

Transformation of 2013 Curriculum to Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education at Vocational Schools

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Abstract. This study aims to analyze the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum (K-13) and Merdeka Curriculum in the learning process, especially in terms of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) subjects. The Merdeka Curriculum provides more space for students to explore independently, and conduct exploration activities through discussions and studying the problems they face, while K-13 tends to be more rigid with a focus on achieving a certain set of competencies. A qualitative research method with a case study design was used to explore teachers' experiences while implementing the two curricula. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with PAI teachers at SMK Karya Rini Yogyakarta, learning documents, and classroom observations of grades 10 and 11. The research findings show that Merdeka Curriculum offers more flexibility for educators in organizing teaching as it is designed to increase students' roles during learning. However, the main obstacles in implementing it are limited facilities, teacher readiness, and understanding among students and parents about this new learning paradigm. Alternatively, K-13 offers stricter guidelines but also stifles creativity from both sides. Curriculum transformation should be comprehensive in the form of training teachers, providing adequate facilities for schools and educating students and parents. The location can serve as a reference for constituents in planning more relevant policies and implementing more effective strategies.

Keywords. Transformation; Curriculum 2013; Merdeka Curriculum

Abstrak. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis implementasi Kurikulum 2013 (K-13) dan Kurikulum Merdeka dalam proses pembelajaran, khususnya dalam hal mata pelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI). Kurikulum Merdeka lebih memberikan ruang kepada siswa untuk bereksplorasi secara mandiri, dan melakukan kegiatan eksplorasi melalui diskusi dan mengkaji permasalahan yang dihadapinya, sedangkan K-13 cenderung lebih kaku dengan fokus pada pencapaian seperangkat kompetensi tertentu. Metode penelitian kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus digunakan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman guru selama menerapkan kedua kurikulum tersebut. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan guru PAI di SMK Karya Rini Yogyakarta, dokumen pembelajaran, dan observasi pembelajaran kelas 10 dan 11 di kelas. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Kurikulum Merdeka menawarkan lebih banyak fleksibilitas bagi para pendidik dalam mengatur pengajaran karena kurikulum ini dirancang untuk meningkatkan peran siswa selama pembelajaran. Namun, hambatan utama dalam mengimplementasikannya adalah keterbatasan fasilitas, kesiapan guru, dan pemahaman di antara siswa dan orang tua tentang paradigma pembelajaran baru ini. Sebagai alternatif, K-13 menawarkan panduan yang lebih ketat tapi juga menghambat kreativitas dari kedua

belah pihak. Transformasi kurikulum harus komprehensif dalam bentuk pelatihan guru, penyediaan fasilitas yang memadai untuk sekolah dan mengedukasi siswa serta orang tua. Lokasi tersebut dapat menjadi referensi bagi konstituen dalam merencanakan kebijakan yang lebih relevan dan menerapkan strategi yang lebih efektif.

Kata kunci. Transformasi; Kurikulum 2013; Kurikulum Merdeka

A. INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia has undergone many changes to meet the demands of the times and the needs of society. Each curriculum change is designed to improve the quality of education and produce a generation capable of competing globally (Diana et al., 2023; Sari, 2024). One important reform is the introduction of Curriculum 2013, which is designed to develop students' competencies in the 21st century, focusing on the development of critical thinking skills, creativity, communication, and collaboration (Neliwati et al., 2023).

Curriculum 2013 aims to integrate competency-based learning that emphasizes the development of attitudes, knowledge and skills as a whole. Through this curriculum, students are expected to develop positive attitudes, deepen knowledge, and improve practical skills (Muhdalia et al., 2024; Wiranda & Tiara Maulina, 2023). This approach is implemented by using active and collaborative learning methods, such as group discussions and projects, which can increase student participation in the learning process (Puad & Ashton, 2023).

