

## THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION LEARNING AT SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Mansur<sup>1</sup>, Andi Najamuddin<sup>2</sup>, Alias<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> Institut Agama Islam As'adiyah Sengkang, Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Education learning at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan, Nunukan District, North Kalimantan Province. The objectives of the research are: 1) to understand how Islamic Education teachers implement the Merdeka Curriculum at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan, 2) to identify the challenges faced by teachers in implementing Islamic Education through the Merdeka Curriculum, and 3) to explore the solutions provided by teachers in overcoming these challenges. This research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach with the research location at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan, Nunukan District. Data collection was carried out through observation, interviews, and documentation, with respondents including the school principal, curriculum supervisor, Islamic Education teachers, and students. Research instruments used include the researcher, observation guidelines, interview guidelines, and documentation. Data were analyzed using steps such as data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and concluded with data verification. The results show that the implementation of Islamic Education learning at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan has not yet been optimal in applying the Merdeka Curriculum. This is evident from the teachers' readiness, as they feel that the curriculum still requires adjustments and processes. The teaching methods continue to follow the previous curriculum patterns, and there are difficulties in preparing teaching materials. Additionally, limitations in the availability and utilization of facilities and infrastructure also pose challenges. However, Islamic Education teachers strive to optimize learning by adapting quickly, developing competencies, enhancing creativity, and utilizing technology for more effective teaching. Collaboration with colleagues and support from various parties are crucial solutions for teachers in implementing Islamic Education through the Merdeka Curriculum.

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### Corresponding Author:

Mansur,  
Institut Agama Islam As'adiyah Sengkang, Indonesia  
Email: [mansur@iaiasadiyah.ac.id](mailto:mansur@iaiasadiyah.ac.id)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Curriculum is a fundamental component of education, serving as a crucial framework for achieving the vision, mission, and objectives of a school. It plays a central role in shaping educational outcomes, guiding both teachers and students toward achieving learning goals. Therefore, it is essential for the curriculum to be continually refined to stay relevant to the evolving demands of the modern world. Over time, the rapid advancements in technology and the increasing complexity of societal challenges have made it clear that a static

curriculum can no longer meet the diverse needs of students. The educational landscape must continuously adapt to ensure that students are well-equipped to face the challenges of the future (Santika et al., 2022).

One such adaptation became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in significant transformations within the education sector. As the virus spread across the nation, education systems were forced to transition to remote learning, leading to a unique situation that impacted the pace and depth of students' learning experiences. Schools were faced with the challenge of maintaining continuity in education while adhering to safety protocols. Teachers and students struggled with the limitations of online learning platforms, and many students experienced setbacks in terms of competency development. The pressure to complete a large volume of lessons within a limited time frame compounded these difficulties, leading to feelings of frustration among both educators and learners (Gunawan & Asep, 2021).

In light of these challenges, the Ministry of Education and Culture introduced the "Merdeka Belajar" (Freedom to Learn) policy. This policy was designed to facilitate the recovery of education and support the implementation of a new curriculum that would enable greater flexibility and adaptability in teaching and learning. The Merdeka Curriculum was officially introduced through the issuance of Ministerial Regulation No. 56 of 2022, which served as a legal framework for its adoption across educational institutions (Hana & Kasim Yahiji, 2023). This regulation provided clear guidelines for the development and implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, emphasizing a shift toward a more student-centered and flexible approach to learning.

The core concept behind Merdeka Belajar is to place individual freedom at the center of the educational process. It recognizes that each student is unique, with distinct talents, interests, and learning needs. As such, the curriculum encourages students to explore their individual potential and design their learning paths in a way that best suits their abilities and aspirations. This concept aligns with the Islamic perspective of human potential, as described in the Quran. Surah Al-Isra/14:84 reminds us, *"Say, 'Each does according to his manner, but your Lord is most knowing of who is best guided in way.'"* This verse underscores the importance of self-awareness and personal growth, urging individuals to use their God-given talents and abilities to contribute positively to society (Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia, 2003).

