

Curriculum Reform in Practice: Implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Islamic Religious Education at *Sekolah Penggerak*

Ummul Khair¹, Hendra Harmi², Dewi Purnamasari³

¹ Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup, Curup, Indonesia; ummulkhair@iaincurup.ac.id

² Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup, Curup, Indonesia; hendra.harmi@iaincurup.ac.id

³ Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup, Curup, Indonesia; dewipurnamasari@iaincurup.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

The Merdeka Curriculum is an Indonesian curriculum reform intended to increase school and teacher autonomy and to strengthen competency- and character-based learning. However, evidence on how this curriculum is enacted in Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) at the elementary level remains limited. This study examined the implementation of PAI under the Merdeka Curriculum in a Sekolah Penggerak (Driving School) context at SD Negeri 02 Rejang Lebong. Using a qualitative descriptive case study design, data were collected from July to December 2024 through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with four PAI teachers, the school principal, and selected students, and analysis of instructional documents (modules and lesson plans). Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke, supported by triangulation and member checking to enhance credibility. Findings indicate that teachers used increased curricular flexibility to prioritize essential and contextual PAI content based on initial diagnostic assessment and clearly stated learning objectives. Instruction commonly incorporated discussion, interactive explanation, reflective questioning, role play, Qur'anic reading practice, and value-based projects (e.g., charity and community service) to connect religious concepts with students' lived experiences. Assessment emphasized continuous formative feedback through quizzes, portfolios, performance tasks, and observation of value enactment in daily behavior; remedial and enrichment activities were applied according to student needs. A recurring challenge concerned uneven parental support for reinforcing religious values at home. Overall, Merdeka Curriculum enactment in PAI fostered a student-centered and value-oriented learning environment that supported both understanding of Islamic teachings and character development, while highlighting the need for stronger school-family collaboration.

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Corresponding Author:

Ummul Khair

Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup, Indonesia; ummulkhair@iaincurup.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

The success of any learning process is inseparable from the curriculum, which serves as both the core and the direction of the educational system. (Yogi Fernando et al., 2023) Without a well-structured and systematic curriculum, educational goals would lack clarity and consistency. The curriculum is often regarded as the heart of education, determining the trajectory of students' competency development. (Surahmat, 2025) It functions not only as a learning guide but also as a synthesis of educational thought, practice, and purpose within each educational institution. (Ramadani et al., 2021) In the broader context of national development, education acts as a fundamental pillar for cultivating human resources who are critical thinkers, creative innovators, and morally grounded individuals – qualities essential for addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century. (Arifin, 2018)

Within this framework, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) holds a strategic position in Indonesia's national education system. As a compulsory subject for Muslim students from elementary through higher education, PAI plays a vital role in instilling Islamic principles and shaping the moral and ethical character of younger generations. (Irmawati, 2024) According to Musthofa and Ilahi the PAI curriculum encompasses five core domains: the Qur'an and Hadith, theology (*aqidah*), ethics (*akhlak*), jurisprudence and worship (*fiqh*), and Islamic cultural history. (Musthofa & Illahi, 2023) these components collectively address human relationships with God, others, living beings, and the environment – reflecting the holistic nature of Islamic education. At the elementary level, religious education serves a foundational role in nurturing children's moral and spiritual character through the internalization of values such as honesty, responsibility, empathy, and respect. (Amie Primarni et al., 2025) Religious and moral education thus extends beyond introducing rituals and doctrines; it seeks to cultivate ethical values that form the basis of integrity and tolerance in social life. (Murni & Ariyani, 2022)

The Merdeka Curriculum emerged as an innovative reform in Indonesia's educational landscape, designed in response to the need for learning recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic and to equip students with 21st-century competencies. This curriculum emphasizes project-based learning, critical thinking, and assessment systems that focus on student processes and competencies. In the context of PAI, the Merdeka Curriculum aims not only to strengthen cognitive understanding but also to foster religious, moral, and social values through more meaningful learning experiences. (Empaldi, 2023)

