

Applying the *Merdeka* Curriculum: Development of *Aqidah Akhlak* Learning at State Madrasah Aliyah

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Abstract

This study aims to determine the process of implementing the independent learning curriculum regarding moral beliefs in MAN 2 Sleman. This research is important to describe the independent curriculum in the learning process. The independent curriculum introduced by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia aims to give students the freedom to develop their potential and interests. In the context of the *Aqidah Akhlak* lesson, this curriculum directs teachers to focus on developing religious character and values in a contextual, project-based manner that focuses on real experiences. The research method used is qualitative with a case study approach. Data was obtained through observation and interviews at MAN 2 Sleman, which implemented the *Merdeka* Curriculum in the subject of moral faith. The results of the study show that implementing the Independent Curriculum in the subject of Moral Beliefs can increase active involvement in students, deepen their understanding of noble moral values, and encourage teachers to be more creative in designing learning materials relevant to daily life.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui proses implementasi Kurikulum *Merdeka* belajar pada mata pelajaran *Aqidah Akhlak* di MAN 2 Sleman. Penelitian ini penting dilakukan untuk mendeskripsikan Kurikulum *Merdeka* dalam proses pembelajaran. Kurikulum *Merdeka* yang diperkenalkan oleh Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia bertujuan untuk memberikan kebebasan kepada siswa dalam mengembangkan potensi dan minat mereka. Dalam konteks pelajaran *Aqidah Akhlak*, kurikulum ini mengarahkan guru untuk memfokuskan pengembangan karakter dan nilai-nilai agama secara kontekstual, berbasis proyek dan berfokus pada pengalaman nyata. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi kasus. Data diperoleh melalui observasi dan juga wawancara di MAN 2 Sleman yang telah menerapkan Kurikulum *Merdeka* pada mata pelajaran *Aqidah Akhlak*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa implementasi Kurikulum *Merdeka* pada mata pelajaran *Aqidah Akhlak* mampu meningkatkan keterlibatan aktif dalam diri siswa, memperdalam pemahaman mereka terhadap nilai-nilai akhlak mulia, serta mendorong guru untuk lebih kreatif dalam merancang materi pembelajaran yang relevan dengan kehidupan sehari-hari.

Keywords

The *Merdeka* Curriculum, moral beliefs, *Aqidah Akhlak* learning

Introduction

Education has a strong relationship with human problems in providing meaning and directed guidance for its existence (Alkhairi et al., 2024). Education can also be interpreted as a cultural process that aims to improve human dignity, lasts a lifetime, and is carried out in family, school, and community environments. Therefore, education is a shared responsibility between family, community, and government. Education needs to be managed in an integrated and harmonious system (Achadi, 2018). Curriculum is one of the important components that cannot be abandoned in education (Shen, 2021). The curriculum as the main component of education, has a decisive role in learning (Coşkun Yaşar & Aslan, 2021). The curriculum can be defined as plans and arrangements regarding the objectives, content, teaching materials, and methods used in the learning process to achieve educational goals (Syafaruddin & Amiruddin, 2017). The curriculum serves as a basis or vision (Twining et al., 2021). This vision or basis reflects the educational goals to be achieved in the future because education does not provide instant results but takes years to see the final results (Al Khadziq & Achadi, 2023).

In Indonesia, the curriculum implementation has undergone various changes and improvements, starting in 1947, then in 1964, 1968, 1973, 1975, 1984, and 1994, and in 1997, a revision was made to the 1994 curriculum (Adam & Wahdiah, 2023). Furthermore, 2004, a computer-based curriculum was implemented, which was then followed by the Education Unit Level Curriculum in 2006. In 2013, the Ministry of National Education introduced the 2013 Curriculum or Kurtilas, which was revised again in 2018 to become the Revised Kurtilas (Rahayu et al., 2022).