The role of teachers is crucial in the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers are not only responsible for delivering content but also for fostering a learning environment that encourages creativity, critical thinking, and self-discovery. They must be prepared to design effective lesson plans, integrate technology into their teaching, and adapt their approaches to meet the diverse needs of their students. Without a solid understanding of the curriculum and effective teaching strategies, teachers will struggle to create meaningful learning experiences. The Merdeka Curriculum provides a platform for teachers to innovate and engage students in ways that are more aligned with the needs of the modern world, supporting the development of a Pancasila Student Profile that reflects the values of Indonesia's national ideology (Kemendikbud dan Ristek, 2022).

However, despite the promising potential of the Merdeka Curriculum, its implementation has not been without challenges. Teachers, particularly those teaching Islamic Education (PAI), face several obstacles in adapting to the new curriculum. These challenges include a lack of understanding of the curriculum's principles, insufficient professional development opportunities, and difficulties in integrating new teaching methods and technologies into the classroom. For instance, teachers at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan, a school in Nunukan District, Kalimantan Utara, have encountered various obstacles while implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in the context of Islamic Education.

These challenges include student passivity, limited resources, and the persistence of traditional teaching methods such as lectures, which are not well-suited to the interactive, student-centered approach advocated by the new curriculum. Furthermore, despite attending various training sessions, many teachers still struggle to fully grasp the concepts and techniques required to effectively teach in line with the Merdeka Curriculum (Diah & Andriyani, 2024).

Given these challenges, it is essential to explore the practical aspects of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in the context of Islamic Education. This research seeks to investigate the experiences of teachers at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan in implementing the curriculum and to identify the obstacles they face. Specifically, the study aims to answer three key research questions: How is the implementation of Islamic Education learning through the Merdeka Curriculum being carried out at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan? What challenges do teachers face in implementing this curriculum? And, what solutions have teachers proposed to address these challenges and improve the learning process?

By addressing these questions, this study will provide valuable insights into the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Education, contributing to the broader discourse on curriculum development and teacher professionalization in Indonesia.

## **2. METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative research approach to produce comprehensive and reliable findings. The qualitative approach is selected due to its ability to generate detailed and rich descriptive data, which can be analyzed and interpreted in depth and accuracy. Qualitative research is well-suited for exploring phenomena through words, either spoken or written, derived from the participants involved in the study, as well as those observed in the field (Bungin, 2007). The study adopts a phenomenological research design to explore and reveal the meaning and experiences of individuals related to a specific concept or phenomenon. Phenomenology focuses on understanding the lived experiences of individuals and how they perceive and interpret certain phenomena, based on their own consciousness and perspective (Rahmat, 2009). This research is conducted in a natural context, allowing for an open-ended interpretation of the events under study. The phenomenological approach allows the researcher to gain a deep understanding and to describe the reality experienced by the research subjects through relevant theories and concepts. In this case, the study seeks to explore how the readiness of Islamic Education teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in their teaching practices at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan, located in the South Nunukan district, North Kalimantan Province, influences the learning environment.

The research site chosen for this study is SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan, located on Jl. Selisun, Kelurahan Selisun, Kec. Nunukan Selatan, Kabupaten Nunukan, Propinsi Kalimantan Utara, and led by Dra. Mahria, M.Pd., the principal. This location is selected not only because it is easily accessible but also because the school began implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in the 2023-2024 academic year and is recognized as an Adiwiyata school, making it an ideal site for the research (Rahmadi, 2011).

In terms of the research approach, this study utilizes both psychological and pedagogical perspectives. The psychological approach examines human behavior, which is influenced by their beliefs, to understand the characteristics of both students and educators in using various teaching strategies to implement the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Education (PAI) subjects. The pedagogical approach focuses on the strategies and methods employed by teachers to guide students in achieving learning objectives. This approach is crucial for understanding the extent of teachers' readiness in implementing the Merdeka

Curriculum, including aspects such as planning, implementation, and assessment in the context of PAI (Saleh, 2017).