This curriculum transformation towards an *Merdeka* curriculum is important (Hasanah & Zalnur, 2024; Quratul Aini & Adiyono, 2023; Rani et al., 2023), the weaknesses of which are the focus of the 2013 curriculum evaluation, including the competencies set at too broad, making it difficult for educators to implement (Subita et al., 2024; Yamin & Astutik, 2023). According to Gumgum Gumilar, et. al, the 2013 curriculum is considered incapable and inflexible in the face of changes that occur in the world of education and society (Gumilar et al., 2023). Therefore, the Ministry of Education and Culture designed an *Merdeka* curriculum so that the implementation of education in Indonesia is able to form independent, creative, and resilient students (Mujiwati et al., 2023). The implementation of the new curriculum is certainly not free from various challenges. These challenges include the lack of training on the concept of implementing an *Merdeka* curriculum, the lack of knowledge of educators regarding learning outcomes, objectives, materials, and evaluation (Aulia et al., 2022). In addition, obstacles usually arise from internal schools such as lack of infrastructure, inadequate school digital media, and teachers who still use the lecture method (Basar et al., 2021; Mhlongo et al., 2023).

The implementation of the new curriculum is certainly not free from various challenges (Rokhimawan et al., 2023). These challenges include the lack of training on the concept of implementing an *Merdeka* curriculum, the lack of knowledge of educators regarding learning outcomes, objectives, materials, and evaluation (Wibowo et al., 2023). In addition, obstacles usually arise from internal schools such as lack of infrastructure, inadequate school digital media, and teachers who still use the lecture method.

In PAI (Islamic Religius Education) subjects in grades 10 and 11 at SMK Karya Rini using the *Merdeka* curriculum, while in grade 12 still using the 2013 Curriculum. In the application of PAI using an *Merdeka* curriculum at SMK Karya Rini, learning is focused on spiritual formation, morals, developing students' critical reasoning skills, and upholding the value of unity. *PAI* and *Budi Pekerti* teachers assist students to think critically and capture the essence of the material taught well and can apply what is learned.

SMK Karya Rini Yogyakarta was chosen as the research location in this study based on its position as one of the private vocational schools that has gradually implemented the transformation from Curriculum 2013 to Merdeka Curriculum, especially in Islamic

Religious Education (PAI) subjects. This school is interesting to study because it has heterogeneous learner characteristics and an adaptive PAI learning approach to the vocational context. The novelty of this research lies in the in-depth analysis of the dynamics of curriculum transformation in the context of PAI learning in the SMK environment, which has tended to receive less attention in similar studies, especially regarding the integration of religious values in the paradigm of *Merdeka* learning.

Islamic Religious Education in the *Merdeka* curriculum from the aspect of substance is also different from the 2013 curriculum, there are several activities that support the strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (Salim, 2023). The implementation of these activities certainly does not immediately run smoothly, there are several challenges faced by schools in implementing an *Merdeka* curriculum for Islamic Religious Education and Ethics at SMK Karya Rini Yogyakarta.

Based on this background, this research focuses on How is the curriculum transformation process from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education subjects at SMK Karya Rini Yogyakarta? as well as the challenges faced in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education subjects? and the teacher's strategy in implementing PAI learning in accordance with the Merdeka Curriculum. The purpose of this study is to analyze the process of transforming the PAI curriculum from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum, identify the challenges faced during the implementation process, and analyze the learning strategies applied by teachers in developing religious values that are relevant to the context of vocational education.

B. RESEARCH METODHS

This research was conducted with a qualitative methods with the type of field research (case study) (Sugiyono, 2021). In this study, the purpose of using qualitative methods that focus on field research is to explore in-depth information about the transformation of the 2013 curriculum to the *Merdeka* curriculum in *PAI* and *Budi Pekerti* at SMK Karya Rini Yogyakarta. This research was conducted in November 2024. With data collection including documentation, photos, documents, observation results, field notes and interviews. This research aims to explore the curriculum changes that occur in Islamic Religious Education (*PAI*) and *Budi Pekerti* procedurally and substantially as well as the challenges encountered. The aim is to provide a detailed description of the curriculum changes and the challenges it goes through so that it can provide insights that are useful in improving the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum at the school.

