

Between hope and reality: challenges of islamic education teachers in implementing the independent curriculum at muhammadiyah 5 junior high school surakarta

Muhammad Alfian Wiandani^{a,1,*}, Isfihani^{b,2}, Iffah Mukhlisah^{c,3}

^{a,b,c} Institut Islam Mamba'ul 'Ulum Surakarta, Indonesia.

¹ alfanwiandani@gmail.com; ² isfihani@gmail.com; ³ ifamukhlis85@gmail.com.

*Correspondent Author

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to comprehensively describe the implementation of the "Kurikulum Merdeka" (Independent Curriculum) by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta in the 2024/2025 academic year, as well as to identify the problems encountered and the efforts made to address them. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, utilizing observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation as data collection techniques. The research subjects included the principal and two PAI teachers. The findings revealed that the Kurikulum Merdeka has been implemented across all classes, using CP/ATP and modules prepared by the central Muhammadiyah foundation. PAI teachers actively contextualize their instruction by integrating Islamic values and discussing contemporary social issues relevant to students' lives. Nonetheless, they face several challenges, including difficulties in applying differentiated instruction, limited time for formative assessments, and a lack of technical training. To address these challenges, the teachers engage in reflective teaching practices, attend internal workshops and online training, share best practices with peers, and improve their assessment design skills. The study concludes that successful implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka requires strong institutional support and continuous professional development. The findings imply the need for collaborative strategies among the government, foundations, and schools to empower teachers in navigating the complexities of the new curriculum.

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Introduction

This world is a dynamic place where everything constantly changes and evolves. The rapid advancement of the modern world in the contemporary era has had a significant impact on human life, particularly in the field of education. One of the most important aspects of human life is education (Fahira et al., 2023), as it enables people to improve their quality of life by developing knowledge and skills through the educational process.

Therefore, education must be developed within a country to ensure that its society can progress and grow more effectively. This aligns with the objectives of the National Education System as outlined in Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System. According

to this law, the government must be able to ensure equitable access to education, improve its quality, and organize and manage the education system in Indonesia in accordance with the demands of the globalization era (Mulyasa, 2022).

Surah Al-Mujadila verse 11 in the Qur'an contains educational values that can be applied in everyday life. This verse encourages continuous learning and knowledge development, as well as openness and tolerance. In Islam, knowledge is a means to know Allah, to be obedient to Him, and to follow the teachings of the Prophet and the Messengers as role models for humanity. In this understanding, knowledge is considered essential to human existence in Islam and serves as a tool for understanding both Islam and Allah. One of the responsibilities of humankind as creations of Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala is to seek knowledge (Muslimah et al., 2023).

In relation to this, the government has made efforts to improve the standard of education in Indonesia through a series of reforms. One such reform is the revision of the curriculum to reflect contemporary concerns in the field of education. Updating the curriculum is considered an effective way to raise educational standards (Halim & Ali, 2024). Since the curriculum serves as the foundation of education and functions to ensure its continuity (Winata et al., 2021), the orientation of education can be observed in how it is implemented.

Law Number 20 of 2003 defines the curriculum as a set of learning plans that contain objectives, content, teaching resources, and methodologies that serve as guidelines in the learning process to achieve national education goals. The implementation of the curriculum in Indonesia has undergone numerous changes and refinements since 1947, culminating in the introduction of a new curriculum known as the Kurikulum Merdeka (Ulinniam et al., 2021).

The Kurikulum Merdeka was officially implemented on February 11, 2022. It is a breakthrough in the national education system aimed at providing greater flexibility for students to develop their potential, interests, and talents independently (Munawar, 2022). This curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning and prioritizes the development of character, literacy, and competence. Its implementation requires a fundamental shift in teaching approaches by educators, including Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers.

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers bear a significant responsibility in instilling religious, moral, and ethical values in students (Rozak, 2023). With the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka, the role of PAI teachers has become increasingly complex, as they are required to integrate the principles of this curriculum into a learning process that is both spiritual and contextual. This inevitably presents several challenges, ranging from teacher preparedness and the availability of teaching materials, to understanding the philosophy of the curriculum itself.

