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Embedding the Love-Based Curriculum Values in Islamic Religious Education: Opportunities and Challenges in the Era of the Independent Curriculum

Ahmad Sayyidiman Hamidalloh
Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia
02040825045@student.uinsa.ac.id

M. Islah Azharul Muluk
Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia
02040825048@student.uinsa.ac.id

***Correspondence:** 02040825045@student.uinsa.ac.id*

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Abstract

Globalization and digital transformation require Islamic Religious Education to become more adaptive, contextual, and character-oriented. Although the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) provides opportunities to achieve these goals, its implementation continues to face challenges related to teacher readiness, differentiated instruction, technology integration, and limited resources. This study aims to describe the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in PAI learning at Kartini Junior High School, Taman, Sidoarjo, and to analyze the opportunities and challenges encountered by teachers during its implementation. Using a descriptive qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with the principal, vice principal for curriculum, and PAI teachers, complemented by classroom observations and curriculum document analysis. The findings indicate that the Independent Curriculum has been implemented independently and systematically through supportive school policies, teacher professional development, and adequate learning facilities. Key opportunities include flexible instructional module design, enhanced teacher professionalism, integration of Islamic values into the Pancasila Student Profile projects, and the use of digital facilities that promote contextual and collaborative learning. The curriculum's flexibility serves as a pedagogical framework for integrating Islamic values in more practical and meaningful ways, expanding the role of PAI from knowledge transmission to the holistic development of students' religious awareness and character. However, several challenges remain, including teacher and student readiness to adapt, low motivation for independent learning, limited educational resources, and administrative complexity alongside policy synchronization. Therefore, continuous professional

development and stronger institutional support are essential to optimize the implementation of the Independent Curriculum.
Keywords: Implementation, Independent Curriculum, Islamic Religious Education Learning, Kartini Taman Middle School

Globalisasi dan transformasi digital menuntut pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) menjadi lebih adaptif, kontekstual, dan berorientasi pada penguatan karakter. Meskipun Kurikulum Merdeka memberikan peluang untuk mewujudkan tujuan tersebut, implementasinya masih menghadapi tantangan yang berkaitan dengan kesiapan guru, penerapan pembelajaran berdiferensiasi, integrasi teknologi, dan keterbatasan sumber daya. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka dalam pembelajaran PAI di SMP Kartini Taman Sidoarjo serta menganalisis peluang dan tantangan yang dihadapi guru dalam pelaksanaannya. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan jenis studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan kepala sekolah, wakil kepala sekolah bidang kurikulum, dan guru PAI, yang dilengkapi dengan observasi proses pembelajaran serta analisis dokumen kurikulum. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Kurikulum Merdeka telah diimplementasikan secara mandiri dan sistematis melalui dukungan kebijakan sekolah, pengembangan profesional guru, serta penyediaan sarana pembelajaran yang memadai. Peluang utama yang muncul meliputi fleksibilitas dalam penyusunan modul ajar, peningkatan profesionalisme guru, integrasi nilai-nilai Islam dalam proyek Profil Pelajar Pancasila, serta pemanfaatan fasilitas digital yang mendorong pembelajaran kontekstual dan kolaboratif. Fleksibilitas kurikulum berfungsi sebagai kerangka pedagogis untuk mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai Islam secara lebih aplikatif dan bermakna, sehingga memperluas peran PAI dari sekadar transmisi pengetahuan menuju pembentukan kesadaran religius dan karakter peserta didik secara holistik. Namun demikian, implementasinya masih menghadapi berbagai tantangan, seperti kesiapan guru dan peserta didik dalam beradaptasi, rendahnya motivasi belajar mandiri, keterbatasan sarana pembelajaran, serta kompleksitas administrasi dan sinkronisasi kebijakan. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan pengembangan profesional guru secara berkelanjutan dan penguatan dukungan kelembagaan untuk mengoptimalkan implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka.
***Kata Kunci**: Implementasi, Kurikulum Merdeka, Pembelajaran PAI, SMP Kartini Taman*

INTRODUCTION

As time goes by, the world of education faces increasingly complex challenges, particularly in responding to rapid globalization, digital transformation, and socio-cultural changes in the era of Generation Z. Empirical data show that the quality of education in Indonesia still faces serious issues. For instance, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results indicate that Indonesian students' literacy and critical thinking skills remain below the OECD average, reflecting gaps in higher-order thinking and meaningful learning engagement. In addition, various studies highlight a decline in students' character and moral awareness, which is marked by increasing cases of academic dishonesty, low learning motivation, and weak internalization of ethical values in school environments (Ibtihal et al., 2025).

Education, therefore, plays a crucial role as a strategic instrument in national development, not only in developing academic competence but also in strengthening life skills and character in accordance with the noble values of the nation and religion

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(Setyawan, 2025). In the Indonesian context, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) holds a particularly significant position, as it is not merely oriented toward cognitive understanding of religious teachings but also toward shaping students' morality, personality, and spirituality (Permadi, 2026). Ideally, PAI is expected to produce a generation that is faithful, pious, and possesses noble character, while also being capable of living harmoniously in a pluralistic society (Putri et al., 2024).

Various studies show that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is beginning to develop in various educational institutions, but still faces several challenges (Sucipto et al., 2024). Research by Noor et al., (2023) demonstrated that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum can promote more contextual and participatory learning at the junior high school level. Another study by Rahman et al., (2024) also confirmed that this curriculum creates space for integrating Islamic values and digital literacy in learning. However, a study by Erihadiana et al., (2024) found that teacher readiness, mastery of differentiated pedagogy, and limited learning resources remain major obstacles to its implementation. These data indicate that although the Independent Curriculum has significant potential to improve the quality of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, its implementation at the school level still requires more in-depth empirical study.

The curriculum, as the primary educational instrument, plays a crucial role in responding to these changes (Firdaus & Permana, 2024) . Therefore, the Indonesian government, through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, launched the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) as an improvement on the 2013 Curriculum (Munawir et al., 2024). The transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Independent Curriculum was motivated by the need to provide learning that is more relevant, flexible, and responsive to current developments. The Curriculum (K-13) is considered to still have several limitations, particularly in terms of the administrative burden on teachers, the dominance of content-based approaches, and the limited space for students to independently explore their interests and potential (Waseso, 2018). Changes in the educational ecosystem after the pandemic have further emphasized the need for an adaptive curriculum that encourages creativity and prepares students to face the challenges of the digital era.