This study used purposive sampling, namely interviews with *PAI* and *Budi Pekerti* teachers. The selected teachers are those who teach in grades 10 and 11 at SMK Karya Rini. Research subjects are often also called informants, namely people who are directly concerned in providing research data, related to the situation, conditions and objects of research. To obtain data validity in this study, triangulation techniques were used. Data analysis was done thematically to identify patterns and main themes that emerged from interview data, documents, and observations. The steps of analysis included transcription of interview data, grouping of themes, and interpretation of findings. Data validation was conducted through source triangulation, comparing data from interviews, documents and observations to ensure consistency of information. The results of this study are expected to provide in-depth insight into the differences in the approaches of the two curricula and their implications for learning.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Learning Innovation in Curriculum 2013

It is based on the purpose of developing character and competence of learners, as required in the globalization period. It is on the basis of a contextual, interactive and work based need driven approach. Some of these assumptions are the quality of teachers, learning methods and both learner potential variations, not ignoring the learner that studies in a comfortable learning environment must be important. Thus, this is an adaptive curriculum that can handle dynamic changes in education and industrial (E. Mulyasa, 2019; Sari, 2024).

The 2013 curriculum aims to implement an integrated form of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in order to form character in students. Nonetheless, an analysis of ground realities proves that the adaptation of this curriculum needs ongoing assistance, especially in terms of professional development of teachers and infrastructure enhancement in schools. Teachers face several barriers to mastering scientific methods and implementing project-based learning, which indicates the need for more intensive training programs to improve teacher competence (Fithriani et al., 2021).

Referring to research results (Nuryanti et al., 2020), also said that one of the crucial things in Curriculum 2013 is the role of teachers as role models. Based on this objective of character education, character education through exemplification of teachers as role models for students is grouped as a means of strengthening student character (Aulia & Minan, 2021; Aulia & Nafisah, 2023; Ma'ruf et al., 2022). According to Jumaeda, the 2013 curriculum also prioritizes the role of teachers to teach and guide good morals and ethics through an indirect approach or through example (Jumaeda, 2022).

This is also expected, in research (Hardiyono et al., 2021; Warman et al., 2021) the findings show that the practice already implemented an inadequate evaluation system and authentic assessment. Tests that are expected to describe the abilities of students as a whole are often difficult to implement due to time and supporting facilities. The implication of the results is that this curriculum needs more final revisions in order for implementation to take place at all levels of education and regions.

It is hoped that this synergistic work of the government, schools and teachers can overcome obstacles to achieving the goals of Curriculum 2013. It is hoped that the government will contribute in terms of providing funds for the infrastructure and arranging regular training for teachers which will ensure the best implementation of this curriculum. So that Curriculum 2013 can be a means to improve the quality of education in Indonesia and a generation that ready to face global challenges (Fithriani et al., 2021).

It has been known that project-based learning is one of the major and important methods in Curriculum 2013, aiming for developing students skill in their critical thinking and their analysing. Nevertheless, this approach is commonly limited to the low level of teachers' preparedness in planning and organizing projects that align with study skills (Warman et al., 2021). where the teacher is too much involved in them. Moreover, in several schools that do not have adequate infrastructure, the availability of learning materials or media that support learning projects also presents a challenge for teachers (Hardiyono et al., 2021).

The stages of the scientific approach contained in the 2013 curriculum include observing, asking questions, gathering information, reasoning, and communicating. Such system is carried out to shape students into logical and critical thinkers. However, teachers in general well misunderstood if the approach is not applied optimally in the preparation of lesson plans, due to the time limitation available (Nuryanti et al., 2020). In a limited time, teachers are often forced to hide this scientific method with a traditional way of completing material (Jumaeda, 2022).