Despite the growing attention given to the Merdeka Curriculum in educational policy, empirical research on its implementation in religious subjects – particularly PAI – remains limited. Most prior studies have focused on conceptual design and macro-level policy, leaving the classroom-level practices of teachers underexplored. Current challenges include curricular flexibility (Jasiah et al., 2024), teacher readiness in adopting new pedagogical approaches, and students' varied abilities to comprehend and internalize religious values. (Prisca & Abdulloh, 2025) This gap underscores the need for research that examines how the Merdeka Curriculum is concretely applied in religious education at the elementary level, and how such implementation contributes to the moral and spiritual development of students. The Sekolah Penggerak (Driving School) program represents an integral component of this educational reform (Nafisah et al., 2024). Selected schools are given the opportunity to implement the Merdeka Curriculum over a three-year period, supported by continuous professional development and mentoring initiatives. (Khaerunnisa et al., 2025) The program's goal is to foster creative, participatory, and contextually relevant learning, ultimately producing students who are not only academically excellent but also morally upright and globally competitive in line with Indonesia's national education transformation vision.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore how Islamic Religious Education teachers implement the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools designated as Sekolah Penggerak, and how such implementation aligns with character- and competency-based educational objectives. The research is expected to provide empirical insights into the strategies, experiences, and challenges faced by PAI teachers during curriculum implementation, while contributing to the development of more contextual, flexible, and character-oriented religious education policies in Indonesia.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive case study design. This approach was selected as it is well-suited to provide an in-depth portrayal of the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in the context of the Sekolah Penggerak (Driving School) Program. The research was conducted over a period of six months, from July 1 to December 24, 2024.

2.2 Site and Participant

The study was conducted at SD Negeri 02 Rejang Lebong, one of the schools designated as a Sekolah Penggerak (Driving School). This site was purposefully selected based on the consideration that the school has consistently implemented the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) instruction. The research participants consisted of four PAI teachers with extensive teaching experience who play a significant role in implementing the curriculum. In addition, supporting interviews were conducted with the school principal and several students to enrich the data and provide multiple perspectives.

2.3 Data Collection

The research data were collected using three primary techniques:

- a. Classroom Observation – conducted to document pedagogical interactions and the instructional strategies employed by teachers in delivering PAI lessons.
- b. Semi-Structured Interviews – held in four sessions involving PAI teachers, the school principal, and student representatives. These interviews aimed to gain deeper insights into teachers' understanding and application of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI learning.
- c. Document Review – included the analysis of lesson plans (RPP), teaching modules, and other relevant instructional materials to compare the alignment between planned strategies and actual classroom practices.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the Braun and Clarke model. The analysis process involved several stages:

- a. Transcription and data organization from observations, interviews, and documents.
- b. Initial coding to identify key topics such as lesson design, pedagogical approaches, and assessment methods.
- c. Categorization of codes into broader themes based on recurring patterns across the dataset.
- d. Review and refinement of themes to ensure coherence and consistency.
- e. Narrative reporting of findings, supported by direct quotations from interviews, observation notes, and document analysis.

Theme validation was carried out through data and method triangulation, by comparing findings from observations, interviews, and document reviews. Member checking was also conducted with participants to confirm the accuracy and credibility of the interpretations.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical research principles. Formal permission was obtained from the school authorities prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided verbal consent to participate voluntarily. To ensure confidentiality, participants' real names were replaced with codes or pseudonyms in the report. All collected data were used solely for academic purposes and handled with respect to privacy and research integrity.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

The *Kurikulum Merdeka* marks a major shift in the educational philosophy of Indonesia. While the *Kurikulum 2013* (K13) emphasized academic skills, the *Kurikulum Merdeka* focuses on students' moral and character growth. This new approach adopts a more integrative and flexible learning method, allowing the design of teaching materials to be adjusted to diverse student needs and abilities. One essential element of this strategy is the mapping of students' abilities, which plays a significant role in determining relevant learning objectives. Furthermore, the integration of character values into the learning framework is crucial in shaping individuals who are not only intellectually capable but also possess high integrity and are ready to face future challenges. Interviews with various informants revealed a deep understanding of the vision of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which aims to create a holistic educational atmosphere that goes beyond academic achievement and fosters a generation grounded in moral values and essential life skills.