In the context of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, this shift is crucial because the Independent Curriculum grants teachers greater authority to develop contextual, collaborative, and character-centered learning strategies (Khoirunisa et al., 2025). The flexibility of developing learning modules, its emphasis on learning differentiation, and its focus on strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile or co-curricular activities allow PAI learning to be more closely aligned with students' needs and the realities of their lives (Yudha & Aulia, 2023).

The Merdeka Curriculum is designed with the philosophy that each student is a unique individual, so learning needs to provide space for the development of students' interests, talents, and potential (Parwati, 2023). This curriculum emphasizes a student-centered learning approach, learning differentiation, and a project to strengthen the Pancasila student profile, oriented towards character development, collaborative attitudes, creativity, and critical thinking skills (Marsela et al., 2024).

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is not without its challenges. On the one hand, there are various opportunities, such as teacher flexibility in designing teaching modules, project-based learning or group discussions, the integration of Islamic values with Pancasila student

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profile projects, and the strengthening of religious values through more contextual and meaningful learning (Sarindah, 2024). On the other hand, there are challenges, such as PAI teachers' limited understanding of the essence of the Independent Curriculum, the readiness of human resources and infrastructure, limited learning resources, the design of differentiated learning, difficulties in designing authentic competency-based assessments, and resistance from some educators to changing learning approaches (Hakim & Mustofa, 2025) .

Previous research has shown that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) presents various opportunities and challenges. In terms of opportunities, research by Noor et al. (2023) found that Kurmer is able to encourage more contextual and participatory learning at the junior high school level. Rahman et al. (2024) emphasized that Kurmer opens up space for integrating Islamic values with digital literacy, while the findings of Erihadiana et al. (2024) indicate that this curriculum provides flexibility for Islamic Religious Education teachers to adapt learning strategies to the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile. Furthermore, Nadzifa et al. (2024) stated that the implementation of Kurmer also increases collaboration between teachers and enriches Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning methods.

However, several challenges were also identified. Noor et al. (2023) noted that Islamic Religious Education teachers still require intensive guidance in developing teaching modules. Rahman et al. (2024) highlighted the limitations of facilities and teachers' pedagogical skills in differentiating learning. Managerial barriers also emerged, as explained by Erihadiana et al. (2024) , particularly regarding independent curriculum management and synchronization of teaching materials. Furthermore, a study by Nadzifa et al. (2024) emphasized that digital adaptation remains a barrier that needs to be addressed in supporting optimal implementation of Kurmer.

From the previous studies, it can be identified that most research on the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) has primarily focused on general descriptions or has been conducted in broader institutional contexts. However, there is still a limited number of in-depth studies that specifically examine how the curriculum is implemented at the micro level, particularly in schools with unique institutional characteristics and varying levels of resource readiness. This indicates a significant empirical gap in understanding how contextual factors shape the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in real classroom practices.In this regard, Kartini Taman Junior High School presents an important case to be examined. As a private school under the Kartini Taman Foundation, it operates within a relatively small-scale educational environment that is adaptive to national curriculum developments. The availability of internet access and managerial support from the foundation provides opportunities for teachers, including PAI teachers, to develop technology-based, differentiated, and character-oriented learning. At the same time, factors such as human resource capacity, availability of teaching materials, and curriculum management remain critical determinants of the school's readiness to optimize the Independent Curriculum (Fadillah et al., 2025).

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at Kartini Taman Junior High School through a case study approach. This research not only describes the implementation practices but also critically explores the opportunities and challenges

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faced by PAI teachers, thereby providing a more contextual and in-depth understanding of curriculum implementation at the school level.

This research is important because it provides an empirical overview of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at the junior high school level. It also demonstrates the extent to which curriculum flexibility can be utilized to strengthen learning oriented toward developing religious character and strengthening students' Islamic values. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the development of PAI learning practices that are more adaptive, contextual, and relevant to the demands of 21st-century education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study. This approach was chosen because it allows for a natural depiction of educational phenomena within a real-world context without manipulating variables. The primary focus of the research is on Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers' practices in designing and implementing independent curriculum-based learning, including differentiated learning strategies, project activities to strengthen the Pancasila Student Profile, and the authentic assessment methods used.

The research was conducted at Kartini Taman Junior High School in Sidoarjo Regency, a private school under the auspices of the Kartini Taman Foundation that has independently implemented the Merdeka Curriculum for three years. The location was selected based on the school's adaptive learning environment, its use of the National Curriculum (Kurnas), and its active development of technology-based learning and co-curricular activities. The research was conducted in October and November 2025, covering the stages of instrument preparation, field data collection, analysis, and report preparation.

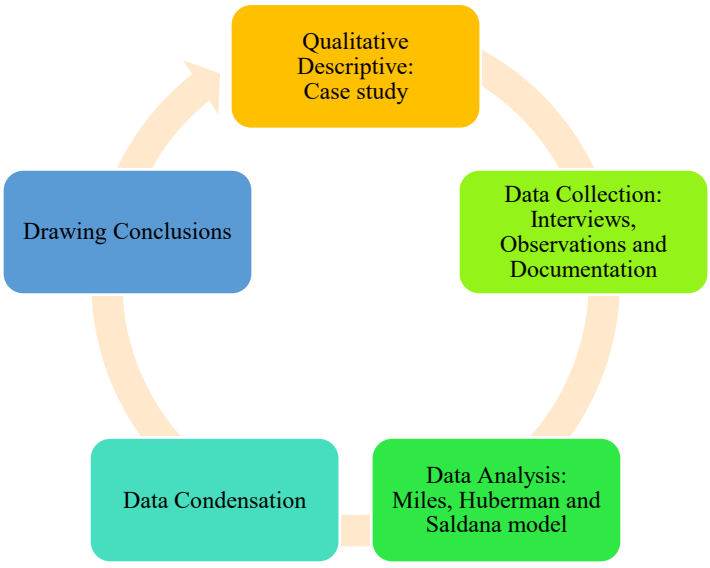


Figure 1 Research Flow

Figure 1 illustrates the research flow. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and documentation studies. Interviews were conducted

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with two Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers (grades VII and IX, and VIII), the principal, and the Deputy Curriculum Supervisor to obtain a comprehensive view of the implementation of the independent curriculum. Observations were conducted to directly examine classroom learning activities and the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. Documentation studies were used to collect secondary data, such as teaching modules and student project activity reports (Sugiyono, 2016).

