

Revolutionizing Education: The Islamic Perspective on *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum and its Successful Implementation at a Middle School in East Kalimantan

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to discuss the revolutionizing Education in Indonesia that shows the problem in campaigning for the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum because the curriculum always develops and keeps up with the times. Updating the curriculum is essential to provide students with an education that meets future needs. Teachers at MTs Negeri East Kalimantan follow the Ministry of Education and Culture policy, whereas the Ministry of Religion adapts according to the learning needs of the madrasah to strengthen Islamic Religious Education, which is its characteristic. The data analysis technique uses a single data analysis method based on phenomena by Larkin and Thompson (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) and comparative analysis techniques by Chris Ryan (Cross-Case Analysis). Besides that, the data validity test used Norman K. Denzin's theory in three stages: data source, theory, and method triangulation. The results show that the conception of *Merdeka Belajar* from an Islamic perspective puts forward holistic Islamic education, the values of freedom of thought, independence, and teacher responsibility in innovation. While implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum will support teachers to value students who have the right to pass or not through the educational transformation without national exams; students will explore various aspects of themselves through the madrasah assessment and give freedom to schools in designing and implementing curricula through more efficient lesson plans.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education has a prominent role in shaping a person's personality; even the quality of individuals will be judged by their educational background. Therefore, education must answer the challenges above to fulfil what a person needs for his progress and to face the challenges of the times (Mukni'ah, 2019). Thus, education should be directed at developing one's character

(inner strength), mind (intellect), and physique. (Soerjaningrat, 1962) These three aspects are interrelated, integrated, and oriented toward the perfection of life by maintaining a balance between education and everyday life.

In response to the previous challenges, education requires superior, competent, and skilled human resources. In contrast, one is by maximizing the form of managing teacher knowledge regarding educational conditions. (Mufti, Fauzi, & Perawironegoro, 2019) Therefore, through the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, the Education and Culture Ministry of the Indonesian Republic took the initiative to restore the national education system to its essence. This curriculum provides freedom to schools, teachers, and students to innovate and learn independently and creatively, and this freedom of innovation must start from the teacher as the driving force of national education (Sherly, Dharma, & Sihombing, 2021). Correspondingly, the process of curriculum replacement is a part of revolutionizing education.

Based on the previous statement, it will be understood that Merdeka Belajar is freedom of thought for everyone related to teaching and learning. Furthermore, Nadiem Makarim confirmed that the essence of freedom of thought must be started by educators first (Fuadi, 2022). In this context, the teacher, as the primary actor, could translate the curriculum before teaching it to students (Widiyono & Millati, 2021). Furthermore, if the teacher understands the curriculum set, the teacher will answer the student's needs during the learning process. Correspondingly, Merdeka Belajar is inspired by the philosophical ideas of Ki Hadjar Dewantara that Merdeka Belajar means encouraging students to be positioned as subjects in every teaching and learning activity (Siswadi, 2023). Through these objectives, students are expected to have the strength and initiative to learn independently and free from dependency on others.

Conversely, the inception of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum was accompanied by a multitude of issues throughout the progression of Indonesian Education. These hurdles were closely related to administrative tasks, paperwork, and various technical issues. Krishnapatria, 2021 In addition, the issue of Merdeka Belajar has also arisen in the madrasah. The theory of resilience highlights the importance of responding with a positive attitude, prioritising core values, working towards goals, and establishing supportive conditions and environments for the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar zoning system policy (Oktradiksa, Dwiningrum, & Rukiyati, 2020).

Research conducted by Lestiyani found that 40% of teachers mastered the concept of independent learning, while 60% understood the term through the distribution of information in the media but did not understand the concept (Lestiyani, 2020). Indirectly, the journey of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum gave birth to critical views, including; *First*, the independent learning policy is seen as a critique of traditional educational practices; *second*, this policy provides space for educational actors openly, and this leads to the concept of progressive Education or liberal Education; *third*, this scheme is a policy to free education from social and political restrictions and pressures. This policy led to the concept of learning freedom, emancipatory education, pedagogy of the colonized, and critical pedagogy. Thus, representations from the second and third perspectives show that Islamic religious education teachers will maintain a moderate view, even though they are more inclined towards progressive education than freedom of learning (Thohir, Maarif, Rosyid, Huda, & Ahmadi, 2021).

