation. The research was scheduled to take place from July to September 2025, covering the stages of preparation, data collection, analysis, and reporting.

The data sources in this study consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through direct observation, in-depth interviews with the principal, PAI teachers, and students, as well as documentation of religious activities at the school. Secondary data were drawn from official school documents, curriculum archives, and literature relevant to the research topic (Sarosa, 2021). Informants were selected using purposive sampling, namely by choosing subjects who were considered to have the most knowledge of, and direct involvement in, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the school.

Data were collected using three main techniques: participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observation was used to obtain a factual picture of PAI teaching practices and religious activities at school. Interviews were conducted to explore teachers' and students' views and experiences regarding curriculum implementation. Documentation served as supporting evidence in the form of photographs, activity schedules, and reports on religious programs (Mulyana et al., 2024).

To ensure the validity of the findings, the researcher applied source and technique triangulation. Triangulation was carried out by comparing data obtained from different informants and different data collection techniques, so that credible and objective results could be achieved. The collected data were then analyzed through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, using Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis model. This model emphasizes continuous data analysis throughout the research process to ensure coherence between field data and the researcher's interpretation.

Through this approach, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive description of how the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI learning contributes to the formation of students' religious character, as well as to identify the supporting and inhibiting factors that influence its success in the formal education setting.

Result and Discussion

1. Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education as an Effort to Strengthen Students' Religious Character at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari shows significant success in strengthening students' religious character. The learning process does not only focus on content delivery but also on the formation of spiritual values integrated with academic and social activities. Observation and interview data indicate that the approaches used by PAI teachers are in line with the principles of student-centered learning that underpin the Merdeka Curriculum.

At the planning stage, PAI teachers develop learning instruments based on Learning Outcomes (*Capaian Pembelajaran/CP*) and the Pancasila Student Profile. Each lesson plan is directed toward developing religious character, discipline in worship, and honest, responsible attitudes. Spiritual values are integrated into learning objectives, activities, and assessment, with a strong emphasis on the affective dimension (Mulyasa, 2023). In this way, students do not merely understand religious concepts theoretically, but also practice them in their daily lives at school.

Learning at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari is implemented through mutually reinforcing intracurricular and co-curricular activities. Intracurricular activities include classroom PAI lessons that instill values of creed (*aqidah*), worship (*ibadah*), and morality (*akhlaq*). Co-curricular activities are realized through religious programs such as Qur'an memorization (*tahfidz*), *shalat dhuha*, *shalat dzuhur* in congregation, and regular *pengajian* (religious gatherings). Each activity is designed to facilitate students' active participation, build spiritual awareness, and strengthen a sense of togetherness.

The *tahfidz* Al-Qur'an program is one of the school's flagship activities and runs consistently. Students are guided to memorize Juz 30 using the methods of *talqin* and *muroja'ah*.

This activity cultivates habits of discipline, patience, and persistence in learning. Teachers play the role of spiritual guides as well as motivators, creating a religious and meaningful learning atmosphere.

The *shalat dhuha* and *dzuhur* congregational prayer programs serve as a means of learning responsibility and discipline. These activities are scheduled regularly and attended by all students and teachers. Through these practices, students learn to manage time, maintain cleanliness, and foster fraternity among school members. PAI teachers and homeroom teachers are the main driving forces in ensuring that these activities run in an orderly and sustainable manner.

In addition, monthly *pengajian* is held as a forum for spiritual reflection for the entire school community. The themes presented are adjusted to issues of morality and adolescent life, such as the importance of honesty, ethics in social interaction, and enthusiasm for seeking knowledge. The sessions are led by PAI teachers, local *ustadz*, and community leaders, thus broadening students' religious insight within a real social context.

Another religious habituation program implemented is the Smile, Greeting, and Salutation (3S) program. Through this simple activity, the school seeks to instill politeness, respect, and social concern. Teachers set an example by consistently greeting students every morning, and students emulate this positive behavior in their daily interactions. This habituation creates a warm and harmonious school atmosphere (Nurjanah & Sholeh, 2020).

The findings show that the main supporting factors for the successful implementation of the curriculum include school policy support, the professionalism of PAI teachers, an already established religious culture, and parental involvement. The principal provides dedicated space and time for religious activities and encourages teachers to develop value-based learning strategies. Meanwhile, inhibiting factors include limited time for activities, differences in students' religious backgrounds, and insufficient worship facilities.

Nevertheless, these obstacles do not diminish the school's enthusiasm in fostering students' religious character. Teachers innovate by optimizing available time, strengthening communication with parents, and integrating Islamic values into experiential, project-based learning. Interview results indicate that students have become more diligent in worship, more polite in behavior, and more able to demonstrate responsibility toward religious duties.