Data analysis was conducted using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana model, which includes three stages: data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). The Miles et al., (2014) analysis model was chosen because it provides a systematic analytical framework, making it easier for researchers to process data sequentially. This model is also effective and flexible in the context of educational research and allows for continuous analysis, resulting in more valid and credible results. Data validity was strengthened by triangulation of sources and techniques to ensure high validity and scientific accountability of the research results (Rijali, 2019).

RESULT

Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education Learning at Kartini Taman Middle School

The results of an interview with the Deputy Head of Curriculum at Kartini Taman Junior High School revealed that the school has been implementing the Independent Curriculum independently for approximately three years. This implementation is a follow-up to coordination with the Sidoarjo Regency Education Office, which gives the school the flexibility to determine the implementation path for the Independent Curriculum. The Deputy Head of Curriculum stated: “We were told to choose the Kurmer implementation coordinated by the Sidoarjo Regency office, for the implementation of the Kurmer. Independent, shared, or what? We are trying to implement the independent one, although there are still difficulties in the policies. It has been implemented for three years, and one class has already graduated.” (Deputy Head of Curriculum, 2025) .

This statement demonstrates that the school has adapted to the Independent Curriculum policy, despite still encountering administrative and technical challenges. To support its implementation, the school also conducts teacher training and mentoring, involving supervisors from the Department of Education. The Deputy Head of Curriculum explained: "We have supervisors from the Department of Education conducting training, and several teachers have participated. We also invited resource persons from the Department, and the implementation is in collaboration with Nidhomuddin Middle School. The supervisors are a team of ten people." (Deputy Head of Curriculum, 2025) .

In line with the statement of the Deputy Head of Curriculum, the principal stated: “ The school policy in implementing the Independent Curriculum focuses on gradual transitions, full support for teachers, and coaching .” (Principal, 2025a) . He continued, “Focus on Vision, We emphasize the implementation of P5 as the main vision for character building. Furthermore, we ensure our KOSP is flexible and relevant to the school context. Strengthening Human Resources, We facilitate teachers to participate in independent training at PMM and provide In House Training (IHT) sessions led by the school’s core teachers.” (Principal, 2025a) .

An interview with a grade VIII Islamic Religious Education teacher revealed how the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Kartini Taman Middle School was carried out in stages, emphasizing flexibility and student needs. The teacher explained

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that learning planning begins with understanding the Learning Outcomes (CP) and developing a Learning Objective Flow (ATP) before designing the teaching module. He said: "I start by understanding the existing Learning Outcomes (CP). Then, I develop a Learning Objective Flow (ATP) and create a Teaching Module. I designed this Teaching Module to be as flexible as possible, incorporating various methods to accommodate student diversity." (Grade VIII Islamic Religious Education Teacher, 2025) .

Observations in grade VIII of Kartini Taman Middle School revealed that the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teacher began the lesson with apperception through contextual questions that linked morality material to social phenomena around the students. The teacher used video and PowerPoint media to support the explanation. Students appeared enthusiastic and engaged in discussion activities and group assignments. This activity aligns with interview results which indicate that the Independent Curriculum emphasizes a flexible and collaborative approach. In line with the Grade VIII PAI teacher, a Grade VII and Grade IX PAI teacher stated: " In my opinion, the basic concept of the Independent Curriculum is essentially providing freedom and flexibility. Freedom means that teachers can choose and modify materials according to students' needs, and students are also encouraged to learn according to their interests and learning styles. So, learning is student-centered, not just pursuing material targets." (PAI Teachers Grades VII & IX, 2025) .

In preparing teachers to implement the independence curriculum, the principal took several steps. " We took structured steps. Formation of Learning Communities (Kombel), Islamic Education Teachers, together with other teachers, meet regularly to share good practices. Individual Mentoring, namely the Principal and Deputy Principal of Curriculum supervise and coach teachers periodically, not to assess, but to support and facilitate teachers' needs. Resource Provision, We provide access to digital platforms and reference books of the Independent Curriculum for Islamic Religious Education teachers." (Principal, 2025a) .

In addition to developing teacher competencies, the school also pays attention to providing supporting facilities. The Deputy Head of Curriculum stated that the school is trying to improve facilities such as wifi networks and projectors, although they are still limited by security and maintenance factors: "Teachers are required to develop their skills, so wifi is necessary . Initially only in the office, then spread across each floor. For projectors, there are three, but we do not install them in every classroom for security and maintenance reasons." (Deputy Head of Curriculum, 2025) .

The school also adjusted its policy regarding the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), which is now a co-curricular activity, as stated by the curriculum vice-chairman: "It used to be called P5, now it's co-curricular." (Curriculum Vice-chairman, 2025) . Meanwhile, teachers integrated Islamic values into the practical Pancasila Student Profile (P5) project. One example of this is the School Waste Bank project with the theme "Sustainable Lifestyle." He said: "Students created the School Waste Bank project. They learned the concept of cleanliness (thaharah) in Islam, responsibility towards the environment as part of faith, and the ethics of resource management." (8th Grade Islamic Education Teacher, 2025)

Meanwhile, the policy on student gadget use has also been adjusted to support digital-based learning activities: "Previously, it was not allowed, but because it required communication between students and parents (when picking up children), now cellphones are allowed but must be collected at the office. For learning purposes, they may be used with the permission of the homeroom teacher." (Deputy Head of Curriculum, 2025)

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Evaluation of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum is conducted routinely through supervision by the principal every six months, which includes academic and learning supervision. Islamic Religious Education teachers at Kartini Taman Middle School have implemented the Independent Curriculum by adopting teaching modules from the Ministry of Education and Culture that are tailored to student characteristics. "The principal conducts supervision every six months, including supervision of learning and equipment. Teaching modules may be used from the Ministry of Education and Culture, but may also be modified as needed." (Waka Curriculum, 2025) .