Findings from interviews reinforce this view. Mrs. Ln stated that *Kurikulum Merdeka* represents a holistic learning model that integrates various educational elements into unified learning outcomes. She emphasized the importance of mapping learning objectives so that the teaching process becomes more targeted and effective. Unlike the more rigid structure of K13, *Kurikulum Merdeka* provides educators with greater freedom to design relevant materials that align with students' needs. This autonomy allows teachers to focus on meaningful learning needs rather than less essential content.

Similarly, Mrs. Rs asserted that *Kurikulum Merdeka* is oriented toward strengthening character and skills, rather than solely academic achievement as was typical of K13. She highlighted the importance of accurately mapping students' abilities to establish clear learning objectives, enabling teachers to develop materials that genuinely match learners' needs. By embedding character values into the curriculum, education becomes more meaningful — intellectually, socially, and morally.

In line with this, Mrs. Dh stated that the essence of *Kurikulum Merdeka* lies in character and ethical value development. According to her, the curriculum's flexibility and contextual relevance allow the delivery of materials that suit specific student needs. This strong focus on character and competency distinguishes it from K13, which prioritized academic quality. Therefore, mapping students' abilities is indispensable to ensure that the learning process runs effectively and meaningfully.

This analysis reveals two main aspects of *Kurikulum Merdeka* as perceived by the informants: learning priorities and teachers' autonomy in instruction. The first informant noted that the scope of *Kurikulum Merdeka* is broader than that of K13, while the subsequent informants emphasized a shift in focus toward character formation and skills development rather than mere academic performance.

From the perspective of flexibility, informants mentioned that *Kurikulum Merdeka* grants teachers greater autonomy to adapt teaching materials to students' needs, prioritize essential content, and apply more creative and contextual learning methods. This is evident in the statements of several teachers.

According to Mrs. Mg, *Kurikulum Merdeka* allows for the integration of various aspects into a single comprehensive learning outcome. She noted that the flexibility offered by this curriculum gives teachers the freedom to develop essential materials more strategically. This is a significant advantage compared to previous curricula, as it enables teachers to tailor materials to the unique needs and conditions of each student.

Similarly, Mrs. Rs reiterated that the core of *Kurikulum Merdeka* lies in building character and skills. She noted that this curriculum provides teachers with the freedom to design more adaptive instructional strategies. The character values embedded within it are considered highly relevant to contemporary educational demands, encompassing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains.

In agreement, Mrs. Dh added that *Kurikulum Merdeka* adopts a more varied approach, particularly in strengthening students' character and skills. The flexibility in material delivery is a key advantage, allowing teachers to create learning experiences that are relevant and aligned with students' real-life contexts. Consequently, learning becomes more meaningful and effective.

Research findings confirm that *Kurikulum Merdeka* promotes a holistic and flexible approach focused on developing students' character and competencies. In the context of *Pendidikan Agama Islam* (PAI), the four observed teachers began each session with a prayer, communicated learning objectives, and fostered a comfortable classroom atmosphere. Interactive activities such as group discussions and regular reflection were used to connect the material with real-life experiences, followed by evaluation through quizzes or assignments.

Although similar patterns emerged, each teacher applied distinct methods—ranging from critical questioning, light quizzes, and experience-based discussions to role play. Feedback was provided both directly and through summative assessments. Homework assignments varied from essay writing and additional research to practicing religious values in daily life. Despite the methodological differences, all teachers shared the same objective: to cultivate knowledgeable students with strong character who are prepared for future challenges.