These findings reinforce Islamic education theory, which emphasizes the importance of balance between cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. The concept of *uswah hasanah* (teacher role modeling) is shown to be effective in shaping students' religious behavior (Abbas & Khoir, 2023). Thus, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI learning at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari not only imparts religious knowledge but also internalizes spiritual and moral values that form the foundation of students' character.

Table 1. Comprehensive Summary of the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI Learning at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari

Aspect of Implementation	Forms of Activity / Learning Strategy	Religious Values Strengthened	Supporting / Inhibiting Factors	Field Findings
Learning Planning	Preparation of lesson plans (RPP)	Faith, piety, noble character	Support from school policies	Teachers prepare

	based on the Pancasila Student Profile and Learning Outcomes (ATP)		and the MGMP (PAI subject teachers' forum) team	contextual and reflective lesson plans
Intracurricular Activities	Classroom PAI learning and <i>tahfidz</i> activities	Discipline, perseverance, responsibility	Support from PAI teachers and learning facilities	Students show improvement in spiritual and moral attitudes
Co-curricular Activities	<i>Shalat dhuha, dzuhur</i> in congregation, monthly <i>pengajian</i>	Honesty, togetherness, empathy	Support from the principal and local community	Communal worship culture becomes a hallmark of the school
Religious Habituation	3S program (Smile, Greeting, Salutation) and collective prayers	Politeness, empathy, solidarity	Participation of teachers and students	Social relations at school become increasingly harmonious
Evaluation and Reflection	Interviews, observations, and reflection on religious values	Spiritual and moral responsibility	Limited time for evaluation	Monitoring is conducted regularly by PAI teachers

Accordingly, the findings indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI learning at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari has succeeded in creating an educational ecosystem that is religious, disciplined, and character-oriented. Spiritual values are internalized through real activities that are planned, measurable, and sustainable. This approach proves that religious education can become the core of character formation in the era of the Merdeka Curriculum.

2. Analysis of Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI Learning at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari proceeds effectively because it is supported by several strong enabling factors, yet at the same time faces a number of obstacles that require strategic solutions. Based on interview, observation, and documentation data, these factors directly influence the success of character-based religious learning at the school.

The first supporting factor is school policy support. The principal demonstrates a high commitment to creating a religious learning environment. This is reflected in policies that incorporate religious activities as an integral part of the school agenda, such as mandatory congregational prayers, *tahfidz* programs, and monthly *pengajian*. In addition, the lesson schedule is adjusted so that religious activities are not disrupted by other academic programs. This structural support serves as the main foundation for the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI learning.

The second factor is the active role of PAI teachers. PAI teachers act as facilitators, motivators, and moral role models for students. Their attitudes, speech, and daily behavior reflect Islamic values, which are then emulated by students. In line with the concept of *uswah hasanah*,

teachers not only teach but also guide students in forming strong religious character. They also innovate in project-based learning relevant to everyday life, such as social-religious projects and charitable activities.

The third factor is the religious school culture. SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari has established a strong religious culture through routine religious activities, the use of polite language, and a spiritual atmosphere that permeates every activity. Each morning, students are accustomed to reciting prayers together before lessons begin, while teachers lead the recitation of the Asmaul Husna. These practices strengthen students' spiritual dimension and make the school a conducive environment for practicing Islamic values.

Another supporting factor is parental and family support. Parents' participation greatly determines the sustainability of school religious programs. PAI teachers emphasize that the success of students' *tahfidz* memorization and worship discipline is closely related to family involvement at home. Parents help supervise Qur'an memorization, encourage regular worship, and motivate students to remain consistent in religious activities.

In addition to supporting factors, there are also inhibiting factors that affect the effectiveness of implementation. The most dominant obstacle is limited time and dense lesson schedules. Activities such as memorization, collective prayer, and *shalat dhuha* often have to be condensed because they clash with other subjects. Teachers acknowledge that limited instructional time makes it difficult to conduct religious activities optimally every day.

The second obstacle is the variety of students' religious backgrounds. Not all students come from family environments that support Islamic value habituation. Some students are less accustomed to reading the Qur'an or participating in regular worship activities at home. This leads to differences in the pace at which religious values are understood and practiced at school. Teachers must adopt personal approaches so that each student receives guidance according to their needs.

Another challenge is the lack of worship facilities and infrastructure. Although the school has a *mushola* (prayer room), its capacity is insufficient to accommodate all students at once. Additionally, there is still a shortage of equipment such as prayer mats, *mukena*, and copies of the Qur'an. These conditions mean that some religious activities cannot be conducted simultaneously for all students and must be organized in shifts. PAI teachers address this by creating alternating schedules for each class so that activities can still run effectively.