The principal's explanation of the evaluation mechanism: "We carry out several things. First, I and the curriculum team conduct regular classroom supervision to directly observe how teachers teach and whether it aligns with the spirit of the Independent Curriculum. Second, we review student learning outcomes reports and P5 activity reports. Third, we hold monthly evaluation meetings with all teachers, where we discuss challenges and seek solutions together." (Principal, 2025) .

Islamic Religious Education teachers independently develop teaching modules by adapting government modules and adding local contextualization to make them more relevant to students' lives. A grade VIII Islamic Religious Education teacher stated: "I develop and modify existing teaching modules. I use modules from the government or school as a basic reference, but I add examples of Islamic Religious Education cases that are relevant to my students' environment." (Grade VIII Islamic Religious Education Teacher, 2025) . Another Islamic Religious Education teacher also explained: " I modify the teaching modules provided by the government, sir, because it is impossible for me to use them raw. However, I mostly compile them myself, because I feel I better understand the needs and context of the students' environment in our school. Making it myself is more tiring, but the results are more appropriate and relatable to the children." (Grade VII & IX Islamic Religious Education Teacher, 2025) .

In implementing learning, Islamic Religious Education teachers apply differentiated learning in the aspects of content, process, and product. He gave an example: "For example, for students who quickly master the material, I provide additional learning resources such as readings or videos about contemporary religious issues. Students can also choose their learning methods, for example making concept maps, worship simulation videos, or infographic posters." (Islamic Religious Education Teacher Grade VIII, 2025) . Another Islamic Religious Education teacher's view is the same, with the statement: " The key to differentiated learning is in the process and product. For example, when discussing morality material , if the process differentiation is I can ask students who like to write to write essays. Those who like to talk, can make video presentations. Those who like to draw, can make digital posters or infographics about morality. If the product differentiation is the final results they make also vary, but the point is that they all demonstrate an understanding of the material." (Islamic Religious Education Teacher Grade VII & IX, 2025) .

Based on observations in the eighth grade at Kartini Taman Middle School, it was apparent that the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teacher had implemented the principles of differentiated learning as mandated by the Independent Curriculum. The teacher began the learning activity with an apperception and a simple diagnostic assessment through questions and answers to determine the students' initial understanding of the material on morals in everyday life. Afterward, the teacher divided the students into several study groups based on their ability levels.

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Each group received a different assignment based on their needs. High-ability students were asked to analyze material on discipline in worship in social life and present their findings using digital media. Meanwhile, moderate-ability students were directed to create a concept map of worship, and basic-ability students were given more intensive guidance to understand concrete examples through video presentations and simple discussions.

In addition to differentiating materials and methods, the teacher also gave students the freedom to choose the final product format, as agreed upon by each group. Some students chose to create digital posters, while others wrote short reflections or created short educational videos about the importance of honesty in Islam. The teacher facilitated all these activities using PowerPoint presentations , instructional videos, and digital worksheets shared through Google Classroom . Another impact is seen in the integration of Islamic values in co-curricular activities, such as the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), which encourages students to actualize religious teachings in real life, such as social awareness, environmental responsibility, and tolerance.

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum has demonstrated a tangible impact on the dynamics of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning in the classroom. Observations indicate that learning has become more interactive and participatory because teachers provide more space for students to discuss, conduct projects, and express their understanding through various forms of learning products. Students not only passively receive material but also actively engage in the learning process through case analysis activities, Islamic value-based projects, and reflections on religious experiences in everyday life. This approach demonstrates that curriculum flexibility not only results in a variety of learning methods but also encourages the development of independent learning and greater student engagement.

Classroom observations revealed that students appeared active, enthusiastic, and confident in expressing their opinions. The teacher acted as a facilitator, providing direct feedback on student work. This approach aligns with the principles of student-centered learning, which emphasize independent learning and empowering each student's unique potential. The teacher’s role as a facilitator, providing feedback rather than direct instruction, further reinforces this shift. This approach aligns with the principles of student-centered learning, where learners are given space to regulate their own learning processes. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the level of independence varied among students. Some students still relied on teacher guidance, indicating that flexibility alone is not sufficient to automatically foster independent learning. Therefore, while the Independent Curriculum creates opportunities for enhancing student autonomy, its actual impact depends on how effectively teachers scaffold and guide students toward self-directed learning.

The research findings show that the learning flexibility within the Independent Curriculum not only results in a variety of learning methods but also contributes to increased student learning independence. Observations in grade VIII of Kartini Taman Middle School revealed that students were given the freedom to choose learning product formats, such as digital posters, video presentations, or written reflections, based on their interests and learning styles. Furthermore, teachers differentiated between processes and products by assigning different assignments based on student ability levels. Interviews with Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers revealed that this approach encouraged students to actively seek out learning resources independently, engage in group discussions, and express their understanding through various media. This indicates that

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the flexibility within the Independent Curriculum not only results in a variety of learning methods but also provides students with the opportunity to develop independent learning and actively participate in the learning process.

The learning strategies and methods of the eighth grade Islamic Religious Education teacher, as he said: " I most often use project-based or case-based learning (Project Based Learning). This is very effective in Islamic Religious Education because students can directly practice knowledge, for example, simulating case studies on tolerance, or analyzing religious practices in society. In addition, I also use group discussions to train critical reasoning and the Critical Reasoning dimension in P5." (Eighth Grade Islamic Religious Education Teacher, 2025) . In contrast to the eighth grade Islamic Religious Education teacher, the seventh and ninth grade Islamic Religious Education teachers apply discussion and problem-based learning methods in learning, "What I most often use is the discussion and problem-solving method (Problem-Based Learning) . For example, when discussing contemporary cases, I invite students to discuss finding solutions from an Islamic perspective. In addition, the role-playing method is also good for religious or moral material, so they can directly experience its application." (7th & IX Grade Islamic Religious Education Teacher, 2025) .