As previously explained, education in Indonesia continues to experience various dynamics and changes that aim to adapt to the needs of the times and global challenges. One of the significant changes in the education system in Indonesia is the implementation of the *Merdeka* Belajar Curriculum, which has been introduced by the Ministry of Education and Culture since 2020. This curriculum is one of the policies that respond to the need for education and is flexible, contextual, and oriented to students' individual potential. In the *Merdeka* Curriculum, learning focuses on achieving academic competence and developing students' character, creativity, and critical abilities (Alimuddin, 2023). This approach gives schools and teachers the freedom to customize teaching methods according to the needs of students and the school environment. The *Merdeka* Curriculum has several main characteristics, namely: First, project-based learning to develop soft skills and student character, which includes faith, piety, noble character, cooperation, diversity, independence, critical reasoning, and also creativity. Second, focusing on essential materials is expected to provide sufficient time for in-depth learning. Third, teachers can conduct learning following student abilities (teaching at the right level) (Mulyasa, 2023).

In the *Akidah Akhlak* subject, an important component of Islamic Religious Education, implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum presents new challenges and opportunities for educators. *Akidah Akhlak* aims to shape students' personalities and characters based on the values of faith (*akidah*) and good moral behavior (*akhlak*). This subject has an important role in shaping Islamic character in students and providing a strong foundation for living a life following Islamic teachings. Thus, applying the *Merdeka* Curriculum in *Akidah Akhlak* learning requires a holistic and contextual approach so that learning is not only a transfer of knowledge but also the cultivation of religious values applicable in everyday life.

One of the main principles of the *Merdeka* Curriculum is the freedom for teachers to design a more relevant and meaningful learning process for students (Anggraini et al., 2022). A too-rigid syllabus no longer binds teachers but allows them to arrange learning according to student's interests and abilities. It certainly positively impacts *Akidah Akhlak* learning, where teachers can relate teaching materials to the context of students' daily lives in family, school, and community environments.

In addition, the *Merdeka* Curriculum also emphasizes project-based learning and student-centered learning. In the *Akidah Akhlak* subject, this approach allows students to be actively involved in the learning process through projects that teach noble moral values, group work, and critical discussions on moral and ethical issues.

From the explanation above, the author examines the concept and implementation of the *Merdeka* Learning Curriculum at School, as well as what obstacles occur in the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum, especially in the *Akidah Akhlak* subject and also the solution, and how the *Merdeka* Curriculum meets the 2013 Curriculum for *Akidah Akhlak* subject.

Method

This research uses qualitative methods. This method is often called naturalistic because the research is carried out in natural conditions. Also known as the ethnographic method because initially, this method was more widely used for research in the field of cultural anthropology, referred to as qualitative methods because the data collected and the analysis is more qualitative. Qualitative methods are used to obtain in-depth data containing meaning (Sugiyono, 2013). In this study, the data collection method involves observation and interview techniques. Data collection using participant observation is shown to reveal the meaning of an event from a particular setting, which is an essential concern in qualitative research. Participant observation is carried out to observe research objects, such as a special place of an organization, a group of people, or some school activities (Salim & Syahrums, 2012). Meanwhile, an interview is a conversation between two or more people where questions are asked by someone who acts as an interviewer to extract information about the research focus.

In the early stages of this research, the researcher identifies a problem that needs to be solved and then formulates questions that, if answered, will help solve the problem. The answers to these questions will be obtained through collecting and analyzing data from respondents who play a role in providing related information. The primary focus in this

article is to review the topic of implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum in schools and explain an overview of how the independent curriculum can be implemented in schools. In this study, a description of the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum is carried out, especially regarding the efficiency of its implementation in madrasas, and potential obstacles are identified. Within the qualitative research framework using observation techniques, three main elements are observed: the research location conducted at MAN 2 Sleman, the actors involved, namely the *Akidah* Akhlak subject teacher, and the activities carried out.

