

IDENTIFYING FACTORS AND PRINCIPLES THAT SHAPE THE PAI CURRICULUM: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CURRENT CURRICULUM DESIGN

Reni Fitriani *, Nur Sintia Ningrum, Irham Maulana Akbar, Mohammad Yahya

Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember

Jl. Mataram No.1, Karang Miuwo, Mangli, Kec. Kaliwates, Kabupaten Jember, Jawa Timur 68136, Indonesia

Email: renifitri104@gmail.com

Abstract

The success of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) as the moral and spiritual foundation of future generations depends heavily on the harmonious synergy between the theoretical basis and practical implementation of the curriculum. This report aims to comprehensively identify the contextual factors and normative principles underlying the design of the PAI Curriculum, as well as to critically analyze the implementation and challenges faced in the design of the current PAI curriculum, particularly in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia. This study uses critical literature review and document analysis methods. The results of the analysis show that the ideal PAI curriculum design faces the dilemma of integrating strong philosophical-theological values with the pragmatic demands of Science and Technology (IPTEK) and the need for 21st-century skills. Although the principle of flexibility has been explicitly institutionalized in the Merdeka Curriculum to achieve relevance and balance, its implementation is hampered by the readiness and competence of PAI teachers as key human resources. The gap between the ideal design and the reality of implementation threatens the realization of the principle of holistic balance (cognitive, affective, psychomotor). Based on these findings, it is recommended that Islamic Education teachers undergo pedagogical transformation through continuous capacity building and innovative resource management strategies to achieve an adaptive, contextual, and high-quality Islamic Education curriculum.

Keywords: Development Factors, Design Principles, Critical Analysis, Flexibility, Independent Curriculum

Introduction

Education plays an important role in developing high-quality human resources with noble character and broad knowledge, enabling them to face the increasingly complex challenges of globalization. In the education system, the curriculum serves as the main guideline that directs the entire learning process to run systematically and purposefully, reflecting the objectives, content, strategies, and evaluation of education. Due to the rapid development of science, technology, and socio-culture, the curriculum is required to undergo a process of continuous renewal and adjustment in order to remain relevant to the needs of the times (Muchtar & Suryani, 2019).

In the context of national education, the Islamic Education Curriculum (PAI) has a dual role: as a means of transmitting Islamic values and as a preparation for individuals to be adaptive to modern socio-technological dynamics. The PAI curriculum is designed to cover various important aspects, ranging from faith, worship, and morals to Islamic history and culture. The main objective of this curriculum is to produce Muslim individuals who are faithful, knowledgeable, and act holistically. The traditional PAI curriculum, which is often dominated by normative and memorization-based learning, is considered no longer adequate for developing character, creativity, and critical thinking

skills that are essential in the 21st Century and the Society 5.0 Era. The introduction outlines the background of the problem being addressed, issues related to the problem being addressed, and a review of previous research conducted by other researchers relevant to the research being conducted. It is best to avoid organizing the writing into “sub-headings” in this section.

Curriculum development is a complex and multidimensional process. This process cannot be carried out carelessly, as it must consider a series of factors that influence its direction, content, and implementation. These factors include the characteristics of students (psychological), national education policies, community needs (socio-cultural), developments in science and technology (IPTEK), and the underlying educational philosophy. Each of these factors is interrelated and influences the success of curriculum implementation in the world of education (Marisa, 2021).

In addition to these contextual factors, curriculum development must also be based on basic principles that serve as normative references. These principles, such as relevance, flexibility, continuity, effectiveness, and efficiency, ensure that the curriculum design is comprehensive, focused, and effective. Therefore, an in-depth study of the synergy between these factors and principles is essential to understand how the PAI Curriculum can be designed to be effective, adaptive to change, yet still grounded in basic values.