Media or technology used to support Islamic Religious Education learning, "I utilize easily accessible technology: Learning Videos or animations. Furthermore, technology is employed to support practical and affective aspects of learning, such as recording students' recitation of the Qur'an, documenting worship practices, or creating reflective video assignments related to Islamic values in daily life. This indicates that, unlike other subjects that tend to emphasize cognitive outcomes, the integration of technology in PAI learning is oriented toward the holistic development of students, encompassing cognitive understanding, moral awareness, and spiritual engagement.

The goal is to explain abstract material, such as Islamic history or metaphysical concepts. Then the Interactive Presentation Platform (Kahoot, Quizziz), for fun formative assessments. Google Classroom or WhatsApp Group to share learning resources (PDF, e-books , video links) and communication media for assignments or discussions outside of class hours. Cellphone Voice and Video Recorders, students use them for practical assignments, for example recording reading the Qur'an or practicing prayer. " (8th Grade Islamic Religious Education Teacher, 2025) . However, despite these opportunities, several challenges emerge in the implementation of technology-based learning in PAI. First, not all students demonstrate the same level of digital literacy and learning independence, which may limit the effectiveness of technology integration. Second, the use of technology tends to risk becoming merely a variation of instructional methods if it is not accompanied by meaningful pedagogical design. From the perspective of constructivist learning theory, learning should enable students to actively construct knowledge through reflection and experience, not merely interact with digital tools. In this context, technology may fail to foster deep learning if it is only used for surface-level engagement, such as answering quizzes without critical reflection.

Unlike other subjects, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning has its own characteristics, as it focuses not only on mastering academic competencies but also on developing students' spiritual, moral, and religious character. In this context, PAI has a strategic function as a vehicle for internalizing Islamic values, encompassing aspects of faith, worship, and morals in daily life. Although the potential for implementing the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is quite strong, this study also identified several

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challenges that need to be more explicitly emphasized, such as teachers' readiness to understand the curriculum philosophy, limited learning facilities, and low learning independence among some students. The success of curriculum innovation is determined not only by policy, but also by the readiness of educational actors to shift the learning paradigm from teacher-centered to student-centered. Therefore, the challenges of implementing the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning are not only technical but also related to the process of pedagogical adaptation and changes in the learning culture within the school environment.

Opportunities in Implementing the Independent Curriculum

a. Policy Support and Regulatory Clarity

The first opportunity lies in the school's policy aspects that align with the directives of the Sidoarjo Regency Education Office. Schools are given the freedom to choose their implementation path, and SMP Kartini chose the independent path, as a form of internal readiness. The Deputy Head of Curriculum stated: "We were told to choose the Kurmer implementation coordinated by the Sidoarjo Regency Office. We are trying to implement the independent one, although there are still difficulties in the policies. It has been implemented for three years, and one class has already graduated." (Deputy Head of Curriculum, 2025) .

This statement demonstrates that the Independent Curriculum has provided clearer and more structured policy direction for schools and opened up opportunities for innovation within the capacity of each institution. The Independent Curriculum also encourages collaboration between teachers in cross-subject projects. He stated: "Now, collaboration between teachers is even stronger through the P5 project. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) can be connected with other subjects within the same project." (8th Grade Islamic Religious Education Teacher, 2025) . The school also provides mentoring and special training for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, as explained by the principal : “We always send our Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers to participate in training or seminars on the Independent Curriculum, especially those focused on the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) and differentiated learning.” (Principal, 2025) .

b. Strengthening Teacher Professionalism

The Independent Curriculum also encourages increased teacher professionalism through training and inter-school collaboration. Schools actively participate in training conducted by the Education Office and supervisors . "We have supervisors from the Education Office conducting the training, and several teachers are participating. We also invite supervisors from the office to participate in the training, and the implementation is carried out in collaboration with Nidhomuddin Middle School." (Deputy Head of Curriculum, 2025) .

The training activities expand teachers' pedagogical competencies, including in the preparation of teaching modules, development of co-curricular projects, and implementation of student-centered learning. The flexibility in designing teaching modules and learning methods allows teachers to adapt the material to current religious issues surrounding their students. He emphasized: "Islamic Religious Education teachers

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have the freedom and creativity to adapt the material to current religious issues surrounding their students." (8th Grade Islamic Religious Education Teacher, 2025) .

c. Digital Facilities and Technology Support

Another opportunity is improving learning support facilities, such as Wi-Fi networks and projectors. The school strives to provide facilities to support the digitalization of the teaching and learning process. "Teachers are required to develop their skills, so Wi-Fi is necessary . Initially, it was only in the office, but then it was spread throughout every corner of every floor, from the first to the third. There are three projectors ." (Deputy Head of Curriculum, 2025) .

The facilities provided by the school to support the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum include comfortable classrooms, digital resources, and reference books. As explained by the principal of Kartini Middle School: "In terms of facilities, thank God, we have prepared them. We ensure that the classrooms are comfortable and supportive for group discussions, not just listening to lectures. Furthermore, we are also working on digital resources, such as projectors, Interactive Flat Panels (IFPs), and internet access for teachers to find more modern teaching materials or learning media. Sometimes, we also budget for purchasing reference books or additional teaching modules relevant to the Merdeka Curriculum." (Principal, 2025a) .

In addition, the school provides flexibility for students to use cell phones under teacher supervision, to support digital-based learning. "Students may bring cell phones but they are collected in the office. If there is a lesson that requires a cell phone, the subject teacher informs the homeroom teacher and is permitted." (Vice Principal of Curriculum, 2025) . This shows a positive adaptation to technological developments, as well as an opportunity to strengthen Islamic Religious Education learning that is relevant to the current context. The support of digital technology also provides an opportunity to strengthen interactive learning. The teacher explained: "I utilize technology such as learning videos, Kahoot , Google Classroom , and WhatsApp Groups for discussions and assignments. Students can also send recordings of prayer practices or reading the Quran via cell phone." (8th Grade Islamic Religious Education Teacher, 2025) .

d. Strengthening Character Learning through Co-curricular Activities

The transformation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) into a co-curricular activity presents a significant opportunity to instill religious character and spiritual values. "Previously called P5, now called co-curricular." (Deputy Head of Curriculum, 2025) . This change demonstrates that the character values contained in the P5 project are now directly integrated into Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning activities. As a result, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers have the opportunity to shape students' religious character through practical activities and socio-religious projects.