Data sources for this study are categorized into primary and secondary data. Primary data refers to field data collected directly from informants, including the school principal, vice principal for curriculum, PAI teachers, students, and through observation of the school's Merdeka Curriculum implementation (Moleong, 2018). Secondary data includes information obtained from existing records, such as the school's curriculum documents, teacher and student data, and facilities (Sugiyono, 2011).

Data collection techniques include observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation involves the systematic and purposeful collection of data through direct observation, including participant observation, where the researcher actively engages with the subject (Margono, 2019). Interviews, both structured and semi-structured, allow for in-depth exploration of the subjects' experiences (Rachmawati, 2007). Documentation involves gathering relevant written materials, such as curriculum documents, school profiles, and reports, which provide supporting evidence for the research (Rahmadi, 2011).

For data analysis, this study uses a descriptive approach to organize and interpret the data. Descriptive analysis allows for a detailed understanding of the characteristics and patterns within the data collected. The analysis follows the steps outlined by Miles and Huberman, including data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions (Harahap, 2021). Triangulation is also used to validate the data by comparing information from different sources or methods, such as interviews, observations, and documentation, ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the findings (Saleh, 2017).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Results

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##### *a. Implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Learning through the Merdeka Curriculum at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan*

The research on the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) through the Merdeka Curriculum at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan, Nunukan District, North Kalimantan Province, investigates three main areas: the implementation of the curriculum in PAI, the challenges faced, and effective solutions. The Merdeka Curriculum, adopted for grades X and XI, is designed to encourage flexible and student-centered learning, providing opportunities for teachers to integrate various teaching methods such as discovery learning, cooperative learning, project-based learning, and problem-based learning. The school aims to balance the 2013 Curriculum for grade XII and the Merdeka Curriculum for grades X and XI.

##### 1) Preparation and Planning for PAI Teachers:

PAI teachers at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan undergo training to understand the Merdeka Curriculum. Although the school has conducted in-house training (IHT), it is noted that this training is insufficient for a complete understanding of the curriculum, as there has been no external training from government or educational institutions. Despite this, teachers, such as Ibu Kuna'ah, emphasize the importance of the principal's guidance to ensure the curriculum is followed. The school also emphasizes the need to prepare teaching materials like teaching modules, which are vital for delivering the curriculum effectively.

## 2) Implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) through the Merdeka Curriculum:

PAI teachers have made significant efforts to create engaging and dynamic learning experiences. They use various methods to present the content of the Qur'an, Hadith, Aqidah, Akhlak, Fiqh, and the History of Islamic Civilization, integrating real-life examples and moral stories. The teachers incorporate both traditional lecture methods and newer approaches such as discovery learning and problem-based learning. However, there is still reliance on textbooks and lecture-based teaching, as noted by PAI teacher Sumiyati Kaso.

Teachers begin lessons by reciting the Qur'an together, an activity which includes assessments and motivates students. This approach is reinforced with structured opening activities that connect new material to prior knowledge and encourage active participation.

## 3) Assessment of PAI through the Merdeka Curriculum:

The assessment system under the Merdeka Curriculum incorporates both formative and summative assessments. Formative assessments include tasks, homework, daily quizzes, and practical exams to measure students' progress. Summative assessments include the Semester End Assessment (PAS), the Year-End Assessment (PAT), and the Final School Exam (UAS). Teachers use both individual and group-based assessments, with written tests and quizzes being the most common methods for formative assessments.

Despite some challenges, such as reliance on traditional teaching methods and limited access to technology, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has shown promise, increasing student enthusiasm and engagement. However, the study suggests that further development of teaching methods and media is necessary to prevent student disengagement and enhance the learning experience in PAI.

In conclusion, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan shows progress in encouraging flexibility in teaching and learning. However, efforts to enhance teacher training, expand access to technology, and diversify teaching methods will be essential to achieving the curriculum's goals of student-centered, critical, and problem-solving learning.