The second and third views above seem to bring up a dichotomy between the Merdeka Belajar curriculum and Islamic Education. In contrast, the Merdeka Belajar curriculum also emphasizes several things, including; *First*, character development, moral values, and development of academic and non-academic skills; *second*, the freedom given to educational institutions or educators and the students themselves are still within the scope of supervision, (Nugroho & Setiawan, 2020) and *third*, the teachers referred to in the Merdeka Belajar curriculum are teachers who are creative, innovative or able to provide the best for students (Mulyasa, 2021).

The previous research results could describe the obstacle to the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, which is considered new and needs improvement. Besides that, the research results only focus on general education development and do not explain it from an Islamic point of view.

Based on the previous historical background, this study will discuss the Merdeka Belajar curriculum from an Islamic perspective, namely interpretation from several of Islamic literature, and then measure the extent to which the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is implemented in madrasah-based schools at a middle school level in East Kalimantan. Simultaneously, this study will answer the research questions: the conception of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum from an Islamic perspective and the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum in east Kalimantan.

2. METHODS

This qualitative research uses a literature study and a case study approach. Based on the discussion topic, firstly, the research leads to solving the problem of the Merdeka Belajar conception from an Islamic perspective. To get accurate data, a researcher will take steps involving; determining topics, using imagination, determining the context of the questions, developing research plans, determining references in the form of data, identifying various sources, evaluating sources based on research questions, reflecting on experiences and presenting them in the form of insights (George, 2008). In this case, the researcher's study is based on several sources of education-related Islamic literature.

Furthermore, the research leads to the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum in madrasah-based schools under the policy of the religious ministry. In this case, research will be included in two main cases, which are the focus of field studies, namely; *First*, search for a meaning that is contained (intrinsic) in certain situations and *second*, oriented as a comparison (Ryan, 2012). These two things illustrate that the researcher decides on the correctness of opinion on implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum and continues to present with significant comparisons.

In determining the respondents who could be submitted as samples, the researcher used a purposive sampling technique, where the research subjects were limited to state MTs that had fulfilled the criteria, including implementing a Merdeka Belajar curriculum, schools that are accredited A and representatives from certain districts in East Kalimantan. The data collection techniques are in the observation, interviews, and documentation stages. The researcher indirectly came and observed sites through a number of activities for learning and studying. However, the researcher connects the data observation with interview results to conduct accurate data. Lastly, all data should be related to the previous data observation and interviews.

While the data analysis technique used a single data analysis using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Larkin & Thompson, 2012) on each site, and Chris Ryan's Multi-site analysis technique (Cross-Case Analysis) (Ryan, 2012) will be the form of comparison between the three research sites. Both of these sections will be explained as reading and re-reading to get the original data of Merdeka Belajar, initial nothing with the exploratory notes, developing the themes with the general and latest issues, relating every single theme, exploring the next cases, and looking for patterns accros cases. After getting the pattern, the research will continue to compare all data in multi-sites. Besides that, the data validity test used Norman K. Denzin's theory in three stages: data source, theory, and method triangulation (Given, 2008). *First*, the data sources by crosschecking with other data sources, comparing and contrasting data, and using categories for different informants at the sites; *Second*, time triangulation, namely determining the time used for data collection at three sites; *Third*, the triangulation method, namely data collection based on observation, interview, and documentation techniques.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 *The Conception of Merdeka Belajar from an Islamic Perspective*

The Merdeka Belajar conception from an Islamic perspective relates to a holistic and comprehensive perspective on education by combining aspects of religion and general knowledge, enabling individuals to develop spiritually, intellectually, and socially. Indirectly, it shows the importance of integration between the freedom of learning provided by the Merdeka Belajar curriculum and Islamic values, ethics, and teachings. According to the school principal, the madrasah provides students with competence, attitude, and life skills. Besides that, the madrasah also transmits the characters and values based on culture, religious values, and national values. The following statement from the school principal supports this statement:

School Principal: "Basically, the learning curriculum in madrasah and independent learning have a relationship; it can be seen through the forming character of students, Pancasila values inculcating, religious moderation, and projects to strengthen the profile of Pancasila students and the profile of rahmatan lil' alamin (P5PPRA)."

Therefore, the Merdeka Belajar curriculum concept in the madrasah could be mentioned as Islamic Holistic Education. Islam encourages holistic education, which includes spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical development. While in the context of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, the approach will be reflected in the emphasis on character development through the profile of Pancasila students, moral values, and academic and non-academic skills development. Correspondingly, education is related to nurturing, protecting, and exemplary nature. Therefore, achieving maximum education requires continuous effort, patience, and mental and spiritual determination.