The Independent Curriculum provides ample space for teachers to innovate and contextualize Islamic values in learning activities. A teacher stated: “The opportunities are huge. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning becomes more relevant and practical. The focus on character (P5) makes PAI not only theoretical but directly realized in everyday behavior.” (8th Grade PAI Teacher, 2025) . Another PAI teacher said, “ It increases the relevance of PAI to students’ lives. Because the material can be modified, we can discuss current issues from an Islamic perspective, so that PAI lessons become

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more connected. This also strengthens their religious character through P5 and more focused learning." (7th & 9th Grade PAI Teacher, 2025) .

e. Directions for Deeper Learning (Deep Learning)

The Independent Curriculum opens up opportunities for teachers to conduct in-depth learning . This concept enables students to understand the meaning of religious values reflectively and contextually. "It has now become the national curriculum (Kurnas)... there is continued application of learning or deep learning ." (Waka Curriculum, 2025) . This presents an opportunity for the development of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning that emphasizes not only memorization but also the interpretation and application of Islamic values in real life.

The teacher's strategy involves implementing adaptive strategies, including integrating assessments into the learning process and conducting outreach to parents. She stated: "I conduct formative assessments on-the-go, and I assign memorization material as independent homework. I also frequently remind parents about the philosophy of the Independent Curriculum." (Grade VIII Islamic Religious Education Teacher, 2025) .

Challenges in Implementing the Independent Curriculum

a. Teacher and Student Readiness to Adapt

The main challenge in implementing the Independent Curriculum is human resource readiness. Both teachers and students are still adapting to the changing learning paradigm. "Some students and teachers are hesitant to take the plunge." (Deputy Head of Curriculum, 2025) . This situation demonstrates that, despite the spirit of reform, ongoing support is needed to ensure teachers are able to fully implement the Independent Curriculum.

The principal explained the challenges in the field: "There are definitely challenges, the most common being teachers adapting from the 2013 Curriculum to the current one, especially in terms of creating teaching modules and implementing differentiated learning, which requires hard work. Especially for Islamic Religious Education (PAI), sometimes the limited media and technology for modern learning is still a challenge, especially when teaching material that requires engaging visual examples. Finally, raising parental awareness about the importance of character education at home is also our homework." (Principal, 2025). These findings indicate that school policies in implementing the Independent Curriculum are inherently contextual and relative, as they are shaped by the specific conditions, resources, and readiness of the school community. The challenges faced are not merely technical barriers, but reflect the dynamic process of policy adaptation at the institutional level. However, this relative nature of policy implementation does not imply rigidity; instead, it opens up opportunities for continuous innovation and gradual improvement. The flexibility embedded in the Independent Curriculum allows schools to refine their strategies over time, particularly in strengthening teacher capacity, integrating technology in PAI learning, and fostering collaboration with parents (Sarindah, 2024). Therefore, school policy should be understood not as a fixed framework, but as an evolving process that provides space for future pedagogical innovation.

The Merdeka Curriculum implementation policy at Kartini Taman Middle School is essentially contextual and relative, adapting to the school's resource availability, including teachers, facilities, and student learning culture. Nevertheless, the policy leaves room for future learning innovations, particularly in strengthening differentiated learning

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practices, utilizing educational technology, and integrating Islamic values into learning activities and student character projects.

The Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teacher also acknowledged various challenges in implementing the Independent Curriculum. The main challenges relate to time constraints and changes in the mindsets of students and parents. He explained: "The time for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) lessons is limited, while the demands for diagnostic assessments and differentiated learning are numerous. So sometimes we have to be smart in managing it." (8th Grade Islamic Religious Education Teacher, 2025) . Furthermore, there is a fixation on numbers: "There are still students and parents who are oriented towards numerical grades, even though the Independent Curriculum emphasizes the process and character development." (8th Grade Islamic Religious Education Teacher, 2025) . These challenges reflect a fundamental shift in the role of teachers within the framework of the Independent Curriculum. Teachers are no longer positioned merely as curriculum implementers, but as curriculum designers who are responsible for planning, adapting, and contextualizing learning based on students' needs and characteristics. In this context, PAI teachers must not only deliver content but also design diagnostic assessments, develop differentiated learning pathways, and construct meaningful evaluation systems that align with the goals of character and value internalization.

This shift requires teachers to exercise higher levels of pedagogical competence, creativity, and professional judgment. At the same time, it also explains why time constraints and mindset transformation become critical challenges, as the responsibility of designing learning is inherently more complex than simply implementing predetermined curriculum structures. Therefore, the effectiveness of the Independent Curriculum in PAI learning is closely linked to the teacher's capacity to function as an adaptive and reflective curriculum designer.

The role of teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum has also undergone a significant shift, no longer merely as curriculum implementers but as learning designers. Teachers have greater freedom to design strategies, methods, and assessment formats that are appropriate to student characteristics and the classroom context. Through this flexibility, teachers can develop more contextual, differentiated, and student-centered learning. This ensures that the learning process not only follows the formal curriculum structure but also provides a creative space for teachers to develop more meaningful learning experiences.

b. Low Motivation and Independence in Student Learning

The resource person also revealed that some students still exhibit a passive attitude and lack enthusiasm for learning. "Some are still reluctant to be encouraged to study harder." (Deputy Head of Curriculum, 2025) . This fact shows that the Merdeka Curriculum's orientation, which emphasizes independent learning, has not been fully achieved, necessitating strengthening motivation and fostering a culture of active learning among students.

c. Limited Learning Facilities

Despite improvements in facilities, their use remains limited due to safety and maintenance factors. "We don't install projectors in every classroom for safety and maintenance reasons. Students still can't maintain the facilities." (Vice Principal for Curriculum, 2025) . This limitation poses a technical barrier that can reduce the effectiveness of media-based learning, especially in Islamic Religious Education (PAI)