### *b. Challenges Faced by Teachers in Implementing PAI (Islamic Education) Learning through the Merdeka Curriculum at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan, Nunukan Regency*

Through a series of research activities, including in-depth interviews with the school principal, vice principal for curriculum, Islamic Education (PAI) teachers, students, as well as direct observations of the learning process and collection of related documents, the researcher identified several challenges faced by PAI teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan, Nunukan Regency. One of the primary challenges revealed was the lack of comprehensive understanding among PAI teachers regarding the concepts, goals, and mechanisms of the Merdeka Curriculum, as well as inadequate supporting infrastructure.

The latest changes to the PAI curriculum involve fundamental transformations in the learning process. These changes affect the approach, strategies, and evaluation methods, presenting a new paradigm that differs significantly from its predecessor. Therefore, PAI teachers must equip themselves with a comprehensive understanding of these changes so they can design and implement more innovative teaching activities that align with the current curriculum demands.

An interview with the vice principal for curriculum, Suparmuji, highlighted that the Merdeka Curriculum, as an evolution of the 2013 Curriculum, brings a significantly different approach to learning. However, educators, such as PAI teachers at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan, have become accustomed to the structure and teaching methods set out by the 2013

Curriculum. The transition to the Merdeka Curriculum requires additional time and effort, particularly in changing the deeply ingrained teaching habits.

Observations made by the researcher indicated that students desired more interactive and varied teaching methods. PAI teachers also pointed out the implementation challenges of these methods. They acknowledged that their experience with the 2013 Curriculum still heavily influences their current teaching practices. Consequently, an interview with Sumiyati Kaso revealed that she has yet to fully optimize the application of the Merdeka Curriculum and that a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of its concepts, principles, and the use of methods and media in teaching is required. In addition, there was an issue with limited technology mastery, and the available infrastructure, such as LCD projectors, was inadequate.

In terms of assessment mindset, PAI subjects, as emphasized by Kuna'ah, tended to focus on memorization and written tests. While there have been efforts to implement more varied assessments, the habit of giving written tests remains dominant. This shows that changing the assessment paradigm for PAI to be more diverse and innovative is not an easy task. Kuna'ah said: "Islamic Education learning in the Merdeka Curriculum era has undergone a significant transformation. One of the main changes is the implementation of differentiated learning, considering the learning environment context in the classroom. As a result, PAI learning is no longer uniform but is designed to meet the needs and interests of students within their unique learning environment."

The most notable difference between the previous curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum is the approach to differentiated learning. This approach allows each student to learn according to their unique abilities, interests, and learning styles. The Merdeka Curriculum facilitates differentiated learning to ensure that each student can achieve learning objectives optimally. In practice, teachers need to conduct initial assessments to identify the needs and interests of each student. However, in subjects such as Islamic Education, which often involves practical worship activities, challenges arise when students have learning styles that do not align with the practical activities. Teachers must find ways to accommodate the diverse needs of students in the context of worship practice learning.

The implementation of differentiated learning at the beginning requires extra effort from teachers to adapt. This is because each student has unique and diverse learning styles. Nevertheless, once teachers manage to identify the learning styles of each student, the learning process becomes more directed and effective. For example, when assigning projects, teachers can adjust the tasks based on students' interests. Students who prefer to speak can be assigned to give presentations in front of the class, while visual learners can create posters or videos.

The success of the Merdeka Curriculum depends greatly on the selection and adaptation of the appropriate teaching tools. These tools serve as guides for teachers to design effective and engaging learning activities. The Merdeka Curriculum provides simpler and more flexible teaching tools, yet teachers have the freedom to adapt them to suit the unique characteristics of each student and the learning context at school. The government has provided examples of teaching tools that can be used as references, but teachers are encouraged to use them as-is or to be creative and develop them according to the needs and potential of their respective schools.

Sumiyati Kaso, a PAI teacher, shared her perspective on the Merdeka Curriculum implementation. She acknowledged that the provided teaching tools are indeed more practical, but the process of creating customized teaching modules for the Merdeka Curriculum takes considerable time. This suggests that while the Merdeka Curriculum aims to offer flexibility to teachers, it also demands an improvement in teachers' competence in designing effective lessons. Additionally, ready-made teaching tools (either from the

government or online sources) are directly implemented by teachers. This is due to the lack of a deeper understanding of the learning concepts within the Merdeka Curriculum, making the modification of teaching tools more difficult and time-consuming.