The PAI curriculum is currently at a crossroads, where its relevance is measured not only by the depth of religious doctrine (internal relevance) but also by its ability to produce competitive, critical, and characterful graduates in the digital age (external relevance). Historically, the PAI curriculum has been strong in its philosophical foundation of religious values. However, the demands of the globalization era (science and technology factors) have forced the curriculum to adopt pragmatic elements such as digital literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. If PAI fails to adapt, it risks failing to fulfill its sociological relevance and losing its strategic role in the national education arena (Ma’rifatini, 2017).

To overcome the weaknesses of the traditional curriculum, the design of the current PAI curriculum, mainly through the Merdeka Curriculum initiative, has emphasized the Principle of Flexibility. Although this policy provides a strong theoretical framework, its implementation faces substantial challenges. There is tension between the Principle of Flexibility offered by the policy and the Human Resource Factor (the readiness and competence of PAI teachers). This study aims to critically analyze the synergy between the factors and principles that shape the PAI Curriculum and evaluate the extent to which the current curriculum design has succeeded in achieving its ideal goals and overcoming existing implementation challenges.

Method

This study uses a qualitative design with a Literature Review (Critical Literature Review) and Document Analysis approach. This approach was chosen to enable in-depth interpretive and evaluative analysis of the theoretical concepts of PAI curriculum development and the practical policies for its implementation. Through a literature review, this study attempts to synthesize various expert views on the contextual factors and normative principles that must be considered in designing a curriculum. Unlike prepositivist research, which tends to only describe reality, this critical study seeks to provide an in-depth interpretation (verification and synthesis) of the causal relationship between the theoretical basis of the curriculum and the implications of its implementation in the field.

The research data sources include the latest PAI curriculum policy documents, especially those related to the Merdeka Curriculum, as well as academic literature in the form of textbooks and scientific journal articles. Data collection was carried out through searching relevant documents and scientific journals (document analysis).

The qualitative data analysis technique used refers to a systematic process, comprising three main stages:

1. Data Reduction: Identifying and sorting the core concepts from all the collected data. The concepts identified include Foundational Factors (Philosophical, Science and Technology) and Design Principles (Flexibility, Balance), as well as the challenges of implementing the Merdeka PAI Curriculum.
2. Data Presentation: Synthesizing findings through logical academic narratives and comparative tables to highlight the synergies and contradictions between PAI curriculum factors and principles.
3. Critical Verification: Conducting in-depth interpretation and critical evaluation to assess the alignment of the current PAI curriculum design with ideal principles. This stage is crucial for drawing implicative conclusions and strategic recommendations.

Results

Foundational Factors of the PAI Curriculum: Determinants of Direction and Content

The development of the PAI curriculum is a manifestation of the complex interaction between internal demands (religious values and student potential) and external demands (society and technology) (Bagaskara et al., 2024). These factors serve as the empirical and contextual basis for curriculum design.

1) Philosophical-Theological Foundation: Vision of Islamic Character Building

Philosophical factors and value systems, including religious values, are key determinants in setting the direction and goals of education. In PAI, these factors serve as the ideal and moral foundation, which plays a central role in shaping the character and religious commitment of students. The PAI curriculum is designed based on Islamic ideal values, with the aim of optimally developing human potential to achieve spiritual and social perfection (fitrah). This goal requires the PAI curriculum to be value-centered, emphasizing the formation of noble character and spiritual awareness, as emphasized in the components of character, worship, and faith.

2) Psychological and Socio-Cultural Factors: The Bridge of Human Relevance

Psychological factors emphasize the characteristics and development of students as the main objects of education. The principle of psychological relevance ensures that the curriculum design (material and methods) is appropriate to the level of development, needs, interests, and potential of students (learner-centered design). In line with this, socio-cultural factors require the curriculum to be responsive to the surrounding environment, community expectations, and developments in the world of work. It is important to note that the demands arising from psychological and social factors are often misinterpreted as rigid pressure. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes critical and independent thinking skills, demands should be interpreted as expectations that motivate and challenge students to think reflectively and find solutions independently. If demands are interpreted as rigid commands, they will actually hinder students' ability to think critically and independently, a result that is contrary to the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum.