Another element of Curriculum 2013 is authentic assessment, which delivers an holistic measurement of students' competence, covering attitude, skill and knowledge. Such

an assessment takes careful observation and ongoing assessment. Nevertheless, the implementation of authentic assessment by the teachers is very challenging due to time limitation and the number of students in the class (Hardiyono et al., 2021). As a result, written tests are still used by many teachers as a main way of measuring student learning outcomes (Warman et al., 2021).

Curriculum 2013 applied in school in rural or remote areas also encounter major challenges. Access to educational facilities, including laboratories, libraries and technology, remains extremely limited in these areas. Even these facilities are extremely supportive in conducting the scientific approach and project-based learning (Fithriani et al., 2021). Due to this gap of access, there is an educational gap between urban and rural based schools (Jumaeda, 2022).

One of the keys to the successful implementation of Curriculum 2013, especially in character education, is teachers. Teachers as role models for students are expected to practice moral and ethical values based on Pancasila (Fithriani et al., 2021). The character teaching is highly dependent on teacher competence and readiness. It has been proven by several researches that teacher's knowledge about character values contributes to the successful implementation of character values to students (Nuryanti et al., 2020).

The incorporation of information and communication technology (ICT) in Curriculum 2013 is an attempt to provide students with the skills they need to confront global challenges. But the biggest challenge in ICT usage is that many schools have minimal infra structure especially in remote area (Nuryanti et al., 2020). Moreover, many teachers remain unskilled in using ICT in the learning process, so the power of technology has not been maximized in the classroom (Hardiyono et al., 2021).

There is also focus on collaboration between teacher and students as well as parents in 2013 curriculum. The parents are expected to support the character building of students outside of the school environment. But that means schools and parents need to communicate — and this is often a barrier to success. Parents often feel engaged in their child's learning, and yet some schools struggle to work with parents effectively (Warman et al., 2021).

One of the important roles of the government in the implementation of Curriculum 2013 is to provide regular teacher training. This training must be prepared to be better in order for the teachers to understand the learning and assessment procedures in Curriculum 2013 (Fithriani et al., 2021). Teachers are also expected to be more confident in implementing this curriculum in the classroom through intensive and continuous training (Hardiyono et al., 2021).

The 2013 curriculum still needs to be adjusted to the needs and conditions of each school. Referring to the different traits of students in every region, some of them stated that flexibility in implementing this curriculum should be improved (Jumaeda, 2022). This allows teachers to take the flexibility as an opportunity to adapt and select teaching resources and approaches according to local needs (Nuryanti et al., 2020).

To be able to compete with other countries in the world, one of the 2013 Curriculum goals is to form a generation. Many teachers, however, consider the curriculum overly complex, making it difficult to implement unless adequate support is provided (Jumaeda, 2022). If teachers and students struggle with such a huge influx of changes, the gradual adaptation of the curriculum could potentially bridge the gap.

The issue of implementing Curriculum 2013 in religious education has not been less challenging. Islamic Religious Education, for instance, has important content for character. Although teachers are expected to be able to communicate well on religious values, most teachers find it difficult when providing key performance indicators, especially regarding academic and character (Warman et al., 2021). These values must be

conveyed in a more personalized and in-depth manner from teachers to students and vice versa (Hardiyono et al., 2021).

Some aspects of the implementation of Curriculum 2013 are in need of improvement, as seen from several evaluations. Several teachers recommended frequent reviews of the curriculum, to ensure it remained current with educational goals (Warman et al., 2021). This assessment should also be a part of the various parties including teachers, students and parents (Fithriani et al., 2021).

