

REVITALIZATION OF CHARACTER EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF FLEXIBLE INDEPENDENT CURRICULUM REVISION: ANALYSIS OF LEARNING OUTCOMES AND CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING PAI

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Abstract

The Merdeka Curriculum, introduced as a strategic response to the challenges of learning loss and the demands of 21st-century competencies, emphasizes curriculum flexibility and the development of the Pancasila Student Profile. Islamic Religious Education subjects play a fundamental role in realizing this character-building agenda. This study aims to analyze in depth the conceptual framework of the revised Merdeka Curriculum, particularly Learning Outcomes, and to synthesize empirical challenges and best practices in its implementation at various levels of education in Indonesia (2022–2025). The method used is descriptive qualitative through Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and content analysis of formal policy documents (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology and Ministry of Religious Affairs) as well as scientific journals on the implementation of PAI in the Merdeka Curriculum. The results of the study show that the Revised Independent Curriculum, through CP PAI structured in five scientific elements, has shifted the focus to applied ethics and religious moderation. These implementation efforts are reinforced by initiatives from the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag), such as the Love-Based Curriculum, which explicitly outlines human values within the framework of Islamic teachings. However, the main challenges that hinder the effectiveness of the Merdeka curriculum include: low pedagogical readiness and information and communication technology (ICT) competence among PAI teachers, difficulties in designing holistic authentic assessments, and classroom management issues related to diversity in motivation.

Keywords: Independent Curriculum, Islamic Religious Education, Learning Outcomes, Character Education, Religious Moderation, Implementation Challenges, Love-Based Curriculum

Introduction

The national education system is constantly transforming to produce competent and characterful human resources, in line with the nation's civilizational development goals. The Merdeka Curriculum was introduced in 2021 as a strategic innovation, intended as a tool for post-pandemic learning recovery and a substantive effort to address the criticism of the 2013 Curriculum for being too dense. The Merdeka Curriculum is philosophically defined as a curriculum that provides flexibility to educational units, focuses on essential material, and aims to shape students as lifelong learners who uphold the Pancasila Student Profile. The official implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum began in the 2022/2023 academic year (Damayanti, 2025).

The formal basis for the Merdeka Revisi curriculum continues to be updated. The latest policy is regulated through Permendikbudristek Number 12 of 2024 concerning Curriculum, which is then clarified with amendments such as Permendikbudristek Number 13 of 2025. The dynamics of this policy revision show that the Ministry of Education and Culture is trying to improve the independent

curriculum framework to be more adaptive at all levels of education. However, this dynamic and repetitive policy process, marked by the publication of the latest policies, raises concerns about potential implementation fatigue at the school level. Teachers, including PAI teachers, are periodically required to adjust their approaches and methodologies in line with changes to the official framework (Hasibuan, 2024).

In the independent curriculum, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a central role. PAI is not only responsible for imparting normative religious knowledge, but also serves as a main pillar in shaping students' spiritual souls and positive character (*akhlaqul karimah*), an agenda that is fully integrated with the vision of the Pancasila Student Profile. The effectiveness of PAI greatly determines the success of the independent curriculum in producing a generation that is intelligent, high-quality, moral, and capable of believing in their religious teachings.

The context of PAI implementation is unique due to the need to harmonize the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology's curriculum with specific religious guidelines issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag). PAI in the independent curriculum serves as an ideological bridge. Its task is to translate universal values (such as unity and mutual cooperation) into an Islamic framework, emphasizing values such as *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood) and the concept of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (a blessing for all creation). The analysis of PAI implementation must focus on how schools and teachers successfully carry out this dual role, ensuring that religious values are not only understood theoretically but also practiced in everyday life. This study aims to answer key questions that define the relationship between the revised independent curriculum and PAI, namely: How does the PAI Learning Outcomes framework in the Revised Independent Curriculum (2022-2025) reflect a paradigm shift towards flexibility and applied ethics? What are the most dominant pedagogical, institutional, and structural challenges faced by PAI teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum? How do best practices successfully bridge the gap between curriculum policy and the reality of PAI learning in the field?.

Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach (Sugiyono, 2017). The aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of independent curriculum implementation in the context of PAI, presenting empirical results and educational engineering. The design applied is Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and thematic content analysis. Systematic Literature Review is used to synthesize findings from various previous studies on the challenges and opportunities of implementing the independent PAI curriculum, while content analysis focuses on formal policy documents to interpret structural and philosophical changes in the curriculum.

The data sources used are categorized as follows:

1. Primary Policy Data: Includes official documents from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, such as the 2024/2025 Permendikbudristek, as well as the PAI and Character Education Learning Outcomes. In addition, operational guidelines from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, particularly the Love-Based Curriculum Guidelines relevant to madrasahs and schools under the coordination of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, were also analyzed.

2. Empirical Secondary Data: Consisting of research journals discussing the implementation of the independent PAI curriculum published between 2020 and 2025. These sources include relevant literature reviews that meet scientific standards, providing a theoretical foundation and supporting empirical data. The inclusion criteria require that articles focus on the implementation of the independent PAI curriculum at the primary and secondary education levels.

Data collection techniques were carried out through literature reviews (library research) using books, journals, and other scientific studies relevant to the topic. The data were analyzed through thematic synthesis. The stages include: (1) Data extraction, which is collecting key findings, challenges, and proposed solutions; (2) Thematic synthesis, which groups data based on policy categories, learning outcomes, teacher challenges, and best practices; and (3) Interpretation, which is drawing conclusions about the causal relationship between the independent curriculum design and the reality of its implementation in the field.

Results

Philosophical Foundations and Policy Framework of the Revised Merdeka Curriculum

The Merdeka Curriculum is built on philosophical foundations that emphasize flexibility and focus on essential material. The shift from the K-13 Core Competencies (KI) and Basic Competencies (KD) framework to Learning Outcomes in the independent curriculum provides space for PAI teachers to design differentiated learning that adapts to the needs of students with diverse individual potentials. The independent curriculum views students as members of society who must develop their potential as lifelong learners with Pancasila character. (Pohan, 2025).

Within the framework of PAI, there are synergistic efforts between the policies of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The Love-Based Curriculum published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in 2025 serves as a specific guideline that strengthens the implementation of the values of the independent curriculum. The Love-Based Curriculum is designed as a strategic solution to respond to the challenges of humanity, discrimination, and intolerance that often arise, with the aim of strengthening the value of diversity (pluralism) and shaping characters with high morals and integrity. The Love-Based Curriculum places love as an important element in creating balanced social relationships. Thus, the Love-Based Curriculum functions as the operationalization of PAI in the Independent Curriculum, ensuring that PAI realizes the vision of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* and creates a harmonious and inclusive society.

Content Transformation: Analysis of Islamic Education Learning Outcomes

The Learning Outcomes for Islamic Religious Education and Morality are compiled based on five scientific elements: Al-Qur'an-Hadith, Aqidah, Akhlak, Fiqh, and History of Islamic Civilization. These Learning Outcomes are detailed based on learning phases (Phase A to Phase F), covering elementary to high school/vocational school levels.

An analysis of the content of PAI Learning Outcomes highlights a strong emphasis on the dimension of Morals, which indicates a paradigm shift from the mastery of normative concepts to applied ethics and social responsibility. For example, in Phase F (Grades XI–XII), the Learning Outcomes for the element of Morals require students to solve problems of fighting among students. This requirement goes far beyond mere memorization or theoretical understanding. These Learning Outcomes reflect the need for PAI to provide practical skills and social problem-solving rooted in religious values. Similarly, Phase D (junior high school/MTs) emphasizes the importance of verifying information (*tabayyun*) to avoid fake news and deepening tolerance in Islamic tradition. This emphasis on applied ethics and social problem-solving skills justifies the use of constructivist and project-based learning (P5) models in PAI. PAI must be relevant to the real social context of students (Ma'rifatani, 2017).