Imran, an 11th-grade student (XI.M.2), commented on the teaching style of Sumiyati. He expressed that while she is a fun and relaxed teacher, he felt a bit bored because the learning was often done through lectures, with a lot of writing and explanation of the material. Furthermore, media tools such as laptops and LCD projectors were never used in the classroom, possibly because of Sumiyati's limited understanding of how to use these media in teaching. Occasionally, Sumiyati also asked students to search for material using their mobile phones.

Based on an interview with Ibu Hj. Kuna'ah, S.Pd.I, she noted that one of the challenges faced by the team is the lack of capacity in designing student-centered learning processes. The team still requires further assistance in formulating Learning Objectives (TP) and structuring the Learning Objectives Pathway (ATP) that align with the Learning Outcomes (CP).

Similarly, the vice principal for curriculum, Suparmuji S.Pd., stated: "Indeed, many teachers still rely on the internet or other PAI teachers outside of SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan without modifying teaching tools themselves. Although the school has provided support for Merdeka Curriculum implementation to help teachers deepen their understanding of the curriculum, this issue is due to the uneven competencies of teachers at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan and the lack of understanding of how to develop Learning Objectives (TP) from Learning Outcomes (CP)."

*c. Solutions Implemented by Teachers in Implementing Islamic Education Learning through the Merdeka Curriculum at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan, Nunukan Regency*

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the subject of Islamic Education (PAI) presents various challenges for teachers. Following the identification of the obstacles encountered during the learning process, it is essential to propose concrete solutions to overcome these issues and ensure the successful execution of the curriculum.

*1) Adapting to the Merdeka Curriculum*

The transition to the Merdeka Curriculum is a dynamic process that requires careful adjustment. Teachers, as the facilitators of learning, must be given adequate time to adapt to the changes in teaching methodology and the shift towards a more student-centered learning environment. According to Kuna'ah, a senior PAI teacher at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan:

"I often feel the need to consciously change my teaching habits that have been ingrained over the years. For instance, I need to reduce the amount of lecturing and engage students more in discussions and problem-solving activities. The adaptation process is certainly challenging, but with support from the learning community and relevant training, I feel more confident in facing these new challenges."

The shift towards a more interactive and participatory teaching style marks a significant change in how Islamic Education is delivered. The traditional lecture method, which can often make lessons feel monotonous, has been replaced with methods that encourage greater student involvement, such as discussions and problem-solving activities. This shift allows students to interact with the content and each other, fostering deeper understanding and critical thinking.

*2) Creative Approaches to Differentiated Learning*

The success of differentiated learning depends heavily on the creativity of the teacher. As stated by Sumiyati Kaso, another PAI teacher from the same school:

"The success of differentiated learning greatly depends on the creativity of the teacher. The initial phase of implementing differentiated learning is indeed full of

challenges, but with adequate creativity, teachers can create a more engaging and effective learning environment to meet the diverse needs of students."

In response to the challenge of grouping students based on diagnostic results, Kuna'ah decided to implement an inquiry-based learning method. This approach encourages students to engage in discussions, practice, and draw conclusions independently, allowing teachers to observe and assess their understanding and abilities directly.

### 3) Overcoming Challenges in Preparing Teaching Materials

Another challenge identified by Kuna'ah was the difficulty in preparing appropriate teaching materials. However, she emphasized the importance of self-improvement and collaboration in overcoming this issue:

"I often encounter difficulties in preparing suitable teaching tools. To address this, I actively work on improving my competencies through self-directed learning, utilizing the Merdeka Belajar Platform (PMM), coordinating with fellow teachers, and sharing information about effective teaching practices. Through collaboration with colleagues, I receive valuable input and support in fulfilling my role as an educator."

This collaboration with fellow teachers not only provides moral support but also offers practical advice on how to improve teaching materials and methods. Such efforts are vital in ensuring the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum.