Results and Discussion

Independent Learning Curriculum

In Law Number 12 of 2024 Article 1, it is stated that the *Merdeka* Curriculum is a curriculum that provides flexibility and focuses on essential material to develop students' competencies as lifelong learners with the character of Pancasila (Permendikbudristek, 2024). The *Merdeka* Curriculum features the "*Merdeka Belajar*" concept for students designed to support recovery from the learning crisis. The idea of *Merdeka Belajar* is rooted in a vision inspired by the thoughts of Ki Hadjar Dewantara, the Father of Indonesian Education, who emphasized that independence is the goal of education as well as an important paradigm that all education stakeholders need to understand (Jamila, 2023)

Merdeka Curriculum is a multifaceted learning plan that is optimally designed to provide students with sufficient time to deepen their understanding of concepts and strengthen their skills (Lestri et al., 2023). In the *Merdeka* Curriculum, teachers can choose learning media that suits students' learning needs and interests. The curriculum also includes projects to strengthen the learner profile of Pancasila, which are developed based on specific themes determined by the government. These projects do not focus on specific learning objectives and are unrelated to technical content (Iskandar et al., 2023).

In implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum, there is a reduction in learning loads and hours, especially in face-to-face learning in the classroom. In addition to reducing lesson hours, teaching materials considered too heavy for students are also simplified. The *Merdeka* Curriculum emphasizes competency development, character building, and increasing student creativity (Fitriyah & Wardani, 2022). Seven main aspects need to be understood in this *Merdeka* Curriculum, namely the curriculum structure, learning outcomes (CP), implementation of the learning process, lesson time allocation, collaborative learning models, information and communication technology (ICT) subjects, and social, natural science (IPAS) (Mulyasa, 2023). According to Nasution et al. (2023), implementing learning in the *Merdeka* Curriculum follows a three-stage cycle.

a. Diagnostic Assessment

Teachers conduct initial assessments to understand students' potential, characteristics, needs, developmental stages, and learning achievements. This assessment is generally carried out at the beginning of the school year, and the results are used as a basis for planning appropriate learning methods.

b. Planning

Based on the diagnostic assessment results, teachers develop appropriate lesson plans, including grouping students according to their ability levels to provide more targeted and effective learning.

c. Learning

Teachers conduct formative assessments periodically during the learning process to monitor students' progress and adjust learning methods if necessary. At the end of the process, teachers can carry out summative assessments to evaluate the overall achievement of learning objectives. The essence of the *Merdeka* Curriculum is teacher freedom in developing curriculum and learning so that teacher creativity is increasingly open and accommodated to innovate productively. Previously, teachers only taught the material that the government had determined in the National Curriculum. It is not the case in the new curriculum. In the *Merdeka* Curriculum, there is an operational curriculum, which is a school curriculum developed by teachers to provide space and freedom for teachers to choose what is best for students. Teachers are no longer dictated to teach this material and that material but are given the freedom to choose other materials as long as they can achieve predetermined learning outcomes and are following the characteristics and development of students.

Akidah Akhlak Learning in Madrasah Aliyah

Akidah Akhlak in Madrasah Aliyah is one of the core subjects in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum, which aims to form students' understanding and appreciation of the basic principles of Islam. The main focus of this subject is to instill a correct knowledge of *akidah* (belief or faith) and morals (behavior and ethics). *Akidah Akhlak* in Madrasah Aliyah is designed to strengthen the foundation of students' faith, guide them in understanding the attributes of Allah, the concept of tawhid, and help them foster Islamic attitudes and behavior in everyday life.

According to the Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia Number 2 of 2008 concerning Graduate Competency Standards and Content Standards of Islamic Religious Education and Arabic Language, the learning objectives of *Akidah Akhlak* in Madrasah Aliyah are. *First*, developing students' faith through teaching, instilling, and developing knowledge, appreciation, experience, habituation, and practice of Islamic faith, so that they grow into Muslim individuals who continue to strengthen their faith and piety to Allah SWT. *Second*, to form a person who is able to apply the values of the Islamic faith in daily life and in social relations as a concrete manifestation of the teachings and principles of the Islamic faith (Ramadhan, 2020).

