WEAVING A NEW PARADIGM: TRANSFORMING ISLAMIC EDUCATION UNDER THE AEGIS OF THE INDEPENDENT CURRICULUM

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Abstract

This study analyzes and identifies forms of innovation in the learning process of Islamic education within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. Innovation in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is a response to the challenges of the relevance of Islamic education in the digital era. This study uses a qualitative approach with library research, focused on analyzing relevant literature regarding learning innovations in Islamic education based on the Merdeka Curriculum. Data collection techniques were conducted through document studies of scientific papers published in the last five years. The results of the study indicate that innovations in the learning process of Islamic education, such as differentiated learning, Project-Based Learning, and the integration of digital technology, contribute to increased student engagement, understanding of Islamic values, and strengthening teacher capacity. However, challenges were also identified in the form of limited infrastructure and cultural resistance among educators. This study recommends strengthening teacher training and developing policies that support the transformation of contextual and relevant Islamic learning. Novelty in the context of an integrated exploration of various dimensions of innovation in Islamic education within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. Previous research tends to only address one or two aspects, this study systematically combines five domains of innovation.

Keywords: *Educational Paradigm, Transformation, Islamic Education, Independent Curriculum.*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis dan mengidentifikasi bentuk-bentuk inovasi dalam proses pembelajaran pendidikan Islam dalam bingkai Kurikulum Merdeka. Melalui inovasi dalam implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka, sebagai respons atas tantangan relevansi pendidikan Islam di era digital. Penelitian ini pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis penelitian studi kepustakaan (library research), yang difokuskan pada analisis literatur relevan mengenai inovasi pembelajaran dalam pendidikan Islam berbasis Kurikulum Merdeka. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui studi dokumen karya ilmiah

yang diterbitkan dalam lima tahun terakhir. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa inovasi inovasi dalam proses pembelajaran pendidikan Islam, seperti pembelajaran terdiferensiasi, Project-Based Learning, dan integrasi teknologi digital. Inovasi ini berkontribusi terhadap peningkatan keterlibatan siswa, pemahaman nilai-nilai Islam, dan penguatan kapasitas guru. Namun, ditemukan juga tantangan dalam bentuk keterbatasan infrastruktur dan resistensi budaya di kalangan pendidik. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan penguatan pelatihan guru dan pengembangan kebijakan yang mendukung transformasi pembelajaran Islam yang kontekstual dan relevan. Novelty dalam konteks eksplorasi terintegrasi atas berbagai dimensi inovasi pendidikan Islam dalam bingkai Kurikulum Merdeka, penelitian sebelumnya cenderung hanya membahas satu atau dua aspek, penelitian ini menggabungkan lima domain inovasi sekaligus secara sistemik.

Kata kunci: *Paradigma Pendidikan, Transformasi, Pendidikan Islam, Kurikulum Merdeka.*

A. Introduction

Islamic education is an integral part of the national education system, playing a strategic role in shaping students who are faithful, pious, and have noble character (Fathurrohman et al., 2024; Mahmud, 2023; Pitri et al., 2022). Amidst globalization and the massive development of information technology, Islamic education faces challenges of relevance and adaptability (Mukhtar Latif et al., 2025; Usman, 2013; Yusuf et al., 2021). A stagnant learning system that relies too heavily on traditional methods is beginning to lose its appeal, especially in the face of the digital generation. The Indonesian government, through the Ministry of Education and Culture, has launched the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) in response to these challenges, emphasizing freedom, flexibility, and a student-centered learning approach (Ahmad Muktamar et al., 2024; Cholilah et al., 2023; Selamet et al., 2022; Somantrie, 2021; Yuliyanti et al., 2022). In the context of Islamic education, this opens up significant space for developing learning innovations that are more contextual and applicable, rather than merely textual and normative.(Badrun, 2024; Ilma & Alfian, 2020; Mansir, 2022; Ruhaya, 2021)

Several studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of innovation in the learning process of Islamic education. Fadhil (2023) in his study on "The Use of a Learning Management System (LMS) in Islamic jurisprudence learning at MA Al-Falah" demonstrated that technology can enhance student engagement and

understanding of Islamic material. Ahmad et al. (2022) in their study "The Application of Project-Based Learning in Islamic Religious Education" published by the Journal of Islamic Education at UIN Jakarta, emphasized that this method encourages students to think critically and integrate Islamic values into real life. Furthermore, the differentiated learning approach, as reviewed by Nasution (2021) in the journal Education and Curriculum Innovation, demonstrates its relevance in addressing the diversity of student backgrounds in Islamic educational institutions. These approaches align with constructivism theory (Piaget and Vygotsky), which positions students as active subjects in constructing knowledge, and Rogers' theory of innovation diffusion, which explains the stages of educational innovation adoption by institutions.