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lessons, which ideally utilize a variety of interactive media. Teachers hope for increased support from the school and the government for facilities. He added: “We need support in the form of facilities for the P5 project and more in-depth training on teaching modules and differentiated assessment.” (8th Grade Islamic Religious Education Teacher, 2025) .

d. Administrative Complexity and Policy Adjustments

In addition to technical challenges, administrative adaptation to new policies also presents a challenge. “We are trying to implement them independently, although there are still difficulties with the policies.” (Vice Principal for Curriculum, 2025) . Schools need to make adjustments to teaching materials, supervision, and evaluation systems. Although the principal has conducted routine supervision, the administrative transition requires time to stabilize. Training and sharing about education are also necessary, as stated by the resource person: “More in-depth and ongoing training on the development of Teaching Modules and differentiated assessments, as well as the provision of easily accessible and contextual Islamic Education digital learning resources.” (8th Grade Islamic Education Teacher, 2025) . Several new terms also pose a challenge, “obstacles in the New Administration, new terms such as CP, TP, Teaching Module, P5. This takes time to understand and organize.” (7th & 9th Grade Islamic Education Teacher, 2025) .

DISCUSSION

Analysis of the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education Learning

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Kartini Taman Middle School demonstrates a paradigm shift from content-based teaching to competency- and character-based learning. Based on initial interviews with the Deputy Head of Curriculum at Kartini Taman Middle School, the Independent Curriculum has been implemented for three years through an independent pathway, under the coordination of the Sidoarjo Regency Education Office. The school demonstrated structural readiness by establishing an internal curriculum team, conducting semester-long supervision, and adapting Islamic Religious Education teachers' teaching materials to student needs (Miranti, 2024).

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Kartini Taman Middle School demonstrates a paradigm shift in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning from a conventional model to one that is more flexible, contextual, and oriented toward character building (Martatiyana et al., 2023). In this context, PAI learning no longer focuses solely on cognitive mastery but also focuses on developing noble, independent, and faithful characters.

Interviews with the Deputy Head of Curriculum showed that SMP Kartini has implemented these three stages in a gradual and sustainable manner. Development efforts are also evident in Islamic Religious Education teacher training with supervisors from the Education Office, as well as improvements to supporting facilities such as Wi-Fi networks and projectors used to support technology-based learning. However, some teachers and students still face challenges adapting to this new approach, in line with findings by Setyawan (2025) .

The independent curriculum also serves as an opportunity for innovation and a return to the essence of Islamic Religious Education. The courage to try new methods, focusing on strengthening students' morals and character, is reflected in the perspective of a Grade VIII Islamic Religious Education Teacher (2025) . This emphasizes that teachers not only teach knowledge but also guide students to become faithful, noble

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individuals, and ready to face the challenges of the times. Thus, in general, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at Kartini Taman Middle School has been structurally effective, although it still requires strengthening teacher capacity and adapting student learning cultures so that the religious values that are at the core of Islamic Religious Education can be transformed more contextually and meaningfully.

Opportunity Analysis: Flexibility and Innovation Dimensions

The flexibility provided by the Independent Curriculum allows Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers to innovate in learning methods and assessments. The Independent Curriculum provides significant policy flexibility and pedagogical innovation within Kartini Taman Middle School. From an institutional perspective, the independent pathway policy provides the school with the opportunity to align its curriculum with the vision of Islamic education, which emphasizes a balance between knowledge, character, and morals (Hamidalloh & Hamdani, 2025).

The Deputy Head of Curriculum explained that the school strives to adapt learning materials to student needs and encourages teachers to innovate in teaching methods. This reinforces Parwati's (2023) view that curriculum flexibility provides teachers with the opportunity to develop contextual learning- based curricula tailored to student characteristics.

The next opportunity lies in strengthening teacher professionalism and the digital transformation of learning. With training provided by Education Office supervisors and improved facilities such as Wi-Fi and permission to use mobile phones for learning, Islamic Religious Education teachers now have the opportunity to expand media-based and project-based learning approaches. For example, a policy allowing students to use mobile phones under teacher supervision allows for mini-research-based activities or reflections on Islamic values from digital social phenomena. This aligns with the direction of 21st-century education, which integrates digital literacy with spiritual literacy. (Manshur & Isroani, 2023) .

Furthermore, the transformation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) into a co-curricular activity also strengthens the potential for Islamic character education. In the context of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), this activity provides a significant opportunity to develop the values of monotheism, honesty, responsibility, and social solidarity (Hakim & Mustofa, 2025). This opportunity demonstrates that the Independent Curriculum encourages PAI teachers to develop students who not only understand Islamic teachings theoretically but also are able to apply them in social, environmental, and digital contexts. Thus, the primary opportunity for Kurmer at Kartini Taman Middle School is the creation of a space for PAI teachers to innovate creatively and reflectively in internalizing Islamic values amidst the demands of flexibility and digitalization in education.

Challenge Analysis: Dimensions of Readiness and Structural Support

The main challenge to implementing the Independent Curriculum lies in the readiness of human resources and institutional support from schools. Research shows that some Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers still struggle to understand the curriculum's philosophy, particularly in developing authentic assessments and differentiated learning. Despite the significant opportunities, implementing the Independent Curriculum also faces a number of systemic and cultural challenges.

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Interviews revealed that the main challenges are teacher readiness, student motivation, and limited supporting facilities.

The discussion has highlighted the roles of supervision and school policy in supporting the implementation of the Independent Curriculum (Sufiyah et al., 2024). However, a more in-depth analysis indicates that the success and sustainability of curriculum implementation are not solely determined by administrative supervision, but are fundamentally influenced by the quality of instructional leadership exercised by the school principal. Instructional leadership plays a pivotal role in directing, guiding, and ensuring that teaching and learning practices remain aligned with the core objectives of the curriculum.

