

## Evaluation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Teaching Materials Based on the Merdeka Curriculum in Senior High School: A Case Study at SMA Al-Ihsan, Cimencrang Village, Bandung City

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### Abstract

This study evaluates the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teaching materials based on the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA Al-Ihsan, Cimencrang, Bandung. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through interviews with PAI teachers and school principals, classroom observations, and document analysis of textbooks, lesson plans (RPP), and project reports. The research aims to assess the quality, relevance, and effectiveness of PAI teaching materials in alignment with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, student characteristics, and the Profile of Pancasila Students. The findings indicate that the teaching materials are systematically structured, integrate Pancasila values and religious moderation, and adopt a contextual approach. However, weaknesses include incomplete presentation of Quranic verses, superficial tafsir (exegesis), limited integration of technology, and insufficient emphasis on higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). Key challenges faced by teachers include limited understanding of the curriculum, inadequate facilities, and a high administrative workload. The study recommends continuous teacher training, development of practical teaching modules, and digital integration to enhance the effectiveness of PAI learning. This research contributes to a better understanding of the practical challenges and opportunities in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum within Islamic education contexts.

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengevaluasi implementasi materi ajar Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) berbasis Kurikulum Merdeka di SMA Al-Ihsan, Cimencrang, Bandung. Menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara dengan guru PAI dan kepala sekolah, observasi kelas, serta analisis dokumen buku teks, rencana pelaksanaan pembelajaran (RPP), dan laporan proyek. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menilai kualitas, relevansi, dan efektivitas materi ajar PAI dalam keselarasan dengan prinsip-prinsip Kurikulum Merdeka, karakteristik peserta didik, dan Profil Pelajar Pancasila. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa materi ajar disusun secara sistematis, mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai Pancasila dan moderasi beragama, serta mengadopsi pendekatan kontekstual. Namun, kelemahan yang ditemukan antara lain penyajian ayat-ayat Al-Qur'an yang tidak lengkap, tafsir (penafsiran) yang dangkal, integrasi teknologi yang terbatas, dan kurangnya penekanan pada keterampilan berpikir tingkat tinggi (HOTS). Tantangan utama

### Keywords:

PAI Teaching Materials, Merdeka Curriculum, Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), Technology Integration

### Kata Kunci

Kurikulum Merdeka, Keterampilan Berpikir Tingkat Tinggi (HOTS), Integrasi Teknologi.

yang dihadapi oleh guru adalah pemahaman yang terbatas tentang kurikulum, fasilitas yang tidak memadai, dan beban administratif yang tinggi. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan pelatihan guru yang berkelanjutan, pengembangan modul ajar yang praktis, dan integrasi digital untuk meningkatkan efektivitas pembelajaran PAI. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi dalam memahami tantangan praktis dan peluang dalam mengimplementasikan Kurikulum Merdeka dalam konteks pendidikan agama Islam.



## Introduction

Kurikulum Merdeka, launched in 2022 as part of the Merdeka Belajar policy, aims to provide educational institutions with autonomy in designing flexible, contextual, and student-centered learning (Dewi Rahmadayanti & Agung Hartoyo, 2022). This curriculum focuses on essential materials, character development, and student competencies, emphasizing project-based learning to develop soft skills and the Pancasila learner profile (Moh. Munawar, 2022). It offers flexibility for teachers and students to design learning experiences tailored to local and individual needs (Diah Anisa et al., 2025). The implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka aims to address learning loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and promote meaningful learning experiences (Ahmad Teguh Purnawanto, 2022). However, challenges remain, including resource disparities and teacher readiness (Diah Anisa et al., 2025). The curriculum encourages the use of technology and learning communities to facilitate best practice sharing among teachers, students, and academics (Ahmad Teguh Purnawanto, 2022).

Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) plays a crucial role in shaping students' religious character, morals, and national identity in the face of globalization challenges (Sekolah Tinggi et al., 2025; Jurnal Pendidikan Qosim Jurnal et al., 2025). However, PAI curricula often struggle to meet 21st-century educational needs, emphasizing cognitive-instructional approaches over contextual values and collaborative learning (Jurnal Pendidikan Qosim Jurnal et al., 2025). Effective PAI implementation requires improved teacher competence, student engagement, and relevant teaching materials (Sandy Aulia Rahman & M. Ramli, 2024). The reconstruction of PAI curricula based on religious moderation values is essential, promoting tolerance, empathy, and respect for diversity (Bustari et al., 2024). Integration of technology in learning and continuous curriculum evaluation are necessary to enhance student engagement and ensure relevance (Bustari et al., 2024). Overall, PAI reform is vital for developing resilient, inclusive, and competitive individuals in the global era (Sekolah Tinggi et al., 2025).

The implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) has shown positive impacts on students' conceptual understanding, character development, and competency enhancement (Al Panes et al., 2025). This curriculum grants school's autonomy to manage learning according to student characteristics (Ahmad Rifa'i et al., 2022). However, challenges persist, particularly in public schools, where PAI implementation faces limitations in time allocation and material coverage compared to madrasas (Al Panes et al., 2025). Teachers struggle to connect religious concepts with students' daily practices and face resource constraints (Singgih Caesar Putro Prakoso et al., 2024). To address these issues, strategies such as integrating project-based learning with conventional approaches and involving parents have shown positive effects on student motivation (Singgih Caesar Putro Prakoso et al., 2024). Successful implementation requires enhancing teacher competencies, selecting relevant materials, and developing adaptive and contextual learning strategies (Al Panes et al., 2025).

The research papers discuss various aspects of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teaching

materials and curriculum implementation in Indonesia. The quality and relevance of PAI materials are crucial for effective learning, requiring systematic development to meet students' needs (Asep Abdurahman et al., 2024). Teachers face challenges in developing and implementing PAI materials aligned with the 2013 Curriculum, including limited resources and student comprehension issues (Afif Syaiful Mahmudin, 2021). The transition to the Merdeka Curriculum presents additional difficulties for PAI teachers, such as lack of understanding and resistance to change (Fitri Amelia & Asnil Aida Ritonga, 2024). Professional demands on PAI teachers include effectively using learning media and adapting to the Merdeka Curriculum, despite obstacles like inadequate facilities and administrative burdens (Ahmad Kasyif Rikza & Darnoto, 2024). Addressing these challenges requires collaboration between government, educational institutions, and society to ensure high-quality, relevant PAI teaching materials (Asep Abdurahman et al., 2024).

## Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of PAI teaching materials based on the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA Al-Ihsan. This approach was chosen because it allows for intensive exploration of phenomena in real-world contexts, in line with Creswell and Creswell's suggestion that case studies are highly effective for understanding the complexities of educational programs in a single location.

The research was conducted at SMA Al-Ihsan, located in Cimencrang Village, Gedebage District, Bandung City, which has been implementing the Merdeka Curriculum since the 2023/2024 academic year. The research subjects consisted of three PAI teachers, one principal, and two curriculum representatives, selected purposively based on their direct roles in the development and implementation of teaching materials.

Data were collected through three main techniques: (1) in-depth interviews with teachers and school leaders to understand the implementation process and challenges; (2) direct observation of PAI lessons to observe the actual use of teaching materials; and (3) document analysis of the official Kemendikbud textbooks, lesson plans (RPP), learning modules, and the Project for Strengthening the Profile of Pancasila Students (P5) reports.

The data were analyzed thematically using steps such as data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Data validity was strengthened through source triangulation and member checking with the respondents. The entire research process was conducted in June 2025.

