

Implementing Islamic Religious Education under the Merdeka Curriculum: A Qualitative Case Study at a Junior Secondary School in Tasikmalaya

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Abstract

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a crucial role in shaping students' moral and spiritual character at the secondary school level, particularly within the implementation of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum. This study examines PAI implementation by focusing on student characteristics, curriculum relevance, learning strategies, and assessment practices. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis at SMPN 1 Kadipaten, Tasikmalaya Regency. Three key findings emerged: (1) Qur'an-Hadith instruction remains theoretically normative with minimal critical application; (2) differentiated learning is implemented only at the process level, neglecting content and product differentiation; and (3) P5 assessment rubrics lack specific behavioral indicators to measure the internalization of Islamic values such as tasamuh, tawasuth, and ta'awun. The Merdeka Curriculum provides flexibility through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), supporting moral development. However, learning differentiation remains limited, and P5 assessment instruments lack clarity in measuring Islamic values. These findings suggest that curriculum flexibility alone is insufficient without coherent pedagogical alignment and PAI-specific assessment instruments. This study recommends the development of operationalized P5 rubrics grounded in Islamic character indicators and the expansion of differentiated instruction toward content and product dimensions, so that PAI learning genuinely contributes to holistic student development aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile.

Keywords: *Islamic Religious; Merdeka Curriculum; Differentiated Learning; P5 Assessment; Character Formation.*

Abstrak

Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) memegang peranan krusial dalam membentuk dimensi spiritual dan moral siswa pada jenjang sekolah menengah, terutama di tengah penerapan Kurikulum Merdeka di Indonesia. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana PAI diimplementasikan dengan menitikberatkan pada karakteristik peserta didik, keselarasan kurikulum, strategi instruksional,

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serta metode evaluasi. Melalui desain studi kasus kualitatif, data dihimpun menggunakan teknik observasi kelas, wawancara mendalam, dan telaah dokumen di SMPN 1 Kadipaten, Kabupaten Tasikmalaya. Studi ini menghasilkan tiga temuan utama, yakni pembelajaran Al-Qur'an-Hadis sejauh ini masih bersifat normatif-teoretis dan belum banyak menyentuh aplikasi kritis, penerapan pembelajaran berdiferensiasi baru sebatas pada aspek proses dengan mengabaikan diferensiasi konten dan produk akhir, serta rubrik penilaian Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) belum memiliki indikator perilaku yang spesifik untuk mengukur internalisasi nilai-nilai Islam seperti tasamuh (toleransi), tawasuth (moderasi), dan ta'awun (tolong-menolong). Meskipun Kurikulum Merdeka menawarkan fleksibilitas melalui program P5 untuk menyokong pertumbuhan karakter, pelaksanaan diferensiasi mengajar nyatanya masih terbatas, dan alat ukur P5 masih belum jelas dalam menilai nilai-nilai religius. Fenomena ini menunjukkan bahwa keluwesan kurikulum tidak akan optimal tanpa adanya keselarasan pedagogis yang padu serta instrumen asesmen yang dirancang khusus untuk PAI. Oleh karena itu, riset ini menyarankan adanya penyusunan rubrik P5 yang lebih operasional berbasis indikator karakter islami, sekaligus memperluas cakupan diferensiasi hingga ke ranah materi dan produk pembelajaran agar esensi pembelajaran PAI benar-benar memberikan andil nyata bagi perkembangan siswa secara holistik yang selaras dengan Profil Pelajar Pancasila.

Kata kunci : Pendidikan Agama Islam; Kurikulum Merdeka; Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi; Penilaian P5; Pembentuk Karakter.

I. Introduction

The discourse on Islamic Religious Education (PAI) within the framework of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum has primarily revolved around policy alignments, general implementation challenges, and theoretical adaptations of progressive pedagogical frameworks. While existing literature frequently employs multidimensional analytical lenses to examine this shift, such framework-based novelty arguments often replicate established structural paradigms without offering deeper empirical granularities. The genuine contribution of this study lies in three specific empirical findings within real-world PAI classrooms: the systemic identification that the Qur'an-Hadith sub-component remains the most underdeveloped element in curriculum adaptation; the empirical mapping showing that differentiated PAI instruction is limited to the process level while neglecting content and product differentiation; and the operationally specific critique that current P5 assessment rubrics fail to capture the internalization of core Islamic values such as tasamuh (tolerance), tawasuth (moderation), and ta'awun (mutual cooperation)(Jaenudin et al., 2023; Ruswandi, 2021; Virgona et al., 2025).