In the initial observations, the researcher noted gaps in the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka experienced by all parties, including the school, teachers, and students. The researcher found that many students complained about difficulties in adapting to the new curriculum. As a result, the researcher became interested in conducting a study focused on the challenges of implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta. The study also aims to examine how the curriculum is being applied, the causes of implementation gaps among stakeholders, and the strategies or solutions being used to address these issues.

This research offers novelty because it specifically highlights the challenges faced by Islamic Religious Education teachers in the context of implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta, an Islamic private school characterized by its Muhammadiyah ideology and values. Unlike previous studies, which generally examined the

curriculum's implementation in a broader context or in general subjects such as Mathematics or Bahasa Indonesia, this study emphasizes the perspective of PAI teachers who carry dual responsibilities: meeting the demands of the national curriculum while simultaneously instilling religious values and organizational ideology. This focus provides a significant contribution to filling a gap in the literature that has not been widely explored by previous researchers.

In addition, this study presents a contextual approach by identifying the actual gaps between curriculum expectations and classroom practices, based on the local characteristics of Muhammadiyah schools. Previous research, such as that conducted by Sari (2023), has only highlighted the general difficulties teachers face in understanding Learning Outcomes (Capaian Pembelajaran or CP) and Diagnostic Assessment, without exploring the unique dynamics experienced by religious teachers in private Islamic educational institutions. Therefore, this study not only offers deeper empirical data but also presents a distinct and practical portrayal of challenges, which can serve as a foundation for developing more targeted coaching or training strategies for PAI teachers within Muhammadiyah institutions and other Islamic schools.

The Kurikulum Merdeka is a curriculum approach developed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia in response to the need for a more flexible, humanistic, and contextual education system (Ainissyifa et al., 2024). This curriculum emphasizes character development through the Profile of Pancasila Students, differentiated learning according to students' individual potentials, and project-based learning that is relevant to real-life contexts (Efendi et al., 2023). In this context, teachers are expected to act as facilitators who are capable of designing active, creative, and collaborative learning environments. The philosophical foundation of the Kurikulum Merdeka is based on constructivist theories proposed by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, which emphasize learning as a knowledge-building process shaped by social interaction and meaningful experience (Suryadi et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, Islamic Religious Education aims to shape individuals who are faithful, pious, and of noble character through the understanding, internalization, and practice of Islamic teachings in daily life (Hamim et al., 2022). According to value learning theory, the internalization of religious values must be conducted gradually through cognitive, affective, and psychomotor approaches (Dzofir, 2020). With the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka, PAI teachers are expected to integrate Islamic values into learning practices that are more contextual, reflective, and participatory (Ahmad et al., 2025). Therefore, a teacher's understanding of curriculum theory, pedagogical approaches, and instructional methodologies is essential in analyzing the relevance and challenges of implementing this curriculum in the Islamic Religious Education subject (Trimahmudi, 2024).

Based on the background, issues, and theoretical framework described above, the research problems in this study can be formulated as follows: 1. How is the Kurikulum Merdeka implemented by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta in the 2024/2025 academic year? 2. What are the challenges faced by PAI teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka in the 2024/2025 academic year? 3. What efforts have been made by PAI teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta to overcome the challenges in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka in the 2024/2025 academic year?

Method

This research employs a qualitative approach, as the researcher chose this method due to its descriptive nature and its focus on analyzing data through in-depth observations aligned with field experiences. Consequently, the data obtained is more complex and can be easily understood

and interpreted comprehensively. The type of research used is descriptive qualitative research, which is aimed at exploring the conditions surrounding the research subject in a thorough, broad, and in-depth manner. This type was chosen because it allows the researcher to describe the observed situations more specifically, deeply, and transparently. The determination of research subjects was conducted using purposive sampling.