Furthermore, the Ministry of Religious Affairs' Love-Based Curriculum initiative resonates strongly with PAI Learning Outcomes, particularly in the elements of Fiqh and Akhlak. The Love-Based Curriculum emphasizes Love for the Environment (appreciating *sunnatullah*, avoiding *fasad*, and practicing *adab* towards nature) as well as Love for Self and Others (mastering Social Emotional

Skills, SES for mental and spiritual balance). This shows that the PAI KM has been structurally designed to include non-traditional material relevant to issues of sustainability and student mental health, making it a more holistic curriculum.

Pedagogical and Institutional Challenges in Implementation

The implementation of the independent curriculum, especially in PAI, is not without various pedagogical and institutional challenges. Empirical literature reviews show that the readiness of PAI teachers is the most dominant obstacle in realizing the goal of flexibility in the independent curriculum.

a. Teacher Competency Gap.

Several studies highlight that PAI teachers still face problems related to competence. They often lack adequate experience with the Merdeka Belajar philosophy, which requires them to be facilitators. A lack of competence in information and communication technology is also a crucial obstacle to implementing innovative differentiated learning. In addition, PAI teachers report difficulties in mastering integrated PAI material and challenges in managing classes involving diverse student characteristics. This gap shows a discrepancy between the demands of the formal curriculum policy (which requires differentiation and authentic assessment) and the actual capacity of teachers in the field, which is not yet fully supported by adequate training. (Prayogi, 2025).

b. Assessment and Resource Issues.

Difficulties in implementing authentic assessment also pose structural obstacles. The independent PAI curriculum requires the use of diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments to measure students' understanding and skills holistically. Because the focus of PAI learning outcomes is on applied morals, assessment must be carried out through non-cognitive methods, such as portfolio assessment and behavioral observation, which are more difficult to design and implement than K-13 cognitive tests (Rifa'i et al., 2022).

Institutionally, the implementation of the independent PAI curriculum is hampered by external and internal factors. Limited infrastructure, high teacher workload, and limited learning time allocation in schools are institutional factors that limit teacher creativity. From the students' perspective, diversity in characteristics and low learning motivation among some students complicate the implementation of ideal differentiated learning. Collaboration in implementing strategic solutions, such as mapping student characteristics and intensive assessment training, is needed to improve the quality of the implementation of the independent curriculum in PAI.

Best Practices and the Impact of Project-Based Learning

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the context of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning shows that despite various challenges such as limited resources, gaps in teacher competence, and student adaptation, there are also best practices that can bridge the gap between policy and implementation. Empirical research confirms that the success of this curriculum's implementation is largely determined by teachers' ability to translate curriculum principles into learning strategies that are relevant to students' needs. In other words, macro-level policies will only have an impact if they are internalized through pedagogical actions at the classroom level that reflect independence, creativity, and flexibility in learning.

In addition, the constructivist approach, which is the main foundation of the Merdeka Curriculum, has proven to be effective in increasing student engagement. Through student-centered learning activities, students are given the space to explore, reason, analyze, and build understanding independently. This not only increases the depth of understanding but also encourages critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which are required competencies in the 21st century. Recent

research shows that students are more motivated when they are involved in a learning process that places them as active subjects, not merely as objects receiving information.

In the context of PAI, the transformation of the teacher's role into that of a facilitator is one of the important indicators of the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers no longer act as the sole source of knowledge, but rather as guides who provide stimuli, thought-provoking questions, and space for reflection for students to construct a deeper and more relevant understanding of Islam in relation to real life. This change in role is also in line with the principle of *tarbiyah* in Islam, which emphasizes the development of character, morals, and independence through a dialogical and contextual learning process.

Furthermore, the success of PAI teachers as facilitators is also supported by their creativity in developing varied teaching materials and learning methods, such as religious projects, thematic discussions, case studies, spiritual reflection, and experiential learning. These approaches enable students to connect religious teachings with the contemporary social context, so that PAI learning is not only normative but also applicable and meaningful. At this point, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum not only improves the quality of PAI learning but also contributes to the formation of students' critical, independent, and moral character.