Islamic Religious Education occupies a strategic position within Indonesia's national education system as a foundational instrument for nurturing students' faith, piety, and moral character (Muthrofin et al., 2025; Noneng Nurhayani et al., 2024; Sarwo Edy et al., 2024; Supian et al., 2023). At the secondary school level, PAI plays a particularly critical role because students are in a transitional developmental phase marked by rapid cognitive growth, identity exploration, and heightened sensitivity to social and moral issues. In this context, PAI is no longer merely expected to transmit religious knowledge

but must actively contribute to shaping students' ethical reasoning, spiritual awareness, and social responsibility in response to contemporary challenges.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka/KM) introduces a new paradigm for PAI instruction by emphasizing learner autonomy, contextual relevance, and the development of higher-order thinking skills. This curriculum provides greater flexibility for teachers to design learning experiences that align with students' characteristics and local contexts (Chan & Lee, 2021; Mulianah, 2023). Within PAI, this flexibility is primarily operationalized through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila/P5), which aims to integrate religious values with real-life social practices. Consequently, PAI under the Merdeka Curriculum is expected to move beyond normative and doctrinal teaching toward reflective, dialogic, and practice-oriented learning.

Previous studies have extensively examined the role of PAI in character formation and curriculum development. Research by Astuti and Suastra (2024) and Qulyubi and Komara (2024) highlights that the Merdeka Curriculum strengthens the Pancasila Student Profile, particularly in the dimensions of faith, piety, and noble character (Astuti & Suastra, 2024; Qulyubi & Komara, 2024). Amin et al. (2025) emphasize that effective PAI implementation within the Merdeka Curriculum depends on the coherent integration of Aqidah, Fiqh, Akhlaq, and Islamic history with P5 thematic learning (Amin et al., 2025). Similarly, Noneng Nurhayani et al. (2024) demonstrate the importance of contextualizing PAI learning through local wisdom to enhance students' moral engagement (Noneng Nurhayani et al., 2024).

Other studies focus on pedagogical strategies aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum. Differentiated learning has been identified as a key instructional mandate to accommodate students' diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning styles (Kasih et al., 2025; Tomlinson, 2017). Empirical findings by Nurlaili et al. (2023) and Supriatna et al. (2023) suggest that the use of interactive multimedia and digital learning tools significantly enhances students' motivation and critical reasoning in PAI (Nurlaili et al., 2023; Supriatna et al., 2023). In addition, inquiry-based and project-based learning approaches have been shown to foster reflective religious understanding rather than rote memorization (Koes-H & Putri, 2021; Muthrofin et al., 2025).

Assessment practices within PAI have also received scholarly attention. Rusdiyanto et al. (2024) argue that holistic assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum should measure cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains in an integrated manner (Rusdiyanto et al., 2024). Studies by Fauza et al. (2024) and Ernita and Ardianto (2025), however, reveal persistent challenges in implementing P5 assessments, particularly the lack of specific indicators for measuring the internalization of Islamic values such as tolerance (*tasamuh*) and moderation (*tawasuth*) (Ernita & Ardianto, 2025; Fauza et al., 2024). These findings

indicate that although P5 is conceptually designed as an authentic assessment tool, its practical implementation remains problematic.

Despite the growing body of literature, several gaps remain. First, most existing studies examine PAI implementation in the Merdeka Curriculum at a conceptual or policy level, with limited empirical exploration of how student characteristics, learning strategies, curriculum flexibility, and assessment practices interact within a single school context. Second, research specifically focusing on lower secondary schools (SMP level) is still relatively scarce, even though adolescence is a crucial phase for moral and identity development (Ibda, 2015; McLeod, 2025; Robaeah et al., 2023, 2024). Third, while differentiated learning and P5 assessment are frequently discussed, few studies analyze their actual implementation and limitations in PAI classrooms, particularly in relation to Qur'an-Hadith instruction and the measurement of Islamic values.

This study seeks to address these gaps by conducting an in-depth qualitative case study at SMPN 1 Kadipaten, Tasikmalaya Regency, one of the schools implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The novelty of this research lies in its integrative analytical framework, which simultaneously examines (1) adolescent student characteristics, (2) curriculum relevance within the Merdeka Curriculum, (3) learning strategies with a focus on differentiated instruction and digital media use, and (4) holistic assessment practices through P5. By situating these dimensions within a real school context, this study provides a comprehensive picture of how PAI is practiced and experienced under the Merdeka Curriculum.