Besides the previous statement, The Merdeka Belajar curriculum directly relates to the development of madrasah Education. The previous statements relate to the argument of the deputy head of curriculum as follows:

The deputy head of the curriculum: "The Merdeka Belajar curriculum is student-oriented, making students more active and enthusiastic about learning. Moreover, there will be a change in the classroom atmosphere and fun learning."

Based on the previous argument, activator teachers in Merdeka Belajar should have been accustomed to carrying out innovative, creative actions or giving the best to students. Activator teachers are also referred to as innovators in schools who are always looking for new ways to provide the best service for students. Lastly, the educator is a guide or partner who gives attention to students based on mercy (love) values. Therefore, the activator teacher, also known in the Islamic perspective, has a *Rabbani* characteristic.

3.2 *Education Transformation Without National Examination*

Education is an important milestone in shaping the future of the younger generation. In the discourse on improving the education system in Indonesia, an interesting idea has emerged: the abolition of the national exam to evaluate student achievement. In this theme, we will explore the changes that have taken place in the paradigm of education without national exams and how this can positively impact students. Interviews with teachers from three different sites led to a statement that the National Examination and its implementation put significant pressure on teachers and students in the journey of Education in Madrasah.

Teachers felt pressured to provide material following the curriculum that will be examined in the exam. In addition, the teacher must provide additional assignments to prepare students for

the exam. Correspondingly, teachers are also pressured to improve student achievement so that the school gains a high reputation based on exam results. Besides that, students felt pressured because the national exam is considered a determinant of their future. Therefore, the stresses that teachers and students feel during the national exam period will be a heavy burden, but it will also encourage them to work hard and face challenges with high enthusiasm. The statement was also explained by a teacher as follows:

Teacher: "National Examinations often put great pressure on students, teachers, institutions, and even parents, so this National Examination seems to determine everything in graduation. This pressure can create an unhealthy learning environment, where education becomes all-testing, so the concept of learning is not deep enough."

Thus it would be concluded that the National Examination is a crucial moment that tests students' knowledge, understanding, and abilities in various subject areas. As an illustration, the results of national exam scores below the KKM standard (Minimum Completeness Criteria) could disappoint students, teachers, and parents. Therefore, the learning process indirectly aims to achieve grades and consequently is followed by various weaknesses and potential deficiencies of students in other fields.

3.3 Holistic Assessment in the Context of Madrasah

Holistic Assessment that was developed in the madrasah is the Assessment that involves social skills, emotional, creative, mental health, ethics, and critical abilities. The Assessment is not only focused on academic value, numbers, or quantitative but also on several parts which relate to the spiritual and emotional quotient. Based on interviews with several teachers, madrasah assessment provides benefits to:

Teacher: "Provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their abilities through various means, including projects, assignments, presentations, and exams. It provides space for students with different learning styles and allows them to show their full potential without being limited".

The Madrasah assessment provides exciting opportunities for students to express their abilities through various creative means. They are not only limited to written tests but can also showcase their skills through engaging projects, challenging assignments, stunning presentations, and adrenaline-pumping exams. In this process, students can explore various aspects of themselves, demonstrating creativity, leadership, and critical thinking skills. The madrasah assessment provides opportunities for students to demonstrate their diversity of talents and interests and goes beyond traditional boundaries in measuring students' abilities.

3.4 Optimizing Learning With More Efficient Lesson Plan

A lesson plan is a structured outline that educators use to guide their teaching activities. It includes objectives, content, teaching methods, assessment strategies, and a timeline for a particular lesson or unit of study. To get the optimizing learning, educators should prepare the lesson plan. However, the Merdeka Belajar curriculum presents short lesson plans to help teachers. According to the teacher, that explains as follows:

Teacher: "Shorter lesson plans can provide teachers greater flexibility in adapting lessons according to student needs. They can adapt and change lesson plans more quickly and easily. As for Obstacles Risk of ambiguity, the abbreviation of the RPP can cause unclear"

communication between teachers and students. If learning objectives or instructions are unclear enough, students may have difficulty understanding what is expected and how to achieve”.

The field data shows that even though the lesson plans are shortened and presented in modules, teachers are also charged with various other obligations directly related to applications such as digitizing education through the Merdeka Teaching Platform channel (PMM). Based on the interviews conducted at the three sites, it will be understood that teachers are aware of the importance of a student-centered approach, in which the Merdeka Belajar lesson plans encourage attention to students' needs, interests, and potential.