In the context of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), this role becomes even more crucial, as the flexibility offered by the Independent Curriculum may lead to variations in teaching practices if not properly guided. Instructional leadership ensures that such flexibility does not dilute the essence of PAI, particularly in maintaining the consistency of Islamic values, including faith (iman), worship (ibadah), and moral conduct (akhlak) (Novanto et al., 2025). Through continuous supervision, mentoring, and professional support, the principal is able to shape a shared pedagogical vision among teachers, ensuring that innovation in learning remains rooted in value-based education.

First, teacher and student readiness is still varied. The informant stated that "some students and teachers are hesitant to take the next step." (Waka Curriculum, 2025) . This means that understanding of Kurmer's philosophy and learning practices is still uneven. This finding confirms Hakim & Mustofa's (2025) opinion that one of the main obstacles to implementing Kurmer in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) subjects is teachers' low reflective ability and pedagogical skills in adapting learning designs to student needs. Hakim & Mustofa's (2025) study also stated that the success of the Independent Curriculum is highly dependent on teachers' pedagogical competence and mindset. Similarly, the findings of Wibowo et al., (2025) , without intensive training and school support and equal distribution of facilities, a change in learning paradigm will be difficult to achieve. This research discussion demonstrates that principal supervision and policies play a crucial role in supporting the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in schools. However, a more fundamental aspect is the principal's instructional leadership, a key factor in ensuring the success and sustainability of curriculum implementation. Through effective instructional leadership, principals can direct learning practices, provide mentoring to teachers, and ensure that the flexibility of the Independent Curriculum remains aligned with educational goals, including maintaining the consistency of internalizing Islamic values in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning.

Second, from the students' perspective, there are still obstacles to learning motivation and independence. The statement that "some are still reluctant to be encouraged to study harder" indicates that the spirit of self-directed learning has not yet fully developed. This demonstrates the importance of the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers in providing spiritual guidance that is not only cognitive but also touches on the affective and motivational aspects of students, in line with the findings of Alif et al., (2025) .

Wi-Fi are available , their use is not optimal due to security and maintenance concerns. "We don't install projectors in every classroom for security reasons." This situation limits teachers' exploration of visual learning media or religious videos, which have real potential.

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Finally, institutionally, policy synchronization and ongoing supervision are still needed to ensure consistent implementation of the curriculum at Kartini Middle School. The principal's routine six-monthly supervision is a positive step, but it needs to be reinforced with a more intensive teacher professional development system to ensure the application of religious values remains at the core of every learning activity. These challenges demonstrate that while the implementation of the Independent Curriculum has brought positive changes, its success still depends heavily on the readiness of human resources, institutional support, and the understanding of the curriculum's philosophy by all parties.

Nevertheless, a deeper analysis reveals that the challenges in implementing the Independent Curriculum should not merely be understood as technical issues, such as teacher readiness, limited facilities, or students' learning motivation. Rather, these challenges are fundamentally cultural and paradigmatic in nature. The shift from a teacher-centered, content-oriented approach to a student-centered, process- and character-oriented paradigm requires a transformation in the mindset of all educational stakeholders, including teachers, students, and parents (Nasution & Pohan, 2024).

The persistence of grade-oriented thinking, reliance on teacher direction, and resistance to new learning approaches indicate that the educational culture has not yet fully aligned with the philosophy of the Independent Curriculum. In this context, curriculum reform is not simply a matter of policy implementation, but a process of cultural change that demands the reconstruction of beliefs, values, and learning habits within the school environment. Therefore, the success of the Independent Curriculum depends not only on structural support, but also on the school's capacity to cultivate an adaptive and reflective learning culture that is consistent with the goals of holistic and value-based education.

The description of the challenges of implementing the Independent Curriculum in this study initially seemed to focus on technical aspects, such as teacher readiness, limited facilities, and student learning motivation. However, a more in-depth analysis reveals that the main challenges are actually cultural and paradigmatic. Curriculum changes require not only adjustments to learning tools but also a shift in perspective on the teaching and learning process, from a teacher-centered model to a more participatory and student-centered model. Therefore, the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum depends heavily on schools' ability to build an adaptive learning culture and teachers' readiness to internalize a more reflective and contextual learning paradigm.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at Kartini Taman Junior High School in Sidoarjo demonstrates a paradigm shift in education, moving from a conventional learning model to a more flexible, contextual approach oriented toward developing religious character. Overall, the implementation has been effective, supported by school policies, principal supervision, and ongoing teacher training. The curriculum's flexibility offers significant opportunities, enabling PAI teachers to develop differentiated learning, integrate Islamic values into co-curricular activities, and utilize digital technology to enhance interactivity and foster reflection on students' religious values.

Despite the opportunities, successful implementation faces challenges, particularly the readiness of teachers and students to understand the philosophy of the Independent Curriculum, low levels of student learning independence, limited learning facilities, and

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the complexity of curriculum administration. Therefore, strengthening teacher capacity through ongoing training, improving school facilities, and fostering student motivation and character is necessary to fully realize the spirit of the Independent Curriculum. Flexibility in the Independent Curriculum does not automatically improve learning quality; rather, it provides a pedagogical space that enables teachers to design more contextual, differentiated, and meaningful learning experiences. The relationship between the flexibility of the Independent Curriculum and learning quality needs to be more clearly understood in the context of classroom learning practices. Curriculum flexibility does not automatically improve learning quality, but rather creates a pedagogical opportunity that allows teachers to design more contextual, differentiated, and student-centered learning.

Therefore, learning quality depends heavily on teachers' ability to utilize this flexibility to develop learning strategies relevant to students' needs, characteristics, and learning experiences. Therefore, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning under the Independent Curriculum has great potential to produce a religious, adaptive, and character-driven generation capable of facing the challenges of the global era wisely and with noble morals. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) should not be positioned merely as a subject that follows the framework of the Independent Curriculum, but as a discipline that offers a distinctive contribution through the integration of spiritual, moral, and character values. Through this role, PAI enriches the curriculum by ensuring that learning is not only oriented toward cognitive achievement, but also toward the internalization of values that shape students' attitudes, behavior, and ethical awareness in their daily lives.The flexibility of the curriculum actually opens up space for PAI to develop learning that is oriented not only toward cognitive aspects but also toward the internalization of Islamic values that shape students' attitudes, behavior, and moral awareness in their daily lives.

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