Furthermore, this research offers empirical evidence on the extent to which curriculum flexibility is translated into pedagogical innovation and authentic assessment. Unlike previous studies that emphasize theoretical alignment, this study highlights the practical tensions between curriculum ideals and classroom realities, particularly regarding partial implementation of differentiated learning and the general nature of P5 assessment instruments. As such, it contributes to the discourse on PAI reform by identifying both enabling factors and persistent challenges in operationalizing the Merdeka Curriculum.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine the implementation of Islamic Religious Education at the secondary school level by focusing on student characteristics, curriculum relevance, learning strategies, and assessment practices within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) analyze how adolescent students' cognitive and social characteristics influence PAI learning; (2) examine the relevance and flexibility of the Merdeka Curriculum in supporting PAI objectives; (3) evaluate the application of differentiated and interactive learning strategies; and (4) assess the effectiveness of holistic, value-based assessment through the P5 project. The findings are expected to provide practical recommendations for

teachers, schools, and policymakers to enhance the effectiveness of PAI in fostering holistic student development aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile.

II. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using an exploratory case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) within the Merdeka Curriculum at SMPN 1 Kadipaten, Tasikmalaya Regency. The case study design was selected to provide a rich and contextual description of curriculum adaptation, instructional strategies, and assessment practices in a real school setting. The research was conducted over one academic semester to allow sustained observation of learning processes and institutional practices related to PAI and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure data relevance and depth. The informants consisted of two PAI teachers teaching Grades VII and VIII, one school principal or vice principal for curriculum affairs, and five students representing diverse academic abilities.

The selection of two core PAI teachers and one curriculum administrator was determined sufficient as they represent the entire operational nexus of Merdeka Curriculum implementation in the school's PAI department. The sample of five students was bounded based on data saturation principles, utilizing a purposive framework to capture diverse academic abilities defined and measured by triangulating three cumulative indicators: the students' cognitive placement test scores, their cumulative grade point average (GPA) in the previous academic term, and direct behavioral recommendations from homeroom teachers regarding classroom engagement levels.

Data were collected through non-participant classroom observations, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and document analysis of official curriculum materials, teaching modules, and P5 reports. These methods enabled triangulation of data sources and provided comprehensive insights into both planned and enacted PAI learning practices. Data analysis was conducted inductively using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing with continuous verification. The raw transcript segments were subjected to systematic first-cycle open coding, which were then condensed into second-cycle pattern codes. This iterative grouping yielded explicit emerging themes such as "Theoretical-Normative Stagnation in Scripture Delivery," "Process-Centric Pedagogical Differentiation," and "Value-Ambiguity in Rubric Design," allowing a transparent progression from field evidence to final analytical conclusions. Credibility was ensured through method and source triangulation, member checking, and peer discussion. The effectiveness of PAI implementation was assessed qualitatively based on indicators such as curriculum alignment, instructional differentiation, student engagement, and the relevance of

assessment practices in capturing Islamic values, rather than through quantitative performance measures.

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III. Result and Discussion

A. Research Findings

Classroom observations at SMPN 1 Kadipaten revealed consistent patterns of cognitive disengagement during lecture-dominated PAI sessions. For example, during a non-participant classroom observation of a Grade VIII PAI session dominated by a conventional, one-way expository lecture, the field notes explicitly documented widespread cognitive disengagement among the learners:

"During the 25-minute teacher explanation on Fiqh regulations, approximately 14 out of 28 students exhibited passive behaviors; four students were looking down at their desks, three were whispering to peers, and several others showed blank expressions with zero analytical questions raised when the teacher offered a brief Q&A window" (Observation Field Note, October 14, 2025).

This structural passivity is further corroborated by raw interview testimonies from the students themselves. As one student explicitly remarked:

"If we just sit and listen to the teacher reading from the textbook in class, we eventually get sleepy and bored. We highly prefer being assigned to group discussions or designing infographics using our smartphones, because it allows us to think critically alongside our peers" (Interview with Student S.A., Grade VIII, October 22, 2025).

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These empirical baselines underscore that traditional, teacher-centered modalities directly trigger acute attention drop-offs among adolescent learners at SMPN 1 Kadipaten. Students at SMPN 1 Kadipaten demonstrate distinctive characteristics typical of adolescent development, particularly a marked growth in critical reasoning skills alongside a strong need for social recognition within their peer groups. At this stage, students tend to question information, seek logical explanations, and evaluate ideas based on relevance to their lived experiences. These developmental traits shape how students engage with learning, especially in subjects such as Islamic Religious Education (PAI), where abstract concepts and moral values require thoughtful interpretation and contextualization.