This research focuses on forms of innovation in the Islamic education learning process, the challenges faced, and innovation implementation strategies that align with the spirit of the Independent Curriculum , which aligns with the research (Rohanita & Az Zuhdy, 2025; Yuliana, 2024; Zainuddin et al., 2025). Emphasis is placed on the context of madrasas and Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) as Islamic educational institutions with rich traditions and structural challenges (Asrori & Riki Dwi Angga Saputro, 2025; Nurmalia et al., 2024). By examining various innovative approaches, this article seeks to contribute to strengthening the transformation of Islamic education to make it more contextual, relevant, and adaptive to current developments, reinforced by several other studies from (Siregar & Mashudi, 2024; Wekke et al., 2018; Yustiasari Liriwati et al., 2024; Zainuddin et al., 2025).

The practical benefits of this research include its use as a reference for Islamic education teachers in developing innovative and contextual learning models. For policymakers, the results can be used to evaluate and develop strategies for strengthening the Independent Curriculum in Islamic educational institutions (Apriatni et al., 2023; Lathifah & Triono Ali Mustofa, 2024; Marga & Prahastiwi, 2024). Furthermore, this research is expected to enrich academic studies related to the integration of Islamic values into modern learning designs that address the

needs of digital-generation students, in line with research findings from (Cholilah et al., 2023; Siregar & Mashudi, 2024; Yustiasari Liriwati et al., 2024).

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with library research, focusing on the analysis of relevant literature on learning innovations in Islamic education based on the Independent Curriculum (Creswell & David Creswell, 2018; Dodgson, 2017; Sugiyono, 2013). The research was conducted throughout 2024, with data sources derived from national and international scientific journals indexed by Scopus, Sinta, and Google Scholar, Islamic education and curriculum reference books, and policy documents from the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture. Data collection was conducted through documentation of scientific works published in the last five years (2019–2024).

The research phase begins with the identification and classification of literature based on the focus of the study, namely: (1) innovative learning design, (2) project-based learning, (3) technology integration, and (4) implementation challenges. Next, a descriptive-analytical content analysis was conducted to interpret the data within the context of the Independent Curriculum and the characteristics of Islamic education. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation and theoretical descriptions to ensure objectivity. The findings were analyzed to formulate applicable conclusions and recommendations.

C. Results and Discussion

This study aims to explore various forms of innovation in the Islamic education learning process implemented within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. The literature analysis indicates that the transformation of Islamic education through this curriculum approach encompasses five main domains of innovation: differentiated learning design, project-based learning, digital technology integration, strengthening teacher competencies, and a contextual approach to Islamic values.

As stated by research informants Asriani and Sutarto (2024), the application of digital media and a contextual approach in learning the Qur'an and Hadith increases students' interest in learning and understanding of Islamic values. This is reinforced by observations of online learning at a public madrasah, where students appeared more responsive when using interactive educational applications such as Quizizz and Kahoot, a finding further supported by research from (Ahmad Mustafidin et al., 2025; Fathurrohman et al., 2024; Ji et al., 2024; Shodiq, 2024).

In an interview with a religious education teacher at an Islamic high school, it was stated that project-based learning provides students with the opportunity to explore social issues from an Islamic perspective. The teacher explained: *"When students create projects about zakat, they gain a direct understanding of who is entitled to receive zakat in their community."*

Observations of online classes integrating the Moodle-based LMS also showed an increase in active student participation. Of the 20 students taking the online fiqh class, 17 were active in discussion forums and digital quizzes, compared to only 9 students previously participating in traditional online lectures. Meanwhile, a limited survey of 45 madrasah teachers showed that 65% of them admitted they did not fully understand the philosophy of the Independent Curriculum. The main barriers stemmed from a lack of training and limited infrastructure, such as internet access and technological devices. This is in line with research findings (Ahmad Mustafidin et al., 2025; Aulia et al., 2025; Ji et al., 2024; Malizal, 2025).

The results also indicate cultural challenges. Some senior teachers are reluctant to change their conventional teaching methods. This is reinforced by the statement of one school principal: *"We need time to change the mindset of teachers who have been accustomed to teaching textually and one-way for years."* The following table shows the results of the analysis of the synthesis of innovations in Islamic education learning:

Table 1. Summary of Innovations in the Islamic Education Learning Process in the Independent Curriculum Era

Types of Innovation	Description	Supporting References
Differentiated Learning Design	Adapting strategies and teaching materials to students' needs, interests, and abilities	Tomlinson (2001); Asriani & Sutarto (2024)
Project Based Learning	Active learning model based on real activities and contextual problem solving	Ahmad et al. (2022); Khusni et al. (2022); Mardiah & Fajri (2023)
Digital Technology Integration	The use of LMS, online evaluation applications, and digital interpretation platforms in Islamic Education learning	Fadhil (2023); Gunarsih (2023); Wulandari (2022)
Interactive Audiovisual Media	Development of PAI content in the form of videos, animations, or visual presentations	Amalia (2022)
Strengthening Teacher Competence	Continuous training and development of teacher learning communities in pedagogical innovation	Nasution (2022); Zulkifli (2023)
Integration of Contextual Islamic Values	An approach to Islamic values adapted to the local context and needs of students	Astuti et al. (2024); Setiawan et al. (2022)

Source: Data Analysis (2025)