In addition, the *Akidah Akhlak* material includes a discussion of the praiseworthy traits (*mahmudah*) recommended in Islam, as well as avoiding the prohibited despicable traits (*mazmumah*). In this curriculum, students are also invited to understand the morals of themselves, others, the environment, and even morals to Allah. The ultimate goal of the *Akidah Akhlak* subject is to form a generation of Muslims who have strong faith, and good character and can behave positively in various aspects of life.

Implementation of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Akidah Akhlak Subjects

The *Akidah Akhlak* subject at MAN 2 Sleman aims to instill an understanding and practice of the values of faith and noble morals in students' lives. By studying *akidah*, students are invited to understand and believe in the basics of faith, such as belief in God, angels, books, messengers, the last day, and *qada* and *qadar*. In addition, moral learning provides guidance on commendable attitudes and behaviors, such as honesty, responsibility, justice, and patience, which are expected to form noble characters in students.

In the independent curriculum, students are given the freedom to think independently. This approach differs from conventional learning methods, which often emphasize memorization and one-way instruction from teachers to students. In the Independent Curriculum, students are encouraged to be more active in exploring and finding answers to the questions they face independently. It allows them to explore their potential, develop critical thinking skills, and find creative solutions.

One of the main objectives of the *Merdeka* Curriculum is to form students who can understand problems in depth and think from diverse perspectives. With this freedom, students are encouraged to take the initiative in their learning process. In this case, the teacher acts as a facilitator who directs, provides guidance, and provides space for students to find answers independently. It is expected to create a more dynamic learning environment where students receive material and develop their analytical skills. It was also conveyed by *Akidah Akhlak* subject teacher of MAN 2 Sleman, in his interview with the researcher:

In the *Merdeka* Curriculum, students are trained to think independently in the learning process to develop character and competence in students. The *teacher* is no longer a teacher center but a facilitator who only facilitates students in the teaching and learning process.

In addition, in the *Merdeka* Curriculum, one of the important aspects that is prioritized is differentiation in the learning process. This differentiation aims to adapt teaching methods to each student's different needs, interests, and potential (Pitaloka & Arsanti, 2022). Through differentiation, students are not forced to follow the same learning pattern but are given the freedom to learn in a way that suits their style. Thus, this curriculum can provide each individual with a more personalized and effective learning experience. Differentiation in learning can be done through various ways, such as adjusting materials, methods, and assessments based on students' abilities and interests. Teachers have a role as facilitators who not only convey information but also understand each student's unique characteristics. This statement is supported by the results of the researcher's interview with the *Akidah Akhlak* subject teacher at MAN 2 Sleman, who said:

The *Merdeka* Curriculum indeed has a differentiation process. This means that students are grouped according to their abilities. For example, in the learning process, there are students whose learning style is kinesthetic. Some are visual and audio-visual. So from here, the teacher will find it easier to adjust the learning method. In addition to knowing students about learning styles, schools conduct diagnostic assessments at the beginning of the year. To facilitate later in the learning process. In addition, subject teachers also conduct material assessments to determine students' knowledge of the extent of the material. It also aims to facilitate teachers in learning later.

With the differentiation in the *Merdeka* Curriculum, students are expected to develop their best potential according to their individual interests and abilities. This curriculum helps reduce the pressure on students to perform to a uniform standard, as they are given the space to explore their talents and interests independently.

The learning approach emphasizes active interaction through class discussions, especially in the *Akidah Akhlak* subject in the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Through this method, students not only receive information but are also involved in the process of critical thinking and reflection on the moral values taught. Classroom discussions allow students to express opinions, ask questions, and dialogue with friends and teachers so that their understanding of *Akidah Akhlak* concepts can develop deeply. It was conveyed during an interview conducted by researchers with the *Akidah Akhlak* subject teacher at MAN 2 Sleman:

In learning *Akidah Akhlak*, more discussion learning models are made, with the teacher as a spark. In addition, students are sometimes given project assignments in applying or applying the material. For example, in the chapter on tolerance, the teacher gives an assignment to make a video on how to apply tolerance in religion. Its aim is that students not only understand the material but can also provide examples so that in making the video, the teacher feels that students already understand the material being taught and can apply it in everyday life.