Data from classroom observations and in-depth interviews indicate that predominantly lecture-based PAI instruction is less effective in responding to these characteristics. Students show limited engagement when learning is delivered in a one-way, teacher-centered manner. In contrast, learning activities that incorporate

discussion, debate, collaborative tasks, and digital media generate significantly higher levels of participation and enthusiasm. Interactive learning environments provide opportunities for students to express opinions, test arguments, and receive peer feedback, which aligns closely with their cognitive and social development needs.

Furthermore, students' increasing critical awareness influences their preferences toward certain PAI content areas. They tend to show greater interest in Akhlaq (morality) and the History of Islamic Civilization (SPI), as these topics are perceived as more directly connected to contemporary ethical dilemmas, identity formation, and social realities. Conversely, Fiqh and Aqidah are often viewed as abstract and less engaging when presented without contextual examples. This finding highlights the importance of presenting all PAI components through contextual, inquiry-based approaches so that students can meaningfully relate Islamic teachings to their personal and social lives.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (KM) Phase D at SMPN 1 Kadipaten has opened wider opportunities for PAI teachers to design Teaching Modules that are closely connected to the local context of Tasikmalaya Regency. This flexibility allows teachers to move beyond rigid, textbook-oriented instruction and develop learning experiences that reflect students' social, cultural, and religious environments. By contextualizing PAI content, teachers can present Islamic teachings in ways that are more meaningful and relatable, thereby increasing student engagement and comprehension.

One of the main strengths of PAI implementation within the KM framework is the integration of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). Through P5, PAI learning is not confined to classroom instruction but is expanded into project-based activities that encourage exploration, collaboration, and reflection. For example, a project with the theme "Local Wisdom" enabled students to explore the relationship between Islamic values and Sundanese cultural traditions, fostering a deeper understanding of how religion and culture can coexist harmoniously in everyday life.

This integration demonstrates how elements of Fiqh and Akhlaq can be effectively embedded within local cultural practices without compromising Islamic principles. By linking religious values to familiar traditions, students are able to internalize moral teachings more naturally and authentically. Such contextual learning directly supports the Pancasila Student Profile dimension of "Faith in God Almighty, Piety, and Noble Character," reinforcing the role of PAI as a key contributor to character education within the Merdeka Curriculum.

However, the full potential of the Merdeka Curriculum has not yet been fully utilized across all elements of PAI, particularly in Qur'an-Hadith instruction. PAI teachers acknowledge the difficulty of making this material relevant to the critical reasoning abilities of adolescent students. Frequently, verses that inherently contain profound dimensions of thought such as those related to science or religious moderation—are

presented theoretically, focusing on memorization and translation rather than serving as the basis for critical and reflective discussion. This gap highlights the need for a transformation of Teaching Modules so that students are guided to engage with the primary sources of Islam as a foundation for reasoning, rather than mere compliance without understanding.

In terms of learning strategies, PAI teachers have shown positive initiatives toward implementing differentiated instruction; however, the dominant practice thus far primarily involves process differentiation. This is evident from the variety of methods used, such as mind mapping, group discussions, and presentations. Unfortunately, these differentiation efforts rarely extend to content differentiation (adjusting the difficulty level of learning materials) or product differentiation (allowing flexibility in the form of student outputs), which are the core principles of the Merdeka Curriculum (KM). This partial implementation of differentiation risks failing to fully accommodate the diverse interests and varying levels of learning readiness among all students.

A major supporting factor in the learning strategy is the use of interactive and digital media (such as short videos and online quizzes). The consistent use of these media has been shown to increase students' motivation and engagement, as it aligns closely with their characteristics as digital natives. However, the effectiveness of these tools remains largely limited to content delivery and has not yet been widely integrated as instruments to facilitate product differentiation or deep inquiry, as required by the Merdeka Curriculum.

From the assessment perspective, the PAI assessment model at SMPN 1 Kadipaten aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum (KM), with formative assessments such as daily quizzes, self-assessments, and observations being the dominant forms, aimed at improving the learning process. However, substantial challenges arise in evaluating character aspects, particularly within the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). Although P5 is ideally designed as an authentic tool to measure students' spiritual dimensions, the instruments used (mainly observation rubrics) tend to be overly general. These instruments do not yet explicitly or specifically assess the extent to which fundamental Islamic values such as *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawasuth* (moderation), and *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation) have been internalized and manifested in students' behavior during the projects.

The assessment instruments used in the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) are generally designed in broad terms, which makes the measurement of affective and psychomotor learning outcomes in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) prone to subjectivity. This condition becomes particularly problematic because affective attitudes and religious practices are central components of PAI learning. When assessment indicators are not sufficiently specific, teachers face difficulties in capturing

students' actual character development and value-based behaviors in a systematic and accountable manner.