2. Changes in the Curriculum 2013 to the Merdeka Curriculum

The 2013 curriculum according to the Ministry of Education and Culture is a competency-based curriculum, competency-based curriculum is outcomes-bases therefore curriculum development is directed at achieving competencies formulated in graduate competency standards. Mulyasa defines the 2013 curriculum as a curriculum concept that emphasizes the development of the ability to perform tasks with certain performance standards, so that the results can be felt by students in the form of mastery of a certain set of competencies (E. Mulyasa, 2019). Mulyasa describes the characteristics of the 2013 curriculum including; individualized personal strategies, complete learning, utilizing all learning resources field experience, and ease of learning (H. E. Mulyasa, 2021). The approach used in learning the 2013 curriculum is a scientific approach for all subjects and the lesson hours (JP) are arranged every week in each semester.

In contrast to the 2013 curriculum, the Merdeka curriculum is defined as a curriculum with diverse intracurricular learning, and contains optimal content, so that learners have plenty of time to explore concepts and achieve the desired competencies (Fadlillah et al., 2024; Hindri et al., 2023; Rosmana et al., 2023). In the concept of Merdeka learning, teachers and students move to collaborate to find problems together, meaning that the teacher is no longer the source of knowledge. The teacher as a means of igniting the reasoning and critical thinking of students. In the Merdeka curriculum, differentiated learning is used (Putri & Mangunsong, 2024; Suyitno et al., 2023). Differentiated learning comes from the word different which means different, and learning which means learning. Differentiated learning is defined as the learning process of students facilitated by educators in different ways in the implementation of learning components (Stollman et al., 2021).

Apart from using a differentiated approach, the *Merdeka* curriculum has characteristics including project-based learning, focus on essential material and flexibility (Nafi'ah et al., 2024; Saidah & Haryanto, 2023; Tapung, 2024). The Ministry of Education and Research explained that in the *Merdeka* curriculum, lesson hours (JP) are regulated per year. The Ministry of Education and Culture divides the structure into two main activities, namely intracurricular activities and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project as much as 25% of the total JP per year. Each education unit is given the freedom to flexibly manage the allocation of learning time to achieve the specified JP. In the Merdeka curriculum, formative and summative assessments are used to assess the learning process. The results of the assessment are used to design learning according to the phase of the learners (Kemendikbud, 2023).

The implementation of Islamic Religious Education and Ethics at SMK Karya Rini has changed when using the 2013 curriculum and the Merdeka curriculum. PAI and Budi Pekerti in the Merdeka curriculum at SMK Karya Rini is not only a transfer of knowledge, but also a transfer of values that can be implemented in the daily lives of students. In contrast to the 2013 curriculum which is focused on achieving the competence of student learning outcomes. PAI and Budi Pekerti teachers at SMK Karya Rini in the Merdeka curriculum organize learning systematically, the direction and flow of learning objectives are clear, and can arouse the creativity of students, unlike the case when using the 2013

curriculum whose competencies have been determined nationally, so that teachers cannot organize their learning freely.

The implementation of Islamic Religious Education and Budi Pekerti at SMK Karya Rini experienced changes when using the 2013 curriculum and the Merdeka curriculum, as stated by the PAI Teacher:

"The main difference is in the learning approach. The 2013 Curriculum is more focused on achieving the basic competencies that have been determined, while the Merdeka Curriculum provides more flexibility for teachers to adjust the material to the needs of students. In PAI, the Merdeka curriculum provides space to develop spiritual values. The purpose of the 2013 Curriculum according to my opinion is to prepare students to have good knowledge, skills, and attitudes through structured learning based on basic competencies. Meanwhile, the Merdeka Curriculum prioritizes freedom in learning which can enable students to develop their potential. Then regarding preparation and adaptation to the Merdeka Curriculum, namely by designing more interactive, project-based learning that can involve students in an active process. In addition, the assessment in the Merdeka curriculum is oriented towards student development not just the final results."