A further inhibiting factor is the inconsistent participation of some students in religious activities. Some students show high enthusiasm at the beginning, but their motivation decreases over time. This is influenced by a lack of supervision at home and the impact of social environments outside school. Teachers and homeroom teachers strive to maintain students' enthusiasm by giving rewards, motivation, and personal guidance to cultivate sustainable spiritual awareness.

In addition, there is variation in the commitment of teachers and staff. Not all non-PAI teachers are actively involved in school religious programs. Some view religious activities as outside their responsibility, so cross-disciplinary collaboration has not yet functioned optimally. The principal responds by providing socialization and professional development to ensure that all teachers understand the importance of synergy in fostering students' religious character.

The final obstacle identified is the lack of an integrated evaluation and monitoring system. Thus far, evaluation of religious activities has tended to be informal and unscheduled. The school recognizes the need for a structured evaluation system so that program outcomes can be measured objectively. With regular evaluation, teachers can better assess students' religious character development and adjust learning strategies accordingly.

These field findings show that supporting and inhibiting factors are interrelated. Structural support from the school and the active participation of teachers constitute the main strengths, while obstacles related to time and facilities require collaborative solutions. From the perspective of curriculum implementation theory, the success of curriculum application is determined not only by program design but also by the commitment of implementers and the environmental support that upholds the intended values (Istiadah, 2020).

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the success of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation in PAI learning at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari depends on collaboration among the school, teachers, students, and families. Supporting factors such as policy, teacher role modeling, and religious culture must be continuously reinforced, while inhibiting factors such as limited time and facilities need to be addressed through innovation and ongoing evaluation.

Table 2. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in the Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI Learning at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari

Category	Aspect of Field Findings	Description and Empirical Evidence	Implications for Religious Character
Supporting Factors	School policy support	The school provides a special schedule for religious activities and a policy of mandatory congregational prayers	Fosters discipline and a sense of responsibility in worship
	Active role of PAI teachers	Teachers serve as role models and spiritual mentors for students	Increases students' religious and moral awareness
	Religious school culture	Collective prayers, recitation of the Asmaul Husna, and daily <i>tadarus</i> (Qur'an recitation)	Forms consistent spiritual habits
	Parental support	Parents assist with Qur'an memorization and worship practices at home	Enhances the continuity of Islamic value habituation
Inhibiting Factors	Limited time and schedules	Dense lesson schedules reduce the duration of religious activities	Decreases the continuity of religious habituation
	Diverse student backgrounds	Some students are not yet accustomed to worship activities	Requires personal approaches by teachers
	Limited worship facilities	The <i>mushola</i> cannot accommodate all students	Hinders the implementation of mass/collective activities
	Declining student consistency	Initial enthusiasm does not always last over time	Requires ongoing motivation and guidance

Variation in teacher commitment	Not all non-PAI teachers actively support religious programs	Cross-disciplinary synergy needs to be strengthened
Evaluation not yet structured	Assessment of religious activities remains informal	Regular and systematic monitoring is needed

Thus, the results show that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI learning is influenced not only by curriculum design but also by the school's social and cultural context. When supporting factors are strengthened and obstacles are collaboratively addressed, the strengthening of students' religious character can be achieved optimally and sustainably.

Conclusion

The study on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) as an effort to strengthen students' religious character at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari presents compelling findings: the Merdeka Curriculum is not merely an educational policy but a moral and spiritual movement that revives the essence of value-based education. The results show that its implementation at this school has fostered a strong religious culture in which the values of faith, piety, and noble character are not only taught but also enlivened through concrete actions.

PAI teachers serve as the central axis that bridges policy and classroom reality. Through role modeling, creativity, and a humanistic approach, they transform religious learning from a purely cognitive routine into a meaningful spiritual experience. Activities such as *tahfidz* Al-Qur'an, congregational prayers, collective supplications, and regular *pengajian* shape positive habits and strengthen students' character as faithful and well-mannered individuals.

Although the school faces constraints such as limited time, inadequate worship facilities, and diverse religious backgrounds among students, collaboration among teachers, the school, and parents becomes a powerful force in overcoming these obstacles. The success of this implementation proves that religious education can not only coexist with the modern paradigm of the Merdeka Curriculum, but can also become the heart of character transformation.

Thus, the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Negeri 1 Bendosari has become an effective medium for fostering a generation that is not only intellectually capable but also spiritually mature and firmly rooted in divine values. This is not merely curriculum reform, but the awakening of soulful education—education that enlightens the mind, soothes the heart, and ennoble character.

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