Teaching practices can be seen in the following examples. Mrs. Mg described a routine practice of starting each class with a prayer to create a calm and focused atmosphere. She emphasized the importance of conducting initial assessments and clearly communicating learning objectives so that students understand the direction of the lesson. For example, when teaching honesty, she concluded the session with a reflective question such as, "Who can mention the pillars of faith and explain each one?" This question not only assessed understanding but also reinforced the values being taught. Similarly, when teaching *zakat*, she communicated the learning objectives at the start to engage students emotionally and spiritually.

The same emphasis was expressed by Mrs. Rs, Mrs. Dh, and Mrs. Ln, who all highlighted the importance of active student participation through discussion and reflection. Mrs. Rs, for instance, linked the topic of *zakat* to Muslims' social responsibilities, helping students grasp its significance. Mrs. Dh encouraged students to discuss the application of religious values in everyday life in small groups, enhancing confidence and expression. Meanwhile, Mrs. Ln consistently ended lessons with reflective prompts such as, "What did you learn today, and how can you apply it in your daily life?" She believed this approach effectively connected academic content with real-life experiences.

The findings show that although the four teachers applied different approaches, they shared a focus on enhancing students' understanding of religious values through interactive and enjoyable methods. During initial assessments, some teachers used questions, short quizzes, or experience-sharing discussions. Learning activities included role-playing, *Al-Qur'an* reading practice, discussions, and poster-making projects—all aimed at sharpening students' skills while fostering cooperation.

Feedback was given in multiple forms—during discussions, through praise and motivation, quizzes, evaluations, and reminders to ensure all group members participated actively. Homework assignments also varied, such as writing essays, conducting mini research, practicing *sedekah*, and reading books about Islamic figures—broadening students' academic and contextual understanding. These findings illustrate the diversity of PAI teaching methods among teachers.

In further interviews, Mrs. Mg, Mrs. Rs, and Mrs. Dh affirmed that *Kurikulum Merdeka* provides flexibility in content delivery. This allows teachers to integrate multiple learning aspects into holistic outcomes. The curriculum supports both character development and skill-building while giving educators the freedom to select context-appropriate approaches. They emphasized that *Kurikulum Merdeka* encourages teachers to be more creative in presenting essential material.

In practice, all four teachers began lessons with initial assessments—such as prayer, trigger questions, or brief quizzes—to explore prior knowledge. For instance, Mrs. Mg and Mrs. Rs often asked, "Who can explain what *syahadat* means?" or conducted short quizzes about the Prophet Muhammad's history. Mrs. Rs also emphasized that stating learning objectives at the beginning, especially when discussing *zakat* or honesty, helped students engage more meaningfully. At the end of each lesson, teachers facilitated reflection connecting learning content to students' daily experiences.

Other methods used included group discussions, role play, collaborative *Al-Qur'an* reading, and project-based learning encouraging presentations and dialogue. Mrs. Dh frequently used guiding

questions to deepen understanding, dividing students into small groups to enhance participation and confidence. Mrs. Ln stressed the importance of positive feedback to foster student motivation. The teachers believed that a pleasant, interactive, and meaningful learning environment strengthens students' comprehension and internalization of Islamic values.

Through these various approaches, the four teachers successfully enhanced students' knowledge, collaboration skills, and reflective abilities. Within *Kurikulum Merdeka*, they implemented student-centered learning, encouraging active participation through discussions, Q&A, and group work. The third and fourth informants specifically related content to students' everyday experiences, making learning more meaningful and applicable. Group projects also built social and collaborative skills. Consequently, learning was not only academic but also aimed at strengthening character and preparing students for future challenges.