## Result and Discussion

### Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA Al-Ihsan

SMA Swasta Al-Ihsan, located in Cimencrang Village, Gedebage District, Bandung City, began implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in the 2023/2024 academic year. As a private school with most of its students coming from lower-middle economic backgrounds, the school faces unique challenges in adapting to the new curriculum. Despite these challenges, the school has demonstrated a strong commitment to successfully implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. This commitment is largely driven by the school principal and core teachers, who have worked collaboratively to ensure a gradual and organized implementation process. The school has taken systematic steps, including the formation of a curriculum team, extensive socialization efforts, and intensive teacher training based on the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM).

One of the key aspects of this implementation is the school's focus on three main pillars, as outlined in interviews with the principal and PAI teachers. These pillars are: (1) the development of the Profile of Pancasila Students, which is at the heart of the Merdeka Curriculum, (2) differentiated learning, which addresses the diverse needs of students, and (3) authentic assessment, which aims to measure students' true competencies beyond traditional exams. The PAI teachers have been actively involved in the creation and development of teaching modules, lesson plans (RPP), and the P5 project, ensuring that the materials are contextual and cater to the specific needs of the students. These materials are designed to integrate both Islamic values and contemporary issues, making learning more relevant and engaging for the students.

The implementation of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum faces significant challenges across various educational levels. Limited technological resources and infrastructure, including unstable internet and malfunctioning projectors, hinder effective integration of digital learning tools (Putri & Pranata, 2024; Nur 'Azah et al., 2024; Hasriani et al., 2024). Teachers struggle with adapting to new teaching methods and lack proficiency in technology use, often reverting to traditional approaches (Putri & Pranata, 2024; Soleha & Mujahid, 2024). Inadequate facilities, particularly in remote areas, further complicate curriculum implementation (Hasriani et al., 2024). Additionally, teachers face challenges in understanding and applying the curriculum effectively due to insufficient guidance and resources (Soleha & Mujahid, 2024; Hasriani et al., 2024). To address these issues, studies recommend focused professional development, increased access to technological resources, and improved alignment between teaching methods and curriculum goals (Putri & Pranata, 2024; Nur 'Azah et al., 2024). Collaborative efforts among stakeholders are crucial for successful implementation and improved educational outcomes (Nur 'Azah et al., 2024).

Another challenge is the high administrative burden that teachers face. The extensive workload required for creating lesson plans, conducting assessments, and preparing teaching materials, combined with administrative responsibilities, often leaves teachers with limited time for professional development or curriculum-related innovations. This high workload can lead to teacher fatigue, which affects their ability to engage with and fully implement the curriculum's key components, especially differentiated learning and authentic assessment.

Furthermore, there is an uneven understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum among teachers, which poses a challenge to the curriculum's uniform implementation. While some teachers are fully equipped to implement the curriculum's components effectively, others struggle due to a lack of clarity or insufficient training. This inconsistency can lead to disparities in the quality of teaching and hinder the overall effectiveness of the curriculum. Continuous teacher training and support are necessary to ensure that all educators are equally prepared to meet the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The implementation of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum faces significant challenges, including limited teacher competencies in applying differentiated learning principles, disparities in digital resource access, and low student involvement in learning design (Rini Setyaningsih et al., 2025). Technology limitations and unequal device access hinder effective project-based learning, while teachers struggle to implement new methods effectively despite training (Nur 'Azah et al., 2024). Infrastructure inadequacies, particularly in remote areas, and gaps in understanding the curriculum further complicate its implementation (Subhan Widiensyah et al., 2024). However, the curriculum shows promise in fostering student creativity and adapting to diverse needs (T. Hasballah & Zulfatmi, 2024). To address these challenges, stakeholders recommend investing in infrastructure improvements, streamlining administrative processes, offering regular professional

development, and promoting peer collaboration (Nur 'Azah et al., 2024). Additionally, strengthening collaboration among teachers, schools, communities, and the government is crucial for optimizing the curriculum's potential (Subhan Widiansyah et al., 2024).