This discussion-based approach effectively builds a more meaningful understanding for students. In class discussions, students can relate moral values to real-life situations, such as respecting parents, maintaining friendships, and dealing with conflicts reasonably. In addition, discussions also help students develop social skills and empathy, as they are invited to listen to their friends' opinions and understand different points of view.

Obstacles and Solutions in Implementing the Independent Curriculum for Akidah Akhlak Subjects

Several obstacles need to be considered in the *Akidah Akhlak* subject at MAN 2 Sleman. One of the main obstacles is that student understanding is not only limited to cognitive but must also be able to be applied in everyday life. It shows the importance of learning that focuses on theory and real practice in the field. However, students have good knowledge of *Akidah Akhlak* subjects. Challenges arise when they are faced with situations in the real world. In this context, the knowledge they have acquired needs to be integrated with their actions and behaviors. Therefore, evaluating the extent to which they can implement the values they have learned daily is essential. It is as stated by the subject teacher concerned.

The obstacle in this subject is that the application of the material learned in everyday life cannot be known to what extent. Students already have knowledge of and understand the material, but whether or not it is applied is still the teacher's job. Therefore, one of the new things from the *Merdeka* Curriculum is correlated with Project Based Learning (PjBL). So it is hoped that the material taught will not only increase the cognitive aspects of students but can change student behavior for the better.

To overcome this obstacle, a more holistic approach is needed in teaching *Akidah Akhlak*. Teachers can apply methods that encourage students to understand the theory and practice applying the teachings. Thus, it is hoped that students will not only understand the concept of *Akidah Akhlak* deeply, but also be able to show appropriate behavior in their social interactions.

As for the solutions presented by teachers who refer to the *Merdeka* Curriculum, first, students are tasked with making videos about the material being taught. It is in line with the previous explanation. *Second*, in the *Merdeka* Curriculum, there is a reflection between students and teachers. This has been implemented by the *Akidah Akhlak* subject teacher, which aims to determine the extent to which the teacher and students have conveyed or received the material being taught. This reflection is carried out after the material is finished and carried out in each chapter of the lesson. Another purpose of reflection is to find out the extent to which the teacher explains the teaching material that has been delivered and the extent to which students can receive material according to the learning outcomes. *Third*, an evaluation is carried out to determine the level of student knowledge of the material taught.

The changes in the *Merdeka* Curriculum show that education is not only the responsibility of teachers but is a shared responsibility between teachers, principals, school supervisors, parents, and the community. Therefore, developing these components is a must that needs to be fulfilled so that curriculum changes can be optimally implemented in the learning process.

The important thing that needs to be emphasized here is not to let the *Merdeka* Curriculum, as a form of improvement from the 2013 Curriculum, have the same fate as the previous curricula, which were replaced without being evaluated. In response to this possibility, this curriculum change must be addressed positively by studying and understanding its development, elaboration, and implementation in schools.

Conclusion

The implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum in the *Akidah Akhlak* subject at Man 2 Sleman provides many benefits in learning, such as increasing students' active involvement, deepening their understanding of moral values, and encouraging teacher creativity in compiling learning materials that are relevant to everyday life. The *Merdeka* Curriculum offers flexibility and a project-based approach that allows learning to be more personalized and contextualized.

A significant obstacle in the implementation of this curriculum is the difficulty in ensuring the application of the values taught in students' real lives. To overcome this, a holistic approach is applied, including reflection methods, evaluation, and project-based assignments, such as making videos, to ensure understanding and practice of the material. Overall, implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum in *Akidah Akhlak* is expected to create a generation that not only has strong religious knowledge but also has noble character and can contribute positively to society.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares that no conflicts of interest are associated with this authorship. The author guarantees this original submission has not been submitted to any other publisher for consideration.

Ethical Considerations

All sources used in this writing include journals, books, and also the results of interviews and observations that the author conducted to obtain data sources relevant to this writing.

Disclaimer

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