Discussion

The Conception of Merdeka Belajar from an Islamic Perspective

Based on the previous results, the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is similar to Holistic Islamic Education. The context of Holistic Islamic Education is the development of all one's potential towards perfect development. Therefore, education must achieve human growth in all aspects; spiritual, intellectual, imaginative, physical, scientific, and linguistic, and pushes all aspects toward goodness (Rachman, 2021). It was related to Rasyid Ridha's opinion indirectly in interpreting the word' *Allama* in Qur'an that teaching is putting all knowledge into one's soul without certain limitations and conditions (Ridha, 1948). Holistic Islamic education can be integrated into the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum framework to ensure that religious and moral education also has a firm place in more comprehensive education while allowing students the freedom to develop their interests and potential. This idea would be seen in *projects to strengthen the profile of Pancasila students and the profile of rahmatan lil' alamin (P5PPRA)*.

Indirectly, the educational effort will determine a teacher's quality in developing his students' potential in line with the education proclaimed by Ki Hajar Dewantara, namely all efforts to advance the growth of character (inner strength and personality), mind (cognitive), and child development. The teacher has a position as a facilitator to exercise the heart, exercise the senses, think, and exercise towards the growth of their students. (Nugroho & Setiawan, 2020) As previously mentioned, the Merdeka Belajar originated from the ideology of Ki Hajar Dewantara.

In addition, based on the Islamic perspective, History records that Islam once entered the glorious phase of science. The absence of a dichotomy between sciences marks this. Even in a literary History of the Arab, Nicholson puts a particular discussion in his book on studying the golden age of science during the Abbasiyah period, called '*the golden age of Muhammadan Literature*.' (A. Nicholson, 1907). Even the works of educational figures in the golden age of classical Islam gave rise to the argument of Hasan Langgulung that the ideal principle of Islamic Education is Education that is independence, dependent on oneself, freedom and democracy in education, treating children according to sense, getting along well with them and teach them with morals. In other words, during the golden age of Islamic science, students were free to learn without knowing the dichotomy of science (Bahri, 2020).

However, in the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, one concept will be found where students can freely choose to study through various sources and be free from pressure (Educational democracy). Indirectly, independent learning directs education to create a happy atmosphere (Mulyasa, 2021). The presentation of a pleasant atmosphere must be supported through policies in the form of freedom for educators to determine the direction of learning without any binding burdens. Thus, students will enjoy the learning content, teachers will enjoy learning and be happy in facilitating, and principals and supervisors will also be satisfied managing schools to achieve educational goals effectively and efficiently (Nugroho & Setiawan, 2020).

Achieving these ideal conditions requires more than curriculum improvements; teachers and various components within the madrasah education ecosystem also play crucial roles as determinants. Activator teachers are creative and innovative teachers, who are always actors in change and improving the quality of education in their schools, have a learning spirit, and are active in improving their competence either through their professional organizations or through scientific forums held by the government (Mulyasa, 2021). The activator teacher in the madrasah should have characteristics of *Rabbani*, which means constantly learning, conducting research for scientific development, and teaching their knowledge wherever they are (Hasanuddin & Iskandar, 2022). Ibn Asyur explained that the word *Rabbani* shows the parable of a condition that implies the alignment of Education and affection (attention) from parents to their children. (Asyur, 1997). Thus, the teacher should master learning methods, understand students' needs, and would be the partner with their students.

The Implementation of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in East Kalimantan

The Merdeka Belajar curriculum has undergone several episodes in Indonesia, from orientational and managerial changes in education at the elementary school to the university level. Nonetheless, the Merdeka Belajar curriculum campaigns for educators have not reached a significant level since its introduction at the end of 2019. In East Kalimantan, educational institutions compete to implement the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. However, several benefits and problems followed in achieving the goal, such as educational transformation without national examination, Holistic Assessment in the Context of Madrasah, and Optimizing Learning With More Efficient RPP.

To describe, an approach in the national examination that focuses on the purpose of the national exam only memorizing material without cultivating students' critical attitudes in thinking has consequences that need to be considered. In this context, students think of exams as routine assignments to memorize as much information and formulas as possible without understanding the concepts behind them. The condition hinders students' critical, analytical, and creative thinking skills essential in preparing them for real-world challenges. By emphasizing memorization alone, national examinations do not encourage students to develop analytical skills, relate concepts, or apply their knowledge effectively.

To illustrate, outcomes falling below the Minimum Completeness Criteria (KKM) in the national exam can lead to disappointment among students, educators, and parents. Consequently, the learning process indirectly revolves around achieving grades, which may highlight weaknesses and potential inadequacies in students' proficiency in other domains. However, the education transformation without a national examination will support teachers, students, and schools to get the convenience of shaping the student's character and intelligence without any pressure on academic grades.