### **Evaluation of Class X PAI Teaching Materials Based on the Merdeka Curriculum**

The teaching materials used at SMA Al-Ihsan are *Pendidikan Agama Islam dan Budi Pekerti untuk SMA/SMK Kelas X* (Kemendikbudristek, 2023), compiled by Ahmad Taufik and Nurwastuti Setyowati. This book serves as the primary reference for PAI learning and was specifically developed to support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Based on a qualitative analysis of its content, structure, and teaching approach, the book demonstrates several significant advantages.

First, it is structured based on *Capaian Pembelajaran* (CP). The book is systematically designed in alignment with the National Education Roadmap 2020–2035, emphasizing the balanced achievement of spiritual, social, and cognitive competencies. Each chapter begins with clear learning objectives, introductory activities, and end-of-chapter reflections, which supports a student-centered learning approach.

Second, the integration of four main pillars. The book successfully integrates the values of Islam *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, a sense of nationalism, the Profile of Pancasila Students, and 21st-century skills. For example, when discussing the prohibition of zina (QS. al-Isra'/17:32), the material is linked to the social realities of adolescents, social media, and the importance of maintaining personal dignity not only from a religious law perspective but also from a moral and social perspective.

Third, a contextual approach and the promotion of religious moderation. The book avoids exclusive and dogmatic narratives, instead emphasizing tolerance, harmony, and national unity. This aligns with the principle of religious moderation, which is one of the focuses of the Ministry of Education and Culture in the national curriculum.

Fourth, engaging and varied learning features. The book is equipped with infographics, the *Ayo Tadarus* rubric, *Tadabbur*, inspiring stories of Islamic figures, and character reflection activities. These features encourage students' affective engagement and help naturally internalize values.

However, despite its many strengths, the book also presents several shortcomings that need to be addressed. First, the presentation of Quranic verses is incomplete. Some verses are only presented in translation without the full Arabic text and without the context of the surrounding surah. For instance, QS. al-Isra'/17:32 is presented without the verses before and after it, which causes students to lose the historical context and structure of the surah.

Second, the tafsir is general and lacks depth. The analysis of key verses such as QS. al-Isra'/17:32 remains descriptive and general, without comparing interpretations from major mufasssirin such as Ibn Kathir, al-Qurthubi, or contemporary tafsir by Quraish Shihab. This results in less critical discussion and does not encourage higher-order thinking skills (HOTS).

Third, the integration of technology is limited. Although there are tasks for creating digital learning media, there are no technical guidelines or concrete examples (such as using Canva, short videos, or podcasts). Furthermore, there are no QR codes linking students to tafsir videos, *tadarus* recordings, or interactive simulations.

Fourth, assessments are still conventional. Assessment formats such as reflections and character evaluations are paper based (checklists and manual writing) and have not yet evolved into authentic assessments based on digital portfolios or a Learning Management System (LMS).

Fifth, there is a lack of activities based on critical discussion. The book emphasizes individual activities (reading, writing, reflecting), but there is minimal encouragement for group discussions, debates, or presentations that stimulate communication and collaboration skills.

### **Development of Teaching Materials by Teachers**

The PAI teachers at SMA Al-Ihsan took a proactive approach by developing additional modules to complement the official textbook, specifically to support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This development process was carried out collaboratively within the school's internal MGMP (Subject Teacher Working Group), which allowed for shared ideas and collective problem-solving. The teachers followed a well-defined process, beginning with an analysis of "*Capaian Pembelajaran*" (CP), which identifies the learning goals for each subject. Following this, they engaged in content mapping to ensure that all relevant topics were included and aligned with curriculum standards. They then designed engaging and meaningful activities that would encourage active participation from students. Finally, they integrated local values into the materials, making the lessons more relatable and contextually appropriate for the students.

One example of this initiative was the development of a P5 project titled "Digital Zakat for the Local Community." This project combined Islamic religious values with financial literacy and social awareness. It not only taught students about the religious significance of zakat but also connected them to contemporary issues such as digital financial platforms and community development. By creating a project that integrated these diverse aspects, the teachers aimed to provide students with a well-rounded, practical understanding of how Islamic values can be applied in the modern world.