Although the Merdeka Curriculum (KM) offers substantial flexibility in curriculum implementation and assessment design, its effectiveness depends largely on how schools translate this flexibility into concrete pedagogical practices. At SMPN 1 Kadipaten, the absence of detailed, PAI-specific assessment instruments limits the ability to evaluate the internalization of Islamic values beyond cognitive achievement. As a result, assessments tend to emphasize observable academic outputs rather than the continuous formation of moral dispositions and religious habits.

Therefore, this study concludes that the implementation of PAI within the Merdeka Curriculum framework requires the development of more authentic and context-sensitive assessment instruments. Such instruments should be capable of measuring affective and psychomotor dimensions in an integrated manner, ensuring that PAI assessment reflects not only students' knowledge but also the practice and internalization of Islamic values as essential elements of the Pancasila Student Profile.

Table 1. Empirical Mapping of PAI Implementation under the Merdeka Curriculum at SMPN 1 Kadipaten

Research Dimension	Observed Instructional Characteristics (Alignment)	Operational Inconsistencies & Classroom Constraints (Challenges)
Student Characteristics and Responses	High engagement with collaborative peer dialogue and structured discussions.	Reduced cognitive focus during protracted expository or lecture-centric instruction
Curriculum Structure & Teaching Modules	Positive responses toward active technology integration (interactive quiz platforms). Structural integration of character education through local wisdom-themed P5 modules. Incorporation of Sundanese cultural values within moral development activities.	Theoretical-normative focus in Qur'an-Hadith delivery. Abstract delivery of scriptural elements with limited application to critical issues like religious moderation.
Learning Strategies	Consistent application of instructional process variation (mind mapping, group work, field tasks)	Stagnation of differentiation at the process level. Underdeveloped modification of content levels and product/assignment formats.
Holistic Assessment Mode	Implementation of multi-source formative assessment (self-assessment and descriptive teacher observations).	Broad structural indicators in P5 assessment rubrics. Lack of operational behavioral markers to document the internalization of <i>tasamuh</i> , <i>tawasuth</i> , and <i>ta'awun</i> .

Note: Primary Empirical Data, SMPN 1 Kadipaten, Tasikmalaya Regency



Figure 1. Student Characteristics, Responses, and Learning Strategies

Description: Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between students' characteristics and their responses to learning activities in the classroom. Characteristics such as critical thinking abilities, emotional needs, and individual learning styles shape how students engage with instructional content and interact with teachers and peers during the learning process.

The figure emphasizes that understanding these student characteristics is essential for teachers when designing learning experiences. Students with strong critical thinking skills require learning activities that encourage discussion, problem-solving, and reflection, while attention to emotional needs supports motivation, comfort, and active participation in learning. Learning styles further influence how students process information and respond to different instructional approaches.

Based on this understanding, Figure 1 highlights that interactive and contextual teaching strategies should be deliberately selected to match student characteristics. By aligning teaching methods with learners' cognitive and emotional profiles, educators can Create more effective, meaningful, and engaging learning experiences that support holistic student development.



Figure 2. Islamic Education Curriculum, Teaching Modules, and Holistic Assessment Model

Description: Figure 2 illustrates the integration of the Islamic Religious Education curriculum with teaching modules and a holistic assessment model. This integration emphasizes that PAI learning is not limited to the achievement of cognitive outcomes, but also deliberately addresses affective and psychomotor dimensions. Through this approach, learning is designed to foster students' attitudes, values, and religious practices alongside their knowledge acquisition.

The figure also reflects the role of teaching modules as a bridge between curriculum objectives and classroom implementation. Well-structured modules enable teachers to translate curriculum standards into contextual learning activities that are responsive to students' developmental stages. In this way, instructional design becomes more systematic and purposeful, supporting meaningful learning experiences that encourage the internalization of Islamic values.

Taken together, the integration shown in Figure 2 highlights the importance of alignment among student characteristics, instructional design, and assessment systems. Such alignment ensures that PAI learning effectively supports character formation, strengthens the internalization of Islamic values, and promotes comprehensive student development in cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains.