Purposive sampling is a technique for selecting research subjects by aligning them with the objectives of the study (Abdussamad & Sik, 2021). Based on this explanation, the selected participants in this study include: the Principal of Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta, Parwanto, Islamic Religious Education Teacher, Retduwan, and Aldila Shiddiq Hastomo.

Data collection is one of the most strategic steps in research, as its primary goal is to obtain accurate and reliable data. Therefore, this stage must be given significant attention by the researcher in relation to the results produced. Data collection in this study utilized three techniques as outlined by Waruwu (Waruwu, 2023), namely interviews, observation, and documentation.

Data validity refers to the degree to which the information reported by the researcher accurately reflects the field reality. In qualitative research, data validity is tested using triangulation. Triangulation is the process of verifying data through various sources, techniques, and timeframes (Sugiyono, 2013). The triangulation method used in this study is source triangulation. Source triangulation involves checking the credibility of data by verifying it through multiple sources. The researcher chose this method to emphasize validating information from different perspectives or data sources and to strengthen the validity of findings in this context. In this triangulation process, the data is described, categorized, and analyzed to identify similarities, differences, and unique perspectives among the sources, thereby leading to well-founded conclusions.

Data analysis is the process of examining field data with various preparations that have been planned in advance, and then systematically organizing and presenting the findings (Sofwatillah et al., 2024). The data analysis technique used in this qualitative research follows the model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (Fiantika et al., 2022), which includes: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

Result

Based on interviews, observations, and documentation conducted at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta, the Kurikulum Merdeka has been implemented at the school. In its implementation, the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta have followed directives from the government, although the adjustment process has proven somewhat challenging due to the inclusion of the P5 program (*Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila*), which introduces changes to teaching and learning activities compared to the previous curriculum. To improve the quality of teaching among PAI teachers, the school organizes workshops or educational seminars, with each teacher receiving an individual schedule. As stated by Aldila, a PAI teacher at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta: *"At Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta, we follow the government's directives in implementing the curriculum. Usually, each teacher is called to attend a workshop or seminar related to the Merdeka teacher program, and whatever is gained from those sessions will then be implemented at school. Our Vice Principal for Curriculum has already translated the characteristics of the Kurikulum Merdeka, and we apply them here. The adjustment is quite noticeable, especially with the inclusion of P5 (Project to Strengthen the Pancasila Student Profile), which makes our learning activities different from those in the previous curriculum. So we just follow the instructions from the Kurikulum Merdeka."*

Based on the researcher's observations, the Kurikulum Merdeka has been implemented across all classes at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta. In its application, PAI teachers are not required to create Learning Outcomes (CP), Learning Objectives (ATP), or modules, as these have already been provided by the central Muhammadiyah foundation. As explained by Parwanto, the principal of Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta: *"In implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka, PAI teachers align their modules with ISMUBA (Al-Islam, Kemuhammadiyahan, Bahasa Arab (Arabic)), and we have our own books printed by the Muhammadiyah Central Board. We just have to implement them."* This was also stated by Aldila in the following interview: *"Actually, before the CP or ATP reached us, the Kurikulum Merdeka had already planned it. Since we are under one Muhammadiyah foundation, the central Muhammadiyah authority has already translated it into CP/ATP for graduates of Muhammadiyah junior high schools. So teachers within the Muhammadiyah network don't create their own CPs. The CP/ATP is from Muhammadiyah central, derived from the Kurikulum Merdeka. Now Kemuhammadiyahan is divided into three components: PAI, Kemuhammadiyahan, and Arabic. So we just implement the CP/ATP that has been provided by the Muhammadiyah central board. We just need to deliver it to the students. The textbooks are also from the center; we no longer use regional books. The books are standardized across Indonesia. Everything from the CP/ATP is from there. We simply convey it to the students, perhaps with each school applying its own distinctive approach."*

Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta strongly supports the curriculum renewal, one form of support being the improvement of facilities and infrastructure to support the learning process. As Aldila stated: *"The facilities and infrastructure at MULISKA are excellent in my opinion. Each classroom is already equipped with a projector and sound system, so if a teacher wants to teach using multimedia, it can be displayed directly on a large screen. The sound system is installed in all classrooms, and our classrooms are comfortable."*