Mrs. Mg highlighted the importance of teaching flexibility, often combining lectures with small-group discussions to allow students to express their views. After discussions, lessons continued with practice—such as performing group prayers in class. Mrs. Rs added that she often began lessons with simple questions about Islamic values like honesty and responsibility, believing that students were more engaged this way. She also used feedback from discussions and lectures to adjust future lessons according to student needs.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Dh sought to connect material to students' everyday lives by encouraging them to discuss and reflect on learned values and their real-world applications. She also asked students to choose one value to apply and later reflect on their experiences. Mrs. Ln added that character reinforcement could be achieved through group projects, such as charity fundraising for orphanages, which encouraged students to plan and reflect deeply on their experiences.

Findings show that each teacher implemented flexible, contextual instruction emphasizing character development. Assessment approaches also varied: the second informant focused on formative quizzes, while the first and third emphasized enrichment and practical application. The third informant prioritized practicing religious values, while the fourth provided remedial lessons for struggling students.

Only the fourth informant underscored the importance of parental involvement in supporting home learning. Despite differing methods, all teachers shared the same goal—to help students understand and apply PAI values in daily life through reflection, feedback, and active participation.

According to Mrs. Mg, teachers should not merely deliver content but also combine it with practical activities to deepen learning experiences. She believed that involving students in hands-on practice made understanding easier. For instance, in teaching religious values, students were encouraged not only to grasp the theory but also to implement it in real life. Mrs. Rs added that formative assessment through quizzes and individual tasks was effective in evaluating students' comprehension directly. This allowed teachers to observe students' progress and response to lessons.

Mrs. Dh also emphasized the significance of practical experiences related to religious values. She stated that engaging students in real-world acts, such as helping others, strengthened their understanding in broader contexts. She noted that parental involvement did not always need to be explicit but could occur indirectly through support. Meanwhile, Mrs. Ln highlighted parents' critical role in students' learning, stressing that home support is essential even without formal classroom communication.

This study reveals that each teacher adopted different methods of instruction and assessment. The second informant focused more on quizzes and assignments to monitor student progress, while the first and third prioritized enrichment and practical experiences. The third informant emphasized real-life application, while the fourth offered remedial materials for students who struggled. Among them, only the fourth stressed parental involvement.

Despite these differences, all teachers shared the same goal: to help students understand and apply Islamic teachings in daily life. They employed diverse approaches, such as group projects,

teamwork, interactive lectures, and guided *Al-Qur'an* interpretation, to make learning more dynamic and meaningful. All sought to cultivate both intellectual and moral development.

Mrs. Rs and Mrs. Ln emphasized enhancing students' understanding of religious values, encouraging exploration and self-discovery rather than rote memorization. Mrs. Rs and Mrs. Mg also noted that providing room for inquiry through interactive discussions increased student engagement. Group discussions were considered effective in strengthening participation and collaboration.

Mrs. Dh and Mrs. Ln stressed that religious education should involve real-life experience and social awareness, not just theoretical learning. They viewed spirituality as inseparable from lived experience, aligning with holistic education principles. Mrs. Rs and Mrs. Ln also noted that real-life experiences are vital for building social awareness—for example, discussing honesty as a social value that must manifest in daily behavior.

Thus, all teachers shared a unified objective in PAI instruction: to deepen understanding while shaping students' character. However, differences in teaching methods, assessment approaches, and material focus resulted in a diverse and enriched learning experience.

The first informant favored group work to promote collaboration, while the second preferred teacher-centered interactive lectures. The third employed project-based learning with real-world tasks, and the fourth used inquiry-based learning, encouraging students to derive meaning independently. This study emphasizes that methodological variation is crucial for teachers to tailor strategies to students' needs, making PAI instruction more effective and meaningful.

As stated, Mrs. Mg preferred cooperative learning by dividing students into small groups to discuss values such as honesty, encouraging peer learning and active engagement. Mrs. Rs adopted an interactive lecture model, inviting students to ask questions and discuss topics like *rukun Islam* with real-life examples. Mrs. Dh implemented project-based learning—asking students to plan charity events that integrate moral and social values. Meanwhile, Mrs. Ln employed an inquiry-based model, giving students *Al-Qur'an* verses to analyze individually or collaboratively. This approach allowed deeper exploration of meaning beyond mere content delivery.