### 4) Utilizing Technology to Overcome Infrastructure Limitations

In addition to addressing the challenges in teaching practices, the teachers at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan have also utilized technology to overcome infrastructure limitations in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Ismail Subu, another PAI teacher, has made use of the Learning Management System (LMS) to facilitate learning.

"LMS is a system designed to manage learning activities such as teaching materials, educational videos, student worksheets (LKPD), and assessments. With LMS, activities can be accessed anytime and from anywhere, overcoming barriers related to time and space. LMS also provides a solution for students who are unable to attend learning activities due to certain circumstances such as illness or important family matters. Moreover, record-keeping becomes more organized with the use of student worksheets and digital assessments for learning activities," Subu explained.

By integrating LMS, teachers have been able to make learning more flexible, ensuring that students can continue to access educational resources even when they are unable to attend in person. This digital approach has been particularly useful in overcoming challenges related to time and physical resources.

### 5) Leveraging Local Resources for Learning

Despite the limited infrastructure, teachers have also been creative in utilizing the school's surrounding environment as a rich learning resource. Local places such as mosques and community spaces have been incorporated into lessons, making the learning experience more meaningful and contextually relevant. Additionally, project-based learning, group discussions, and case studies have become effective methods to engage students actively.

By involving students in collaborative activities and integrating community support, teachers have been able to mitigate the limitations imposed by physical infrastructure. This approach ensures that PAI lessons remain effective, engaging, and relevant to students' lives.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Education at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan showcases the resilience and creativity of teachers in overcoming various challenges. Through innovation in teaching methods, collaboration with peers, and the effective use of technology and local resources, teachers have successfully navigated the complexities of the curriculum transition. These efforts underscore the importance of teacher



adaptability and creativity in fostering an enriching and effective learning environment for students.

### **3.2. Discussion**

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan brings forward a mix of successes, challenges, and solutions that can be analyzed through several theoretical frameworks in education. This discussion will examine the implementation process, challenges, and proposed solutions, while linking these aspects to relevant theories and literature.

#### *Implementation of Islamic Religious Education through the Merdeka Curriculum*

The design of the Merdeka Curriculum in SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan seeks to shift towards a student-centered learning environment that emphasizes flexibility, critical thinking, and problem-solving. This is in line with the principles of constructivist theory, which stresses the importance of active learning where students build upon their existing knowledge (Piaget, 1976; Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers in this setting are encouraged to move beyond traditional lecture-based methods, embracing more innovative approaches such as discovery learning, cooperative learning, and project-based learning. These methods allow for deeper student engagement, fostering an environment conducive to active knowledge construction.

However, while teachers strive to implement these strategies, there is a noted challenge in adapting to the new curriculum and methodologies. According to Schunk (2012), teachers must align their instructional practices with students' needs, which may require substantial shifts in teaching behavior and pedagogical beliefs. At SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan, the transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum, which includes the introduction of differentiated learning, presents a significant challenge. Teachers, as noted in the study, still heavily rely on traditional assessment methods such as memorization and written tests. This reflects the cognitive learning theory, which underlines the process of acquiring information through structured teaching, but also emphasizes the limitations of rote memorization in developing deeper cognitive skills.

#### *Challenges in Implementing PAI with the Merdeka Curriculum*

One of the main challenges identified was the lack of comprehensive teacher training on the Merdeka Curriculum. This challenge can be framed within Fullan's (2007) concept of educational change, which highlights that successful curriculum implementation requires adequate professional development and support. As teachers like Sumiyati Kaso mentioned, there is insufficient training and guidance, particularly with external support, which hinders their ability to fully understand and apply the Merdeka Curriculum's principles. This lack of professional development can cause educators to revert to familiar, traditional methods despite the availability of new teaching strategies.

Moreover, the technology acceptance model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) provides insight into the technological challenges faced by teachers. Limited infrastructure and technology mastery were key issues in the school, as teachers struggled to incorporate digital tools such as LCD projectors and Learning Management Systems (LMS) into their lessons. The TAM suggests that for teachers to embrace new technologies, they must perceive them as easy to use and beneficial. The lack of technological proficiency and adequate resources in the school indicates a gap between the teachers' perceptions of these tools and the expected benefits, which ultimately impedes their integration into teaching.