3) Science, Technology, and Policy Factors: The Need for Adaptation and System Support

Advances in science and technology (IPTEK) force the PAI curriculum to continuously adapt. IPTEK not only functions as curriculum content (epistemological relevance) but also as a learning tool and medium. The PAI curriculum must be oriented towards developing 21st-century skills, such as digital literacy, critical thinking, and collaboration, so that graduates are ready to face the challenges of Society 5.0. In addition, policy factors (e.g., the national Merdeka Curriculum policy) and the availability of internal resources (teacher competence, facilities, and budget) are determinants of successful implementation. Policy support determines the direction, while the readiness of internal

resources plays an important role in implementation in the field. Resource constraints, as is often the case, can be a structural obstacle to curriculum implementation.

Normative Principles of PAI Curriculum Design: Quality Guidelines

The design principles serve as normative references that ensure that the curriculum development process is systematic, focused, and achieves national educational goals (Nurwiati, 2022).

1) Principles of Relevance and Continuity

The principle of relevance requires internal consistency between curriculum components (objectives, content, strategies, evaluation) and external consistency. External relevance is divided into sociological (in line with community needs), psychological (in line with student development), and epistemological (in line with scientific developments). Failure to ensure external relevance will render PAI education obsolete and useless for future students.

The principle of continuity ensures that learning experiences are arranged sequentially, both vertically (between education levels) and horizontally (between subjects at the same level). In PAI, this ensures that religious knowledge develops in a spiral and integrated manner, forming a complete understanding without gaps or overlaps.

2) Principle of Flexibility and Balance (Holistic)

The PAI curriculum must be designed flexibly, with room for adjustment or interpretation in accordance with local conditions and individual differences among students (talents, interests, learning speed). This principle of flexibility is strongly emphasized in the Merdeka Curriculum, with the aim of creating a dynamic and adaptive learning environment. A quality PAI curriculum must be dynamic.

The principle of balance emphasizes a harmonious proportion between various aspects of education: cognitive (knowledge), affective (attitude), and psychomotor (skills). In PAI, this balance means not only focusing on understanding religious theory, but also on spiritual awareness and instilling good moral values. Integrative learning is necessary to ensure the holistic development of students who are intelligent, skilled, and moral.

3) Principles of Effectiveness and Efficiency

The curriculum developed must be able to achieve educational goals to the maximum extent possible (effectiveness), bringing about significant changes in students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes. However, the achievement of these goals must also take into account the optimal use of resources (time, funds, personnel, facilities) (efficiency). A good PAI curriculum must be effective in achieving its goals while remaining efficient in its use of resources.

The relationship between the foundational factors and the principles of PAI curriculum design is systemic and synergistic. The factors provide context (what and why), while the principles ensure that the design process is effective, efficient, and relevant.

Critical Analysis of Current PAI Curriculum Design: Implementation Tension

The contemporary PAI curriculum, as embodied in the Merdeka Curriculum, represents a strategic transformation effort to address the challenges of the 21st century (Yenuri et al., 2025). However, critical analysis reveals a tension between the ideal principles embodied in the curriculum design and the reality of implementation factors.

1) Realization of the Principle of Flexibility in the Merdeka PAI Curriculum

The principle of flexibility is the backbone of the Merdeka Curriculum. This transformation gives PAI teachers greater autonomy to create a quality and adaptive learning system in accordance with the individual needs of students. This flexibility opens up great opportunities to adopt project-

based, case study, and inquiry-based learning approaches, which strategically move PAI away from a normative, rote learning model. With flexibility, PAI can become more adaptive and contextual.

2) The Paradox of Flexibility and Teacher Readiness Factors

Although flexibility (Principle) serves as an enabler to achieve relevance and balance, its implementation is limited by Human Resource Factors. Data shows that the readiness of PAI teachers in translating the curriculum philosophy, such as providing student-centered learning, has not reached an optimal level (estimated at around 75% to 80% in 2024). PAI teachers need special skills to select essential and relevant material and develop inclusive learning.