All four teachers at SDN 02 Curup utilized active learning models—group work, interactive lectures, project-based activities, and Qur'anic interpretation—to enhance engagement. They also agreed on embedding *Pancasila* values such as faith, nationalism, and cooperation through real-world practices, helping students connect theory with everyday life.

Although methods varied, all teachers demonstrated commitment to creating diverse learning experiences that build character and foster critical and creative thinking. Mrs. Mega Fitri began each class with prayer and discussions on interfaith tolerance, emphasizing awareness of religious values, respect for differences, and harmony. *Pancasila* values were also integrated, for example, through lessons on nationalism and governance to strengthen civic identity.

Mrs. Rs emphasized the importance of diagnostic assessment at the beginning of the academic year to identify students' baseline abilities. Based on these assessments, she designed more effective learning strategies. She also encouraged students' self-expression—especially in *Al-Qur'an Hadith* lessons—by connecting material to daily life to make it more engaging. Mrs. Dh supported structured project-based methods, while Mrs. Ln emphasized group work and discussions, considering peer interaction essential for learning from diverse perspectives. The following section presents a comparative table outlining the instructional strategies and character values emphasized by the PAI teachers at SDN 02 Curup.

Table 1. Comparison of Teaching Strategies and Character Values of Islamic Education Teachers at SDN 02 Curup

Aspect	Mg	Rs	Dh	Ln
General Approach	Cooperative and reflective	Interactive lecture	Value-based project	Inquiry and reflection
Learning Focus	Honesty and responsibility values	Conceptual and social understanding	Application of values through real actions	Discovery of Qur'anic meanings
Main Methods	Group discussion, collective prayer	Quiz, Q&A, lecture	Charity activities and social projects	Qur'anic interpretation and discussion
Assessment and Feedback	Reflection and behavioral observation	Formative quizzes and individual assignments	Practical evaluation and reflective reports	Remedial, enrichment, and parental involvement
Character Values Emphasized	Honesty, cooperation	Responsibility, discipline	Empathy, social awareness	Perseverance, spirituality
Contribution to the Merdeka Curriculum	Strengthens teacher autonomy	Develops formative assessment	Integrates character with learning context	Involves family and learning environment

Based on the table above, it can be observed that teachers at SDN 02 Curup employ diverse approaches in teaching Pancasila values. The first informant emphasized spiritual and tolerance-based dimensions, while the third and fourth informants focused more on systematic lesson planning and diagnostic assessment. In terms of creativity, some teachers encouraged artistic expression, whereas others prioritized structured and orderly learning. Collaborative activities were also integrated through group work and character-based assessments. This diversity enriches students' learning experiences while strengthening the profile of Pancasila learners.

In general, the teachers agreed that the Merdeka Curriculum provides greater flexibility in designing instructional methods compared to the previous curriculum. Although the underlying principles remain similar, the approaches vary considerably. Some teachers emphasized the integration of spiritual and tolerance values, while others concentrated on competency development. Certain teachers encouraged exploration and creativity through art and role-playing activities, whereas others highlighted the importance of structure and consistency in classroom learning. These findings demonstrate that the flexibility of the Merdeka Curriculum enables the adaptation of teaching strategies according to classroom needs, while underscoring the importance of pedagogical diversity in achieving comprehensive educational goals.

3.2 Discussion

The study on the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning based on the *Merdeka Curriculum* at SD Negeri 02 Rejang Lebong revealed several key findings that demonstrate substantial differences compared to the previous 2013 Curriculum (K13). Interviews with four experienced teachers indicated that the primary orientation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* lies in strengthening students' moral and character formation. The first informant emphasized that this curriculum focuses more on developing character and ethics, in contrast to K13, which prioritized academic achievement. Within the *Merdeka Curriculum* framework, learning is viewed holistically—integrating all educational aspects toward a unified learning outcome. (Zuri Pamuji & Kholid Mawardi, 2023) This approach provides teachers with greater autonomy to develop essential and meaningful content without being constrained by irrelevant materials.