Another challenge lies in differentiated learning, a cornerstone of the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers must design lessons that cater to the diverse needs of students. According to Tomlinson (2001), differentiated instruction requires teachers to modify

content, processes, and products to meet the individual needs of learners. However, the teachers at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan reported difficulties in accommodating various learning styles, especially with practical subjects like PAI, where hands-on activities, such as worship practices, might not align with every student's learning preference.

#### *Solutions to Overcome Challenges*

To address these challenges, the study reveals several adaptive strategies that align with the concept of teacher resilience as articulated by Day (2008). Teachers at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan have shown significant resilience by leveraging their creativity to overcome resource limitations and adapt their teaching methods. For example, Kuna'ah's shift to more student-centered learning methods, like discussion-based and problem-solving activities, reflects an effort to implement more engaging and flexible teaching methods in line with constructivist principles (Piaget, 1976).

Furthermore, the use of the Learning Management System (LMS) as a solution to infrastructure limitations is an example of how technology can support the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on flexibility and accessibility. This aligns with Anderson's (2008) theories on e-learning, which highlight the importance of flexible, digital learning environments that can extend beyond the classroom.

Collaborative efforts among teachers have also proven effective in overcoming challenges related to teaching material preparation. As suggested by Hargreaves (2000), collaboration among teachers not only fosters professional growth but also enhances the development of practical solutions to teaching challenges. By sharing resources and strategies, teachers at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan have been able to support each other in designing teaching materials that are better suited to the new curriculum demands.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education at SMAN 1 Nunukan Selatan presents both challenges and opportunities for improvement. The curriculum's focus on flexibility, differentiated learning, and student-centered approaches aligns with current educational theories like constructivism and differentiated instruction. However, teachers face significant obstacles, including a lack of professional development, insufficient technological resources, and challenges in adapting traditional practices to the new curriculum. By embracing solutions such as teacher collaboration, creative adaptations in teaching methods, and leveraging digital tools, teachers are working to overcome these challenges and create a more engaging and effective learning environment. As this case study shows, teacher adaptability and continuous professional development are crucial to the successful implementation of educational reforms like the Merdeka Curriculum.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMAN 1 Nunukan has already incorporated the Merdeka Curriculum into the learning process. However, its implementation has not been fully maximized due to its relatively recent adoption, which requires further adjustment and thorough preparation. Additionally, there is a need for deeper engagement with stakeholders to ensure the learning process aligns with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, ultimately enhancing the quality of Islamic Religious Education.

The challenges faced by teachers in implementing Islamic Religious Education at SMAN 1 Nunukan include a lack of understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum's concepts and mechanisms. This poses a significant obstacle. Furthermore, limited infrastructure, as well as entrenched teaching habits, hinder the transition process. Teachers tend to rely on methods from the previous curriculum (K13) and experience difficulties in implementing student-centered learning. Despite these challenges, there is a strong willingness among teachers to develop their competencies in applying the Merdeka Curriculum. Another

challenge is the teachers' lack of ability to design learning tools that cater to the characteristics of students and the specific learning context. Continuous efforts, including training and mentoring, are needed to enhance teachers' capacity to effectively implement the Merdeka Curriculum.

The challenges in implementing Islamic Religious Education (PAI) are diverse, and several solutions have been proposed for teachers to address them. Firstly, teachers need to quickly adapt to the new paradigm by shifting their teaching style to be more student-centered. This involves reducing lectures and increasing discussions and problem-solving activities, broadening their knowledge base, and trying new approaches, including using various teaching methods. In terms of developing teaching materials, teachers need to expand their competencies to enhance their understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum by participating in various internal and external training, both online and offline, to improve their ability to create learning tools that meet the curriculum's requirements. Given the limitations of resources, teacher creativity in utilizing technology, the surrounding environment, and other learning methods is key to success. Collaboration with colleagues, the use of digital platforms, and support from various parties are also crucial in overcoming challenges and ensuring the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education.

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