In closing the data presentation across the integrated dimensions, document analysis and professional teacher reflections provide final, tangible evidence regarding the structural gaps in differentiated delivery and value-based P5 auditing. A systematic review of the official P5 Evaluation Module (Grade VII, Culture and Local Wisdom Theme) revealed a complete absence of localized behavioral indicators. The document text reads verbatim:

"Indicator 1: Student demonstrates faith and noble character during the project phase" (Document Excerpt, P5 Module SMPN 1 Kadipaten, p. 12),

failing to unpack how complex Islamic theological virtues are operationally identified. This critical instrumentation gap was explicitly detailed by the core PAI instructor during semi-structured interviews:

"We are thoroughly confused on the ground when filling out the P5 assessment rubrics because the guidelines from the central curriculum are overly general. It merely states 'noble character', but there are no scores or operational behavioral descriptors to evaluate whether a student has demonstrated tasamuh (tolerance) or ta'awun (mutual cooperation) during group work. Consequently, we tend to generalize their P5 report card grades based solely on subjective academic assessments" (Interview with PAI Teacher M.Y., November 5, 2025).

This evidentiary cross-examination between abstract curriculum blueprints, unoperationalized rubrics, and the resulting subjective evaluation practices confirms that

without localized, value-specific behavioral markers, the authentic spiritual assessment mandated by the Merdeka Curriculum remains functionally unfulfilled in the PAI classroom.

B. Discussion

The research findings at SMPN 1 Kadipaten strongly emphasize the urgency of aligning Islamic Education (PAI) practices with the theoretical framework of the Merdeka Curriculum (KM). Ibda (2015) and McLeod (2025) theorize that adolescents in the formal operational stage demand abstract reasoning environments. The present findings confirm this theoretically, but reveal a practical contradiction: despite this developmental demand, PAI instruction at SMPN 1 Kadipaten remains predominantly expository, with Qur'an-Hadith delivery particularly resistant to the dialogic and argumentative approaches that adolescent cognition requires (Ibda, 2015; McLeod, 2025). Students' tendency toward critical reasoning and their resistance to lecture-based methods demonstrate that Islamic Education (PAI) must be transformed into an argumentative and contextual discipline. The success of PAI within the Merdeka Curriculum (KM) lies in the teacher's ability to transform normative material into learning that is relevant to the construction of adolescents' self-identity.

The Merdeka Curriculum (KM) aspect needs to be theoretically analyzed as a policy framework that emphasizes Student-Centered Learning and flexibility in achieving Learning Outcomes (CP). Ideally, KM supports the Critical Thinking dimension of the Pancasila Student Profile (PPP). However, the findings reveal a gap in the Al-Qur'an and Hadith component, where the material is presented in a theoretical and normative manner with minimal case studies. This condition hinders the development of critical reasoning skills promoted by KM, even though project-based KM implementation is expected to foster such critical thinking abilities (Insani et al., 2025; My et al., 2023). Jaenudin et al. (2023) advocate for the integration of religious moderation values into PAI instruction through contextual module design. The present study extends this argument empirically: at SMPN 1 Kadipaten, Qur'an-Hadith sessions consistently defaulted to memorization and translation, suggesting that even where moderation-oriented modules exist at the policy level, their translation into classroom practice remains unrealized (Ambya et al., 2025; Jaenudin et al., 2023; Wardati et al., 2023).

The implementation of Islamic Education (PAI) learning strategies must be evaluated based on their theoretical alignment. Tomlinson's (2017) three-dimensional differentiation framework content, process, and product provides the evaluative lens through which this study's findings become particularly revealing. While PAI teachers at SMPN 1 Kadipaten consistently apply process differentiation through method variation (mind mapping, group discussions, presentations), content and product dimensions remain entirely underdeveloped. This suggests that teachers have adopted the vocabulary of differentiated instruction without fully internalizing its pedagogical

architecture a partial implementation that risks reproducing uniform learning outcomes despite varied delivery methods (Tomlinson, 2017). The research findings show that teachers actively implement process differentiation (method variation) and effectively utilize interactive media. However, this partial differentiation, which focuses solely on the process, is insufficient to address the diversity of students aligning with Trisnani et al., who criticized the non-comprehensive implementation of differentiated learning (Trisnani et al., 2024).

To optimize this strategy, Islamic Education (PAI) teachers need to expand implementation toward content differentiation and product differentiation. Theoretically, product differentiation promotes autonomy and higher relevance, aligning with students' identity formation phase. Teachers should allow students to demonstrate their understanding of religion through diverse outputs such as videos, infographics, or podcasts. Consistent with Nurlaili et al. (2023) and Supriatna et al. (2023), this study confirms that digital media integration positively influences student engagement in PAI. However, the present findings add a critical qualification: at SMPN 1 Kadipaten, multimedia tools function primarily as content delivery mechanisms short videos and online quizzes rather than as platforms enabling diverse student products. This gap between multimedia's demonstrated potential and its actual classroom application suggests that technology adoption in PAI has reached the substitution level without progressing toward the modification or redefinition levels that genuine differentiated learning requires (Nurlaili et al., 2023; Supriatna et al., 2023).