Although the results show that *Merdeka Curriculum*-based PAI learning at SD Negeri 02 Rejang Lebong successfully fostered a more holistic and character-oriented learning environment, several

challenges persist in its implementation. One of the main obstacles identified was the lack of consistent parental involvement in reinforcing religious values at home. This finding aligns with Berliana and Tersta who highlighted the importance of synergy between school-based instruction and family practices to ensure the sustainability of moral internalization. (Berliana & Tersta, 2024)

All informants underscored the importance of initial student assessment as a foundation for designing effective learning processes. Through this mapping, teachers can better understand students' needs and potentials, allowing for more targeted learning objectives. The second informant added that the *Merdeka Curriculum* grants teachers broader freedom in selecting teaching strategies, thus enabling them to focus on meaningful and contextually relevant content (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). However, this flexibility requires considerable time and effort, particularly in preparing adaptive instructional materials responsive to student diversity. Teachers also reported facing challenges with the comprehensive evaluation system, which integrates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions. Nonetheless, they perceived the *Merdeka Curriculum* assessment framework as more holistic than that of K13. Assessment emphasizes not only the final outcomes but also students' learning processes and continuous progress. For instance, one teacher employed portfolio assessment to monitor ongoing student development. (Sugiri & Priatmoko, 2020)

Lesson planning emerged as another crucial stage in the process. All teachers began learning sessions with prayer and a clear statement of learning objectives to foster focus and a conducive learning atmosphere. Interactive activities such as group discussions encouraged active participation. For example, during lessons on honesty, teachers asked students to share personal experiences related to the theme, promoting real-life connections and reflective learning. (Nuryana et al., 2022)

Learning within the *Merdeka Curriculum* also reflects a student-centered orientation, wherein teachers create spaces for active engagement through discussions, questioning, and collaborative activities. Consequently, students develop a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for their learning. Compared with findings from other studies—such as that of Nurmasiyah et al. (Nurmasiyah et al., 2023) this research similarly confirms that the *Merdeka Curriculum* allows teachers to innovate and adapt instruction according to learners' characteristics. However, the implementation at SD Negeri 02 Rejang Lebong demonstrates a unique contextualization of religious values, integrated into daily life practices. Unlike general schools that emphasize academic performance, this institution places spirituality at the core of learning design. These findings also correspond with Zuri Pamuji & Kholid Mawardi who emphasized the significance of integrating moral and social dimensions within PAI instruction under the *Merdeka Curriculum*. (Zuri Pamuji & Kholid Mawardi, 2023).

Overall, this study affirms that the implementation of *Merdeka Curriculum*-based PAI learning at SD Negeri 02 Rejang Lebong has successfully created a more holistic educational environment centered on character formation. Although variations exist among teachers' methods and approaches, all share the same objective—to deepen students' understanding of Islamic values and encourage their application in daily life. Thus, the *Merdeka Curriculum* offers opportunities for students to grow not only academically but also morally and ethically, contributing to the development of well-rounded and high-quality individuals.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) under the *Merdeka Curriculum* at SD Negeri 02 Rejang Lebong has fostered a holistic, flexible, and student-centered learning environment that prioritizes moral and character development alongside academic understanding. Teachers exercised curricular autonomy to design contextual, reflective, and value-oriented instructional strategies, although challenges remained in conducting comprehensive assessments and securing consistent external, particularly parental, support. The findings imply that curriculum developers should explicitly integrate spiritual and moral dimensions into formal learning outcomes, while schools should strengthen professional collaboration and academic supervision to sustain value-based learning cultures. However, the study is limited by its single-site focus and

relatively small number of participants, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader educational contexts. Future research should employ multi-site and comparative designs across different regions and school types, as well as longitudinal approaches to examine the sustained impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on students' moral, spiritual, and social development over time.

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