Despite the innovative efforts, the development process encountered several significant obstacles that affected its full potential. First, time constraints emerged as a major challenge. Teachers were required to balance their time between classroom teaching, administrative responsibilities, and the development of additional teaching materials. Given the time-intensive nature of each task, many teachers found it difficult to dedicate sufficient time to develop high-quality educational resources while keeping up with their primary duties. This limitation hindered their ability to refine and expand upon the learning materials.

Second, there was limited technical training available to teachers. Although the teachers participated in the PMM (*Merdeka Mengajar Platform*) training, many still struggled to translate the broad concepts of the Merdeka Curriculum into practical lesson plans (RPP) and teaching modules. While PMM provided general guidelines, the teachers often felt that they needed more targeted support in applying these principles effectively in their day-to-day teaching practices. As a result, the lack of adequate technical training prevented some teachers from fully utilizing the innovative aspects of the curriculum.

Third, the availability of resources was another major challenge. Many classrooms were equipped with outdated or malfunctioning technology, such as broken projectors, and the school faced issues with unreliable internet access. These technological limitations severely hindered the teachers' ability to make full use of digital media, which is a key component of the Merdeka Curriculum. Without reliable access to digital tools, the integration of online resources, multimedia content, and interactive learning tools was limited, thereby restricting the potential impact of the curriculum.

Furthermore, the teachers also encountered challenges when trying to integrate these new materials with the existing curriculum. While the modules they developed were designed to be

relevant and contextual, aligning them with the official curriculum standards and ensuring that they met all educational goals was not always straightforward. This required careful planning and constant revision, which added additional strain to the teachers' already heavy workload.

### **Supporting and Hindering Factors in Implementation**

Key supporting factors include strong support from the school principal, the availability of the *Merdeka Mengajar Platform* (PMM), teacher commitment to innovation, collaboration among teachers through the MGMP (Subject Teacher Working Group), and school committee participation in procuring equipment. However, there are several hindering factors, including limited understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum among teachers, inadequate facilities (such as broken projectors and unstable internet access), a high administrative workload, insufficient technology and P5 training, and difficulties in developing cross-disciplinary projects.

Based on observations and interviews, the PAI teaching materials based on the Merdeka Curriculum have improved student engagement and understanding of religious values. Students are more enthusiastic about *tadarus*, *tadabbur*, and character reflection activities. Spiritual and social values have shown improvement, particularly in attitudes toward tolerance and responsibility. However, higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) and digital skills still need to be strengthened. The P5 projects tend to be more ritualistic (such as *pesantren kilat* or intensive religious schools) rather than social inquiry projects that demand analysis, creativity, and collaboration. Additionally, teachers still rely on lecture methods when teaching religious concepts, which does not encourage critical thinking about contemporary issues such as Islamic insurance law, crypto zakat, or social media ethics.

These findings align with the research by Mawarni, Trisiana, and Widyaningrum (2023), which states that although the Merdeka Curriculum provides teachers with great autonomy, its effectiveness largely depends on the teachers' capacity, school support, and resource availability. Without systematic intervention, curriculum autonomy may become an additional burden without optimal results.

### **Conclusion**

The PAI teaching materials based on the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA Al-Ihsan have shown significant progress in aspects of contextualization, integration of Pancasila values, and a holistic approach. The official textbook used has a well-structured design and is relevant to the needs of character education. However, there are weaknesses in the depth of religious content, the use of technology, and the stimulation of critical thinking.

The implementation of the teaching materials still faces structural challenges, such as limited teacher understanding, inadequate facilities, and a high administrative workload. Therefore, systematic efforts are needed to improve teacher capacity and provide practical guidance to support the optimal implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The recommendations from this study include: (1) regular training for teachers, (2) the development of practical guide modules, (3) the integration of technology in learning, and (4) periodic evaluation of the effectiveness of the teaching materials. This study is limited to one school, so the results cannot be generalized. Further studies are needed in various school contexts to enrich the findings.

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