The Holistic Assessment aspect also becomes a primary focus. Theoretically, holistic assessment within the Merdeka Curriculum (KM) refers to an evaluation that measures all domains of competence cognitive, affective, and psychomotor in a comprehensive and authentic manner, with the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) serving as the main platform for character assessment (Rusdiyanto et al., 2024). Findings at SMPN 1 Kadipaten regarding the low objectivity of P5 assessment highlight a classic issue in measuring the affective domain. The overly general observation rubric fails to capture the specific internalization of Islamic values. Afifatul Ulwiyah & Iva Inayatul Ilahiyah (2025) position P5 as an ideal instrument for fostering Islamic social values. The present study neither fully confirms nor refutes this position rather, it reveals the conditions under which this ideal fails to materialize: when rubric indicators remain generic and teachers lack operational guidance, P5 becomes a procedural formality rather than an authentic character assessment tool. The instrument's potential is real, but its realization depends on context-specific operationalization that current curriculum guidelines do not provide (Afifatul Ulwiyah & Iva Inayatul Ilahiyah, 2025).

Therefore, resolving this issue lies in the development of an assessment instrument with high content validity. Building on Jaenudin et al.'s (2023) framework for

moderation-based assessment, this study identifies a more fundamental operationalization gap: not only are *tasamuh* and *tawasuth* absent from rubric descriptors, but teachers themselves report uncertainty about what observable student behaviors would constitute evidence of these values during P5 project activities a gap that curriculum policy has yet to address (Jaenudin et al., 2023). While Fauza et al. (2024) and Ernita & Ardianto (2025) identify P5 assessment challenges primarily at the instrument design level, this study reveals that the problem extends into teacher practice (Ernita & Ardianto, 2025; Fauza et al., 2024). At SMPN 1 Kadipaten, even when rubrics exist, teachers default to subjective generalization as explicitly stated by PAI Teacher M.Y. (Interview, November 5, 2025) because no operational behavioral descriptors are available to anchor their judgments. This finding suggests that the P5 assessment gap is not merely a design problem but a professional development problem: teachers require structured guidance on how to translate broad character indicators into observable classroom behaviors (Ernita & Ardianto, 2025; Fauza et al., 2024; Hermawan et al., 2025). Strengthening the rubric will ensure that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) truly contributes to the Pancasila Student Profile in a measurable and accountable manner.

Overall, the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMPN 1 Kadipaten demonstrates that the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum (KM) is closely linked to the alignment between classroom practices and its underlying theoretical foundations. These foundations include an in-depth understanding of student characteristics, the flexible and contextual nature of the Merdeka Curriculum, the application of appropriate learning strategies, and the use of holistic assessment. When these elements are well synchronized, PAI learning is better positioned to support not only academic achievement but also the moral and spiritual development of students.

The findings indicate that PAI teachers play a central role in ensuring this alignment through their pedagogical competence. Teachers are required to move beyond conventional, content-centered instruction toward fully differentiated and inquiry-based learning approaches that accommodate students' diverse abilities, interests, and critical thinking capacities. Such approaches enable students to actively construct knowledge, reflect on religious values, and connect Islamic teachings with real-life contexts, thereby strengthening both cognitive understanding and character formation.

From an institutional perspective, the implementation of KM in PAI also demands supportive school policies. In particular, schools need to develop and adopt Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) assessment rubrics that are clearly aligned with Islamic values. Authentic and value-based assessment instruments are essential to accurately measure affective and psychomotor outcomes, ensuring that PAI assessment reflects the internalization and practice of Islamic values as an integral part of holistic student development.

Table 2. Analytical Synthesis of Empirical Findings Against Theoretical Frameworks