The strategy employed by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta to ensure that the material delivered to students is relevant and up to date with current life is by discussing viral issues on social media in class. As stated by Aldila: *"Since the curriculum is indeed up to date and based on current issues, the material we present naturally aligns with that. Moreover, when I teach content related to something viral, I include it in the lesson—as long as it is relevant to the material. We discuss how to respond to such viral matters, and that is necessary nowadays because students are exposed to these things even if they don't experience them directly. So in religious education, we must guide them with the correct perspective and appropriate proportion, especially regarding social media. Therefore, viral issues need to be addressed in the classroom, and students' perspectives and questions must also be responded to."*

The purpose of implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta is to prioritize religious aspects in alignment with the values of the Pancasila Student Profile. As expressed by Retduwan, a PAI teacher at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta: *"Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta implements the Kurikulum Merdeka by integrating the national curriculum with Islamic character. Although I haven't found specific examples of the curriculum's application here, the school adopts innovative and out-of-the-box learning approaches."*

There are also various daily worship practices that support the development of students' character, as explained by the school principal: *"In terms of activities, we focus a lot on practice-based routines—such as the habit of performing the Dhuha prayer in the morning, *murojaah* (Qur'an recitation), and other daily worship practices. So, for religious subjects, the material is not the main focus; what dominates is the time allocated for religious activities and practices."*

In its characteristics, the Kurikulum Merdeka has both strengths and weaknesses, which are especially felt by the PAI teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta. The advantage lies in the flexibility of learning, where teachers are free to determine the content based on students' abilities. However, the drawback is the adjustment process—teachers need considerable time and repeated training to align their teaching with the nature and demands of the Kurikulum Merdeka.

The Kurikulum Merdeka includes differentiated learning; however, at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta, PAI (Islamic Religious Education) teachers have not yet been able to fully implement differentiated instruction. Teachers are expected to understand and apply all learning styles by adjusting to the needs of students who are grouped based on their abilities as identified through initial diagnostic assessments. This enables them to understand each student's unique character. However, this is extremely challenging, and the teachers have not yet received training on differentiated instruction. As a result, classes often become less conducive to learning due to the implementation of various learning styles simultaneously. For the time being, PAI teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta rely on audio and audiovisual learning styles. Nonetheless, they continue to strive toward understanding and applying differentiated learning, as it is one of the core objectives of the Kurikulum Merdeka, and they aim to implement it gradually, despite the time and process required.

Based on the researcher's observations, the Kurikulum Merdeka contains more complex and in-depth material compared to the previous curriculum. Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta has independently taken several strategic steps to implement the curriculum, such as inviting guest speakers and participating in various training sessions to accelerate the curriculum's application so that students can adapt well. The school also encourages sharing between teachers and utilizes the Merdeka Mengajar platform.

Challenges are inevitable in any process, and this is the case at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka, particularly among PAI teachers. The first major challenge is the limitation of time and resources. One of the principles of the Kurikulum Merdeka is to grant schools the autonomy to design teaching materials according to the characteristics of their students through differentiated learning. However, this has proven difficult to apply at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta. As expressed by PAI teacher Aldila: *"In my opinion, it's still difficult to implement differentiated instruction for certain subjects. They promote differentiated learning, but if we teach in just one class, we can manage everything—adjusting the materials for both high and low achievers. But when we teach multiple classes, it's nearly impossible to accommodate every student's needs."* This was also echoed by the school principal: *"The main obstacle is time. Sometimes, the number of teaching hours is too much, so we need to divide the responsibilities more professionally. However, all learning activities are still well-monitored."*