In addition, one of the government policies in the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is the competency assessment policy. In the view of the Minister of Education and Culture himself, the Minimum Competency Assessment (AKM) is a genuinely minimum competency so that we can map schools and regions based on minimum competence. Minimum competence is the basic competence that students need to be able to learn whatever the material and subject is (Tju & Murniarti, 2021). Meanwhile, education organized by the Ministry of Religion through the Directorate General of Islamic Education presents the Indonesian Madrasah Competency Assessment (AKMI) as a new evaluation form. The purpose of AKMI is as a tool to measure the competence of madrasah students in reading literacy, numeracy literacy, scientific literacy, and socio-cultural literacy (Yusriani & Nurawati, 2022).

In the context of the madrasah itself, the Assessment relates to the Project for Strengthening Pancasila Student Profiles (P5) and the student profiles of *rahmatan lil' alamin* (PPRA) based on

the principle; holistic, contextual, student-centered, explorative, togetherness, diversity, independence, usefulness and religiosity. In addition to the above principles, it must also be based on the uniqueness and spirit of the madrasa as the values that animate policies and management, including; the perspective of worship to Allah Swt, the relationship between teacher and student is built based on (*mahabbah*) loving each other, the view of (*ainurrahmah*) looking each other with mercy, conscience as the primary goal and morality above knowledge (Hanun Asrohah, Mamlu'atul Hasanah, Irma Yuliantina, M. Amin Hasan, & Amiroh Ambarwati, 2022).

Based on some of the previous information, it will be understood that madrasah assessment is a holistic form of Assessment and recognizes the importance of looking at students comprehensively. This Assessment focuses on academic achievement and focuses on students' spiritual, moral, social, and emotional development. Madrasahs gain a deep understanding of students by assessing their religious aspects, knowledge of Islamic values, worship skills, and moral attitudes and behavior. The madrasah assessment also focuses on the educational environment and social factors shaping student character by observing social interactions, communication skills, leadership, and other social skills.

In short, it will be understood that the madrasah assessment provides a broad assessment approach, ensures the holistic development of students, and encourages collaboration between the madrasah and parents in supporting students' growth and development. Nonetheless, the results of interviews with madrasah teachers from the three sites confirmed that lots of outreach training should be followed to learn various assessment methods. Thus, madrasah teachers will be ready to implement holistic madrasah assessments, making a positive contribution to the overall development of students.

The recent implementation of condensing lesson plans onto a single page is a novel policy aimed at facilitating teachers' concentration on the learning process. The teacher must adhere to a one-page RPP format, provided that it encompasses the three essential components: learning objectives, learning activities, and assessment (Ramadani & Desyandri, 2022). The discussion on streamlining the simplification of RPP in the one-page format originated from the belief that teachers have been overwhelmed by administrative tasks, paperwork, and several other technological issues thus far (Krishnapatria, 2021).

On the other hand, the Merdeka Belajar flexibility policy gives schools or madrasah freedom in designing and implementing curricula according to the local context and student needs. Although the abbreviation of lesson plans can provide teachers with advantages in time efficiency, it must be remembered that information compression and digitization can affect the quality of teaching. Therefore, policymakers need to balance time efficiency, and teacher needs in preparing lesson plans by accelerating the socialization of Merdeka Belajar curriculum development.

4. CONCLUSION

The Islamic perspective of Merdeka Belajar seamlessly intertwines the liberation of independent learning with Islamic values. This fusion is exemplified in three key principles. First, it emphasizes holistic Islamic Education that nurtures spiritual, emotional, and physical growth in students, aligned with the essence of Pancasila. Second, it dissolves the divide in scientific exploration, allowing students the liberty to choose diverse learning sources without undue pressure (Educational democracy). Third, it activates educators who embody innovation, creativity, and the Rabbani spirit – consistently learning, conducting research, and disseminating knowledge.

The Merdeka Belajar curriculum transformation at MTs Negeri East Kalimantan unveils an innovative education shift. Here, the absence of a national exam liberates the madrasah to define

graduation criteria independently. This holistic evaluation, rooted in the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) and the student profiles of "rahmatan lil 'alamin" (PPRA), synergizes with streamlined lesson plans, driving optimized learning efficiency. Overall, the condition of Merdeka Belajar curriculum implementation needs directed socialization so that the concept of independent learning can truly be felt by educational institutions, teachers, and students themselves as subjects in learning.

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