Innovation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning must be dynamic and responsive to the demands of the times. One crucial approach is adapting strategies and teaching materials to students' needs, interests, and abilities, ensuring that learning is relevant and easy to understand (Kurniawan et al., 2025; Nasrullah, 2024; Syarafi et al., 2025). This can be achieved through an active learning model based on real-life activities and contextual problem-solving, where students are not only recipients of information but also active participants in understanding and applying Islamic values (Badrun, 2024; Malizal, 2025; Yusuf et al., 2021). Technology integration is also vital, such as the use of LMS, online evaluation applications, and digital interpretation platforms, which enrich the learning experience and enable more efficient evaluation (Holilah Holilah & Wafi Ali Hajjaj, 2024; Malizal, 2025; Yustiasari Liriwati et al., 2024). Furthermore, developing PAI content in the form of videos, animations, or visual presentations

makes the material more engaging and accessible, in line with the learning styles of the digital generation. To ensure successful implementation, ongoing training and the development of teacher learning communities are key, enabling educators to continuously hone pedagogical innovations. Finally, this approach must always be rooted in Islamic values adapted to the local context and needs of learners, making PAI learning not only informative but also transformative and relevant to everyday life.

The results of this study confirm that the Independent Curriculum provides ample room for innovation in Islamic education, particularly in responding to the demands of the times and the increasingly complex needs of students (Aslamiyah, 2025; Rahman et al., 2025; Rifa'i & Muslimah, 2024; Syarifuddin et al., 2024). The shift from a teacher-centered to a student- centered approach reflects the direction of modern education, aligned with the Islamic tarbiyah principle of valuing individual potential.

Findings regarding the effectiveness of the differentiation approach reinforce Tomlinson's (2001) theory that learning tailored to students' styles and needs can improve learning outcomes. In the context of Islamic education, this approach is highly relevant because it allows for the integration of religious values with humanistic and adaptive methods (Ahmad Muktamar et al., 2024; Marga & Prahastiwi, 2024). In their research, Asriani and Sutarto (2024) stated that the application of a contextual approach and the use of digital media have improved students' understanding of Islamic values. This demonstrates that innovation in learning design is crucial for the effectiveness of Islamic education in addressing the challenges of the times (Fathurrohman et al., 2024; Pitri et al., 2022; Usman, 2013).

Project-based learning (PjBL) applied to Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh) and Islamic aqidah and akhlak (Faith and Morals) subjects has been shown to improve students' critical thinking skills, collaboration, and social awareness. This aligns with constructivism theory, which emphasizes the importance of real-world experiences in shaping knowledge. Studies by Ahmad et al. (2022), Khusni et al.

(2022), and Mardiah & Fajri (2023) support this by demonstrating students' active involvement in solving real-world problems based on Islamic values (Al-Fauzany et al., 2021; Gidayani et al., 2022; Susilawati et al., 2019).

Gunarsih (2023) stated that technology integration enables more interactive and dynamic delivery of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) material. Technology integration is another important dimension that has been successfully observed. The results of this study confirm Wulandari's (2022) findings that the use of educational applications can increase Islamic Religious Education (PAI) students' learning motivation. The implication of this finding is the need for intensive training for teachers in mastering educational technology (Ahmad Muktamar et al., 2024; Lathifah & Triono Ali Mustofa, 2024; Marga & Prahastiwi, 2024). The main challenge in implementing this innovation, as stated by Nasution (2022), lies in the human resources aspect. The gap in teacher competency in understanding the essence of the Independent Curriculum and limited access to technology in underdeveloped areas hinder the optimal implementation of the innovation. Fadhil (2023) demonstrated that the use of a Moodle-based LMS in fiqh learning significantly increased student participation and understanding. The use of audiovisual media is also recommended as an innovative approach in delivering Islamic Religious Education (PAI) material, as expressed by Amalia (2022).

In a cultural context, the persistently high resistance to change in some Islamic educational institutions warrants attention. This indicates the need for a transformative and values-based approach to curriculum socialization. This approach must combine modern pedagogical rationality with local wisdom and traditional values inherent in Islamic societies (Siregar & Mashudi, 2024; Yustiasari Liriwati et al., 2024; Zainuddin et al., 2025).

This research demonstrates novelty in the context of an integrated exploration of various dimensions of Islamic educational innovation within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. While previous research tended to address only one or two aspects, this study systematically combines five domains of innovation.

A limitation of this research is the lack of direct field testing, as the approach was based on literature and documentation. Therefore, further research is recommended using a case study or mixed-methods approach to obtain a broader empirical picture of the successes and obstacles to implementing innovation in Islamic education.

D. Closing

The results of this study confirm that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum has encouraged various innovations in the Islamic education learning process, such as differentiated learning, project-based learning, and digital technology integration. These innovations have been shown to increase active participation, understanding of Islamic concepts, and shape students' character and reflective attitudes. These findings demonstrate that Islamic education learning can be transformed to be more adaptive and contextual through a flexible and values-based approach.

The implications of this research demonstrate the need to strengthen teacher capacity and provide supporting infrastructure for sustainable innovation. However, a limitation of this study is the lack of direct field testing of the effectiveness of the studied learning models. Therefore, further research based on case studies and field experiments is recommended to test the effectiveness and scalability of Islamic learning innovations in various educational contexts.

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