Secondly, the challenge faced by PAI (Islamic Religious Education) teachers lies in implementing formative assessment. One of the key characteristics of the Kurikulum Merdeka program is formative assessment; however, this remains a significant obstacle for PAI teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta. As stated by Aldila: *"We are still trying to figure it out; we haven't yet found an ideal assessment concept or a way to implement the Kurikulum Merdeka model. Honestly, it's quite complicated. The assessment in this curriculum has many complex aspects. For example, if we're teaching English, it's manageable—they teach six hours with one class, so they can observe the students closely. But for us, we only have one hour in each class, and we teach many different classes. So it's hard to observe each student individually when our six teaching hours are divided among six different classes."* This challenge was also mentioned by Retduwan: *"Yes, some PAI teachers may struggle to understand or apply the concept of formative*

assessment in the classroom. The reasons include a lack of understanding of formative assessment and limited time and resources available to PAI teachers."

As previously described regarding the challenges in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka, it follows that every problem must have a solution. The following are efforts or solutions made by the school, particularly by PAI teachers, in addressing these issues—especially those related to differentiated learning and formative assessment. These include the need for more time and participation in workshops or training sessions focused on instructional development for PAI teachers. As stated by the Principal: *"The solution for formative assessment is more teaching experience and training, such as workshops. And for now, formative assessment can still be taken from attitude assessments, practice, assignments, and tests, just like in the previous curriculum."*

In this regard, formative assessment of students can still be carried out by considering attitude, practice, and assignment scores, as explained by Aldila: *"There's no clear solution yet unless the government provides certain incentives or flexibility. For now, we are still forced to proceed with assessments under the Kurikulum Merdeka policy by relying on class observations, assignment scores, seriousness in learning, diligence, and student behavior."* Another solution was suggested by Retduwan: *"PAI teachers can undertake several efforts to address the challenges of implementing formative assessment, such as participating in professional development and training, sharing experiences with other teachers, developing skills in designing formative assessments, and analyzing and evaluating assessment results."*

Therefore, while there are already solutions available to address the challenges experienced by PAI teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka, it still requires a considerable amount of time to fully overcome them.

Discussion

1. The Implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka by Islamic Religious Education Teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta in the 2024/2025 Academic Year

Based on the research findings, the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers has been carried out in alignment with directives from the central government, particularly through a system facilitated by the Majelis Dikdasmen (Council for Primary and Secondary Education) of the Muhammadiyah Central Board. This is evident from the statements of both teachers and the school principal, who affirmed that in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka, PAI teachers are not required to develop Learning Outcomes (Capaian Pembelajaran / CP), Learning Objectives (Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran / ATP), or teaching modules independently, as all instructional materials have been prepared and standardized by the Muhammadiyah central authority.

This aligns with the concept of the Kurikulum Merdeka as developed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, which grants educational institutions and teachers the flexibility to design instruction tailored to the characteristics of learners and the school context (Purnawanto, 2022; Salsabilla et al., 2023). However, in institutionally affiliated schools such as Muhammadiyah, this freedom is framed within an integrated system defined by the parent organization, in this case, the Muhammadiyah Council for Education. This is consistent with the educational philosophy of Ki Hajar Dewantara, which emphasizes that education must be rooted in distinctive local culture and values—in this context, Islamic and Muhammadiyah principles.

In implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka, PAI teachers focus more on the execution of learning activities and character-building through the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5 – Project to Strengthen the Pancasila Student Profile). The P5 program is a vital component of the Kurikulum Merdeka because it aims to shape students into individuals who are faithful, devoted to God Almighty, and of noble character, in line with the values of the Pancasila Student Profile (Iskandar et al., 2023; Purnawanto, 2023b). At Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta, religious activities such as the *Dhuha* prayer, *muroja'ah* (Qur'an recitation), and daily worship practices are part of the P5 implementation that emphasizes religiosity and Islamic character.

Furthermore, in their instructional strategies, PAI teachers attempt to connect lesson content with current issues that are trending on social media. This approach is aligned with the principles of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), which emphasizes linking academic content to real-life contexts that are relevant to students (Anwar, 2021; Johnson, 2002; Mu'min et al., 2025). As a result, students are able to understand religious values in ways that are meaningful and applicable to their everyday lives, especially within the digital age and the morally complex environment of social media.