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3. Challenges of Implementing Merdeka Curriculum

The main difference between Curriculum 2013 (K-13) and Merdeka Curriculum is in the learning approach. Teachers in the Merdeka Curriculum leave more space for students to explore independently, discuss, and explore problems more deeply (Afgany et al., 2023; Azita et al., 2023). Such freedom of learning is in accordance with another learning principle (Aulia et al., 2022; Aulia & Nafiisah, 2023), that encourages students to search for information and knowledge based on their interests and needs. Problem-solving, critical thinking, and creative thinking are expected of students to be actively involved in the learning process (Amanulloh & Wasila, 2024; Samani et al., 2019; Tunas & Pangkey, 2024).

Conversely, learning in Curriculum 2013 is more arranged and oriented to the effort of an effort to fulfil the competencies that have been propounded in the curriculum. This method focuses on the delivery of knowledge from teachers to students through an ordered and calculable manner (Ahmad et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2024; Keith & Ramadani, 2024; Tacettin Açıkgöz & Cem Babadogan, 2021). Learning is a process in which students are skilled in the competencies that have been designed in the syllabus and Learning Implementation Plan (RPP). In K-13 learning emphasizes learning outcomes which are simple, measurable and the evaluation system is based on the results of the tests and exams to determine the degree of mastery of material quantitatively.

The PAI teacher at SMK Karya Rini stated that:

"...In the Merdeka Curriculum, I provide more space for students to explore independently, discuss, and study problems. Meanwhile, the 2013 Curriculum tends to be more structured which focuses on achieving competencies."

The Merdeka Curriculum gives teachers more freedom to design and organize learning according to the conditions and needs of students. This approach encourages teachers to be more flexible in managing the classroom and optimizing student potential

through various methods, such as discussions, collaboration, and projects (Citrawati, 2024; Efendi, 2023; Yunaini et al., 2022). This allows students to learn in a more enjoyable and meaningful way, as they can be directly involved in the learning process and contribute to determining the direction of their learning (Harackiewicz et al., 2016; Javaid et al., 2023; Lo et al., 2022; Tullis & Goldstone, 2020).

On the other hand, Curriculum 2013 tends to be more rigid and standardized, which can make the learning process feel less dynamic. Despite its strengths in creating clear competencies, this approach can limit students' creativity in exploring topics and solving problems (Huang et al., 2022; Karlen et al., 2023; Kruk et al., 2018). In K-13, more teacher-centered learning often makes students passive recipients of information, which can limit their engagement in the learning process (Mafarja et al., 2023; Minalla, 2023; Qadir Faqe Ibrahim & Abdullah Abdullah, 2024).

The advantage of the Merdeka Curriculum approach is the opportunity to develop students' soft skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and problem solving. In more open learning, students are given the opportunity to develop these skills through hands-on experience, discussion, and interaction with peers (Alt et al., 2023; Djoeaeriah & Sofyan Iskandar, 2024; Steenkamp & Brink, 2024). It also allows students to learn in a more personalized way, according to their learning styles and interests.

However, the main challenge of the Merdeka Curriculum approach is how to ensure that all students still get an adequate knowledge base despite giving more space for exploration and discussion. The Merdeka Curriculum requires teachers to have the skills to manage learning that is more flexible and student-centered, without neglecting the goal of achieving basic competencies which are also important for overall student development (Hasanah & Zalnur, 2024; Rusmiati et al., 2023). Nonetheless, this approach provides a great opportunity to create learning that is more interesting, relevant and has a positive impact on students' character development.

The transformation to the Merdeka Curriculum from the previous 2013 Curriculum (K-13) has become a significant challenge for education in Indonesia, including in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) subjects (Anggara, 2023; Fathurrohman et al., 2024; Salim, 2023; Siregar et al., 2024; Zubaedi, 2020). A major hurdle is teachers' understanding and readiness. PAI teachers have to adjust to the new paradigm that prioritizes competency- and project-based learning (Desimone, 2009; Kamalov et al., 2023; Katawazai, 2021; Kuo et al., 2024; Mustofa et al., 2023). Many teachers don't have a chance or position to get intensive training about Merdeka Curriculum, thus contributing to their still-limited understanding.