Implementation Domain	Synthesized Theoretical Reference	Result-Based Implications for PAI in Merdeka Curriculum
Adolescent Cognitive & Identity Alignment	Piaget's Formal Operations & Erikson's Identity Framework (Ibda, 2015; McLeod, 2025; Rismen et al., 2020)	Adolescent learners demand dialogic, case-study driven environments to build autonomous religious identity. One-way textual compliance triggers classroom disengagement
Contextual Curriculum & Module Translation	Autonomy and Thematic Integration Policies (Amin et al., 2025; Astuti & Suastra, 2024)	Success depends on shifting foundational elements (Qur'an-Hadith) from passive rote-memorization to analytical processing of contemporary ethical challenges and moderation issues.
Classroom Differentiation Execution	Three-Dimensional Differentiated Instruction Model (Kasih et al., 2025; Tomlinson, 2017)	Multi-method processes are insufficient if content and product pathways remain uniform. Multimedia tools must serve as avenues for diverse student products (podcasts, infographics).
Authentic Value Assessment	Tri-Domain Integrated Holistic Assessment (Afifatul Ulwiyah & Iva Inayatul Ilahiyah, 2025; Rusdiyanto et al., 2024)	General rubric architectures obscure spiritual growth tracking. Rubrics require specific behavioral descriptors to capture value internalisation (<i>tasamuh, tawasuth</i>) objectively.

Description: PAI learning within the Merdeka Curriculum needs to begin with a deep understanding of the characteristics of adolescent learners. At this stage, students tend to demonstrate critical, reflective, and exploratory thinking patterns, which require learning approaches that go beyond one-way instruction. Therefore, PAI teachers are expected to recognize students' cognitive, emotional, and social development in order to design learning experiences that are meaningful, dialogical, and responsive to learners' needs (Firmando et al., 2024; Hamid et al., 2025; Muhammadiyah et al., 2022; Ru'iyah et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the flexible nature of the Merdeka Curriculum provides opportunities for contextual and relevant PAI learning (Firdaus & Suwendi, 2025). This flexibility allows teachers to connect Islamic teachings with students' real-life experiences and contemporary social contexts. By integrating PAI content into projects, discussions, and contextual activities, learning becomes more relevant and supports the development of students' moral reasoning and religious awareness in line with the Pancasila Student Profile.

In addition, effective PAI learning requires the implementation of fully differentiated learning strategies and holistic assessment practices. Differentiated instruction enables teachers to accommodate diverse learning abilities, interests, and learning styles. Meanwhile, authentic and Islamic value-based assessments are essential to measure not only cognitive achievement but also affective and psychomotor dimensions, ensuring that PAI learning truly reflects the internalization and practice of Islamic values in students' daily lives

IV. Conclusion

"This study demonstrates that the Merdeka Curriculum's promise of pedagogical flexibility remains structurally unfulfilled in PAI classrooms when not accompanied by differentiated instructional designs, operationalized assessment rubrics, and PAI-specific professional development support. While the integration of Islamic teachings with local wisdom and project-based learning through P5 has shown potential in fostering student engagement and character development, three persistent implementation gaps undermine the full realization of this potential: the theoretical-normative stagnation of Qur'an-Hadith instruction, the confinement of differentiated learning to process-level variation, and the value-ambiguity of existing P5 assessment instruments.

Based on these findings, this study proposes three specific recommendations for effective PAI implementation within the Merdeka Curriculum. First, PAI teaching modules for Qur'an-Hadith instruction should be redesigned to incorporate contemporary case studies and ethical dilemmas, positioning scriptural sources as foundations for critical reasoning rather than objects of memorization. Second, teacher professional development programs should prioritize content and product differentiation, moving beyond the process-level variation that currently dominates PAI classrooms and enabling students to demonstrate religious understanding through diverse outputs such as videos, infographics, or podcasts. Third, the Ministry of Education and schools should collaboratively develop PAI-specific P5 rubrics containing observable behavioral descriptors for *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawasuth* (moderation), and *ta'awun* (mutual cooperation), ensuring that character assessment is operationalized rather than left to subjective teacher.

Furthermore, the empirical scope of this inquiry carries inherent architectural boundaries that necessitate critical acknowledgment to guide future scholarly evaluations. As a single-site case study limited to a highly bounded participant sample of two core PAI instructors and five students at SMPN 1 Kadipaten, the empirical insights yielded regarding instructional frictions and localized curriculum adaptations cannot be broadly generalized, thus presenting distinct limitations in terms of universal transferability and contextual depth. To transcend these descriptive limitations, future research trajectories should naturally advance in four systematic directions: (a)

developing and empirically validating a localized, PAI-specific P5 assessment rubric containing operational behavioral descriptors; (b) conducting comparative multi-site studies across structurally diverse urban and rural secondary education contexts; (c) initiating longitudinal investigations to evaluate the long-term impact of complete three-dimensional differentiated PAI instruction on adolescent moral development; and (d) investigating the underdeveloped pedagogical dimensions of the Qur'an-Hadith component through a targeted classroom action research design. By addressing these structural pathways, subsequent scholarship can offer more scalable and generalizable strategies to resolve the ongoing operational tensions between progressive national curriculum expectations and actual Islamic classroom practices..

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