2. Challenges Faced by Islamic Religious Education Teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta in Implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka for the 2024/2025 Academic Year

Based on research findings obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta, it was found that although the Kurikulum Merdeka has been implemented comprehensively, a number of challenges are still faced by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers. These challenges include limited time and resources for applying differentiated instruction, as well as difficulties in effectively conducting formative assessment.

First, limited time and resources in implementing differentiated instruction. Differentiated learning is one of the core features of the Kurikulum Merdeka, aimed at adapting instruction to students' individual needs, interests, and learning styles (Halimah, 2023; Purnawanto, 2023a; Soemardi & Hariani, 2023). However, PAI teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta experience difficulties in applying this approach. As stated by teacher Aldila, it is challenging to accommodate the needs of all students across different classes, especially due to limited teaching time distributed among many classes. This finding aligns with Tomlinson's theory (Purwowidodo & Zaini, 2023; Tomlinson, 2001; Trisnani et al., 2024), which suggests that effective differentiation requires a deep understanding of students, complex planning, and flexibility in execution. Without sufficient time or with an overwhelming teaching load, it becomes nearly impossible for teachers to apply differentiation optimally.

Second, difficulty in implementing formative assessment. The Kurikulum Merdeka emphasizes the importance of assessment as learning and assessment for learning, which is reflected in formative assessment practices (Anggreana et al., 2022). However, PAI teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta admit that they are still struggling to grasp and apply this concept. This is mainly due to their heavy teaching load, a large number of classes, and limited time for thorough observation of each student's progress. In line with this, Black & Wiliam's theory (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Busnawir et al., 2025) states that effective formative assessment requires intensive direct interaction between teachers and students to allow for meaningful feedback. When this interaction is limited due to time constraints or class size, the effectiveness of formative assessment is significantly reduced.

Third, lack of specialized training and professional support. Another key issue identified in the study is the insufficient intensive training related to the Kurikulum Merdeka, particularly in areas of differentiated instruction and formative assessment. Although training sessions and workshops have been conducted by both foundations and the government, PAI teachers feel these efforts have not been sufficient to fully master implementation strategies. According to Darling-Hammond (2017), effective teacher training must be ongoing, contextual, and grounded in real classroom practice. When training is only theoretical or occurs as a one-time event, its effectiveness in improving teacher competence becomes very limited.

Fourth, uncondusive classroom conditions for differentiated instruction. PAI teachers also noted that one of the obstacles to implementing differentiated learning is the classroom environment, which is not always conducive—especially when different learning styles are applied for each student. This creates challenges in classroom management. This view aligns with the perspectives of Suryana, Rahmat Fadhli, and Slavin (Slavin, 1995; Suryana & Rahmat Fadhli, 2022), who assert that effective classroom management is a prerequisite for effective learning and for implementing complex instructional strategies such as differentiation. Without strong classroom management, differentiation may instead lead to confusion and disrupt the learning process.

3. Efforts Made by Islamic Religious Education Teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta to Overcome the Challenges in Implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka for the 2024/2025 Academic Year

In response to the various challenges encountered during the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta have taken several strategic steps to enhance the quality of instruction and curriculum delivery. The findings show that these teachers are not passive in facing challenges but instead take initiative to find practical and adaptive solutions. The following outlines the efforts undertaken:

First, increasing experience and teaching hours through reflective teaching practice. Based on interview results, PAI teachers recognize that many skills required in the Kurikulum Merdeka can only be mastered through consistent hands-on classroom practice. Teachers have begun to regularly reflect on their teaching as a form of self-directed professional development. This aligns with Farrell's theory of reflective teaching (Farrell, 2019), which states that teachers who regularly reflect on their practices tend to be more adaptive to curriculum changes and student needs. Reflective practice enables teachers to learn from their experiences and improve the quality of instruction.