Finally, the best practices identified from the research prove that the gap between policy and practice can be overcome through collaboration, continuous reflection, and teachers' commitment to continuously developing their competencies. With a proper understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum philosophy and consistent application of the constructivist approach, PAI teachers are able to create a liberating learning environment that is relevant to the developmental needs of students. This condition illustrates that effective curriculum implementation is not only a matter of regulation, but also about how policies can be translated into quality pedagogical actions in the classroom (Sucipto et al., 2024).

Project-based thematic learning is one of the most effective approaches for integrating Islamic Religious Education (PAI) contextually into students' lives. Within the framework of P5 Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile, this model not only presents religious concepts theoretically, but also connects them to the real experiences of students. This approach allows students to construct knowledge through meaningful activities involving problem solving and collaborative work, so that PAI values are not only understood, but also deeply internalized.

One notable example of implementation is the "Clean Friday Movement" project, which is linked to the concept of *thaharah* in PAI. In this activity, students not only learn the meaning of cleanliness in Islam cognitively, but also practice it through concrete actions such as cleaning the school environment, places of worship, or public areas. Through this direct experience, students learn that cleanliness is not just a ritual obligation, but also part of social ethics and shared responsibility. These activities train discipline, foster sensitivity to the environment, and strengthen caring and trustworthy character in line with the objectives of P5 and PAI.

Another example is the "Anti-Bullying Campaign" project, which integrates the value of *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood). In this activity, students are invited to identify forms of bullying, understand its psychosocial impact, and design creative campaigns to prevent it. Through this process, the values of brotherhood, empathy, solidarity, and respect for others are not only learned but also manifested in concrete actions. Students are trained to think critically, communicate effectively, and build collective awareness that maintaining social harmony is part of implementing Islamic teachings. This activity is in line with the P5 dimensions such as mutual cooperation, integrity, and global diversity.

Furthermore, the project-based learning model has proven to be able to strengthen holistic competencies because it places students as active, creative, and responsible learners. PAI, which is often associated with memorization or lectures, becomes more lively when contextualized through projects, because students see firsthand the relevance of religious teachings to their social reality.

Thus, learning does not stop at understanding concepts, but develops into habits and character traits that are embedded in students.

Overall, Project-Based Thematic Learning is in line with the principles of Merdeka Belajar (Freedom of Learning) and P5 because it prioritizes authentic experiences, character development, and 21st-century skills. The integration of PAI through projects such as these makes religious education more meaningful, applicable, and oriented towards shaping Muslims who are ethical, caring, and adaptive to the challenges of the times. This approach proves that contextual PAI learning can create behavioral transformation, not just an increase in knowledge (Kulsum & Muhid, 2022).

The success of these practices lies in the authentic evaluation system that is implemented. Assessment is carried out through portfolios, project presentations, and observation of student behavior, and even involves reports from parents. This method enables PAI to effectively measure the implementation of the values that have been taught, which is the essence of the independent curriculum. In addition, the role of school leadership and structured religious activities (such as congregational prayers and Rohis) are very important in creating an ecosystem that supports the formation of students' religious insights that are moderate, tolerant, and in line with Islam rahmatan lil 'alamin (Yansah et al., 2023).

Conclusion

The Revised Merdeka Curriculum has successfully provided a flexible framework that deeply targets character through phase-based PAI Learning Outcomes, especially with an emphasis on applied ethics, such as social problem solving and tolerance (tabayyun). This framework is institutionally reinforced by the Ministry of Religious Affairs' initiative, the Love-Based Curriculum (2025), which grounds the character goals of KM in spiritual and humanistic values.

However, the implementation of PAI in the field is still hampered by significant challenges, particularly gaps in the pedagogical competencies of PAI teachers related to differentiation, adaptation of information and communication technology, and difficulties in designing authentic assessments that are in line with the requirements of Akhlak learning outcomes. Best practices show that the success of PAI in the independent curriculum is highly dependent on the ability of teachers to adopt constructivist and project-based learning models (P5), as well as to build active collaboration with parents to measure changes in student behavior holistically.

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