Another barrier is limited facilities and resources. Merdeka Curriculum which embraces contextual and exploratory learning often calls for diverse learning media and supporting technology as well (Harefa et al., 2024; Rumawang et al., 2024). For schools with constrained infrastructure, particularly in the hinterland, executing this syllabus becomes a cumbersome task. Creating PAI with existing resources sometimes exists and must be innovated to remain aligned with curriculum objectives (Nevenglosky et al., 2018; Salim, 2023).

In addition, when the curriculum is revised, lesson plans and teaching modules need to be modified. In the *Merdeka Curriculum*, teachers are given the freedom to design learning according to the needs of students. They allow greater leeway but can be a departure for teachers whose K-13 experience was more of a straitjacket. This is a huge adjustment and it takes time, creativity and support from the school.

The other challenge is the understanding of learnings and parents. Many students and parents are still used to the memorization and exam-based K-13 learning system. The implementation of project and collaborated-based learning, which is the Merdeka

Curriculum education approach, is a mindset game for everyone to need to understand its advantages, especially regarding Islamic Education as a topic a lot thought has a memorization-only type.

Evaluation of learning is another important aspect of this issue. In contrast to cognitive assessment, the *Merdeka Curriculum* also focuses on character as well as competence (Fadillah & Yunus, 2024; Lövdén et al., 2020). In terms of learning outcomes, PAI teachers need to create assessment indicators in accordance with curriculum objectives, for example strengthening morals and spiritual attitudes. This has a need of changing the way teachers think about assessing student success (Mindani et al., 2022; Naofa et al., 2023).

It is also not an easy task to integrate PAI values into project activities. One of the main adjustments in the *Merdeka Curriculum* is the use of project-based learning. PAI teachers are required to be inventive in tying themes of the project with Islamic values of justice, honesty, and sustainability. Nevertheless, not all teachers are accustomed to project-based learning design and execution. Time constraints are another challenge. PAI subjects often have limited time allocations in schools, making it difficult to implement project-based learning that takes longer. Teachers must be smart in managing time so that the curriculum can still be achieved without sacrificing the quality of learning.

The mental readiness of teachers and students is also a challenge. This curriculum transformation requires a change in mindset from all parties. PAI teachers must be ready to leave the old methods that rely more on lectures and switch to interactive methods that encourage active student involvement. Similarly, students must be able to adjust to more *Merdeka* learning methods. Support from the school principal and the government is needed. PAI teachers cannot work alone in facing this challenge. The government needs to ensure adequate training, continuous assistance, and policies that support the implementation of *Merdeka Curriculum*. Principals must also provide facilities and time for teachers to innovate (Ghiam et al., 2019).

Finally, the gap between policy and implementation in the field needs to be minimized. The *Merdeka Curriculum* has a good vision, but its implementation in the field is often not in line with expectations. PAI teachers are faced with the fact that they must integrate religious values with new approaches in situations that are often limited. Collaborative efforts between teachers, schools and the government are essential to overcome this challenge.

D. CONCLUSION

Thus, this study concludes that there are substantial changes in the learning approach from the shift of the 2013 Curriculum (K-13) to the *Merdeka Curriculum*, especially in the subject of Islamic Religion Education (PAI). The *Merdeka Curriculum*, which prioritizes active observation, deliberation and problem identification, creates an opportunity for learners to improve critical, creative and collaborative thinking. However, the realization of this curriculum has several obstacles, including facility limitations, teacher preparedness, and a lack of awareness among students and parents about this flexible learning style. The K-13, in comparison, has defined competencies that make it easier to measure achievement, but the rigid syllabus makes it less conducive to creativity and active engagement among learners. In implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* to be more effective, it requires support from all parties. Therefore, the *Merdeka Curriculum* has the potential to realize learning that is more relevant, meaningful, and impactful on the formation of student character and competencies in this dynamic era. Further research is recommended to explore the long-term impact of implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* on the development of character and religious competence of students in the Vocational

School environment.

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