Second, organizing internal workshops or training. Field findings indicate that the school has taken the initiative to hold regular internal workshops. These workshops focus on topics such as differentiated learning, formative assessment, and Kurikulum Merdeka assessment strategies. According to Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey (2018) school-level collaborative training—especially when rooted in local context and real teacher needs—is more effective than one-way, top-down training. Thus, internal workshops serve as a relevant strategy to increase teacher readiness in implementing the curriculum.

Third, participating in continuous training and professional development. PAI teachers have also actively joined online training programs such as the "Guru Belajar dan Berbagi" initiative by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. This is a concrete step in enhancing their pedagogical competence, especially in assessment and classroom management, and represents a form of self-directed professional development. In line with

Timperley et al. (2007), self-initiated professional learning enables teachers to develop reflective awareness and continuously improve their pedagogical knowledge. Teachers who engage in independent training show high intrinsic motivation to strengthen their competence.

Fourth, sharing experiences with other teachers (peer learning). PAI teachers have formed small discussion groups with other teachers from Muhammadiyah schools in Surakarta. These discussions serve as forums for sharing best practices in curriculum implementation, differentiated instructional design, and assessment techniques. According to Vangrieken et al. (2017), peer learning within communities of practice positively impacts teacher competence, as it fosters collaboration, reflection, and innovation based on real teaching experiences.

Fifth, developing skills in designing formative assessments. PAI teachers have realized that formative assessments should not only serve as measurement tools but also as learning supports. Therefore, they have started using assessment instruments such as rubrics, anecdotal notes, and exit tickets. The theory proposed by Andrade & Heritage (2017) emphasizes the importance of authentic, performance-based formative assessment design, which allows teachers to obtain accurate information about student understanding. By improving their skills in designing these instruments, teachers can more effectively guide students' individual learning progress.

Sixth, analyzing and evaluating assessment results to plan follow-up instruction. PAI teachers have begun to routinely analyze assessment results to map student progress. This data is used as the basis for designing follow-up or remedial instruction. This aligns with the concept of data-driven instruction developed by Datnow & Park (2018), which states that the intentional use of assessment data can improve learning efficiency and accelerate student achievement.

Conclusion

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta has been carried out in accordance with government directives and facilitated by the Central Board of Muhammadiyah's Council for Primary and Secondary Education (Majelis Dikdasmen). The Kurikulum Merdeka is implemented with a focus on character development through the Project to Strengthen the Pancasila Student Profile (P5), as well as the integration of Islamic values through daily religious activities at school. PAI teachers strive to contextualize learning by addressing current and relevant issues in students' lives, thereby making the learning process more meaningful and applicable.

However, during the implementation process, PAI teachers face several challenges, including limited time and resources for applying differentiated instruction, difficulties in conducting formative assessments, a lack of practical and contextual training, and classroom conditions that are not yet fully conducive to adaptive learning. These challenges indicate that curriculum transformation requires not only policy readiness but also well-prepared human resources and strong institutional support.

To address these challenges, PAI teachers at Muhammadiyah 5 Junior High School Surakarta have taken several initiatives, such as increasing reflection time on teaching practices, participating in internal workshops and training, sharing best practices with other teachers, developing skills in designing formative assessments, and analyzing assessment results for

continuous improvement. These efforts align with the theories of reflective teaching, communities of practice, and data-driven assessment. The implication is that schools must continue to support sustainable professional development so that the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka is not merely a formality but becomes substantive and has a real impact on educational quality.

One limitation of this study is that it only focuses on a single subject and a single school, thus it may not fully represent the broader conditions across other Islamic-based schools. Therefore, future research is recommended to expand the scope and subjects of study and to integrate quantitative approaches to measure the effectiveness of curriculum implementation in terms of student learning outcomes. The researcher also suggests that the government, educational institutions, and organizations such as Muhammadiyah become more proactive in providing practical and targeted training for PAI teachers to better address the challenges of curriculum implementation in the field. In conclusion, it is hoped that this study will provide meaningful contributions to improving the quality of Kurikulum Merdeka implementation, particularly in Islamic Religious Education instruction within schools grounded in Islamic and Muhammadiyah values.

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