If the competence of PAI teachers as agents of implementation is low, flexibility in curriculum design can become a liability. In this situation, less competent teachers tend to interpret flexibility as freedom to continue using old teaching methods, or even create significant inconsistencies in quality standards between educational institutions (Nisa & Hamami, 2023). This causes the ideal objectives of the curriculum to fail to be achieved, because low teacher competence limits the application of the principle of flexibility, which in turn hinders the achievement of the principle of holistic balance (cognitive, affective, psychomotor). The pedagogical transformation of PAI teachers through continuous capacity building is an absolute prerequisite to ensure that curriculum flexibility can function properly (Waqfin et al., 2024).

3) Challenges of the Principles of Balance and Efficiency in the Field

The principle of balance is very important in PAI, requiring harmonious cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development. However, the reality in the field shows that it is difficult for PAI teachers to measure and foster affective and spiritual aspects in a deep and integrated manner, often due to time constraints, limited resources, and an assessment orientation that is still dominated by cognitive aspects.

Meanwhile, the limitation of internal resources (facilities, funding) requires the application of the principle of efficiency. These limitations must be addressed as challenges for management innovation, not merely structural obstacles. To minimize the impact of resource constraints, creative strategies are needed, such as optimizing existing resources (e.g., utilizing simple and contextual learning media). Schools must also improve teacher competence through community-based training (MGMP) and engage in strategic partnerships, for example, by involving parents or nearby universities, to compensate for the limitations of expensive practical facilities (Ma'rifatunnisa', 2025).

Innovative efficiency management is not only about cost savings but also about equity. By utilizing local resources and free technology, the PAI Curriculum can reduce dependence on expensive infrastructure, so that an effective curriculum can be implemented evenly in educational institutions with varying levels of infrastructure limitations (Suherman, 2023). If the curriculum is only effective in schools with complete resources, then the curriculum violates the principle of equity because it creates disparities in the quality of PAI education.

Conclusion

The design of the Islamic Education (PAI) curriculum is a systemic and synergistic process driven by Foundational Factors—ranging from philosophical-theological foundations that demand the formation of a comprehensive character, to the demands of science and technology and Society 5.0. This process must be guided by Normative Principles that guarantee quality, namely Relevance, Flexibility, Balance, and Efficiency. The factors provide context and direction (what and why), while the principles ensure that the design process runs effectively and with quality (how). Theoretically, the current PAI curriculum design (Merdeka Curriculum) has adopted the principle of flexibility to achieve psychological and sociological relevance.

Critical analysis shows that the main obstacle in the contemporary PAI Curriculum lies in the failure to bridge the gap between the Ideal Flexibility Principle mandated by policy and the Teacher Readiness Factor in the field. If PAI teachers' ability to translate the curriculum philosophy is limited, flexibility risks becoming a source of inconsistency and a major obstacle to achieving the Principle of Holistic Balance (cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development), which is the philosophical goal of PAI. To realize the vision of an adaptive and holistic PAI, strengthening teacher competence and innovative resource management are strategic priorities.

Based on this analysis, there are two main strategic recommendations that must be implemented to improve the quality of the PAI Curriculum:

1. Transformation of PAI Teacher Competence: Educational institutions must prioritize improving the competence of PAI teachers through peer-to-peer training strategies and the activation of learning communities (Subject Teacher Working Groups/MGMP). The focus of training should shift from merely understanding curriculum documents to transformative pedagogy, which is student-centered, dialogical, and capable of translating flexibility into innovative and contextual teaching modules.
2. Innovative and Collaborative Efficiency Management: Resource constraints (internal factors) must be turned into challenges for innovation. Schools are encouraged to implement interdisciplinary Project-Based Learning (PjBL) to integrate topics and save time, as well as expand educational resources through strategic partnerships with local industries, parents, and universities. This strategy ensures that limitations in facilities and infrastructure do not hinder the achievement of PAI education effectiveness and quality.

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