

Implementation of Islamic religious education in the era of independent learning

M. Nurul Ardi Rosyidi¹, Suwendi Suwendi^{1*}

¹*Sekolah Pascasarjana Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia.*

Abstract: The implementation of Indonesia's *Merdeka Curriculum* has transformed educational practices by promoting learner-centred pedagogy, instructional flexibility, and meaningful learning experiences. However, limited empirical evidence explains how these principles are enacted in Islamic Religious Education (IRE), a subject that integrates cognitive, moral, and spiritual development within formal schooling. This study aims to examine the implementation, instructional strategies, and challenges of IRE learning under the *Merdeka Curriculum* while exploring how learner-centred pedagogy is translated into classroom practice. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving school principals, IRE teachers, students, and school policymakers. The findings reveal that the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* has encouraged teachers to adopt contextual, flexible, and student-centred learning through differentiated instruction, project-based activities, and opportunities for learner autonomy and creativity. Nevertheless, its implementation remains constrained by limited instructional time, persistent teacher-centred beliefs, inadequate professional readiness, and insufficient institutional support. The novelty of this study lies in conceptualising the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in IRE as a process of reconstructing learner agency within faith-based education, rather than merely introducing curricular innovation. However, the findings are limited to a single institutional context and therefore should be interpreted cautiously. The study implies that successful implementation requires sustained professional development, supportive educational policies, and collaborative stakeholder engagement to foster transformative, learner-centred IRE that promotes both academic achievement and character formation.

Keywords: Islamic Religious Education, *Merdeka Curriculum*, independent learning, student center learning.

Article History: Submitted 26 May 2026; Revised 01 June 2026; Accepted: 11 July 2025; Published online 06 August 2026

Introduction

Education should not merely focus on the mechanical transfer of knowledge, but rather on the deep internalization and practical application of values. In Islamic religious education (IRE), this goal is historically anchored in three interconnected pillars: *tarbiyah* (nurturing), *ta'lim* (instruction), and *ta'dib* (moral and behavioral discipline). Collectively, these elements aim to foster a holistic development encompassing the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. However, in contemporary educational practices, faith-based instruction often faces a persistent tension between rigid, traditional transmission methods—such as rote memorization and direct lecturing—and modern, learner-centered educational frameworks that prioritize critical thinking, student autonomy, and constructivist learning (Rahman & others, 2021).

Globally, the integration of student agency and constructivist pedagogy within faith-based education presents a profound theoretical and practical dilemma. Progressive education models place strong emphasis on flexibility, personalized learning, and autonomous (Blaschke & Hase, 2015). Conversely, religious instruction inherently seeks to preserve normative doctrines, ethical boundaries, and collective religious identities. This fundamental ideological divergence creates a

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: *suwendi@uinjkt.ac.id

Address of corresponding author:

Suwendi Suwendi; Sekolah Pascasarjana Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia.

Jalan Ir. H. Juanda No.95, Ciputat, Kec. Ciputat Timur, Kota Tangerang Selatan, Banten 15412, Indonesia.

How to cite: Rosyidi, M. N.A., & Suwendi, S. (2026). Implementation of Islamic religious education in the era of independent learning. *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam Al-Thariqah*, 11(2), 337–349. [https://doi.org/10.25299/al-thariqah.2026.vol11\(2\).28417](https://doi.org/10.25299/al-thariqah.2026.vol11(2).28417)

delicate balancing act for educators who attempt to foster independent critical thinking while maintaining adherence to established religious orthodoxies. This ongoing tension raises a crucial question for the international scholarly community: How can faith-based educational systems implement learner agency without diluting core religious values and identity? While international literature extensively explores curriculum reform and learner-centered approaches within secular contexts, the contextual adaptation of constructivist pedagogy—and its alignment with traditional Islamic educational values—remains complex and under-theorized (Agonács & Matos, 2019). Consequently, there is an urgent need to examine how religious schools dynamically navigate this intersection in practice.

In the context of Indonesia, this international theoretical debate manifests in the national implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* (Independent Learning) curriculum. Promoted as a policy to address educational crises, *Merdeka Belajar* grants educators and students greater autonomy to design flexible, project-based, and differentiated learning experiences (Mulyasa, 2021). In IRE classrooms, this paradigm shift demands that teachers move away from teacher-centered paradigms toward facilitating interactive and contextual learning. Nevertheless, the practical execution of this policy exposes significant friction: IRE educators frequently grapple with deeply entrenched traditional mindsets, severe instructional time constraints, fragmented policy guidelines across ministries, and inadequate technological infrastructure (Anida et al., 2024).

Beyond national educational reforms, this shift reflects a fundamental dilemma in international religious education: how to reconcile student agency and constructivist learning paradigms with faith-based, normative doctrines (Alkouatli, 2018). Worldwide, faith-based educational systems face increasing pressure to transition from traditional teacher-centered instruction toward learner-centered models that foster critical thinking and intellectual autonomy (Ezzani et al., 2023). However, the adaptation of constructivist pedagogy within religious curricula often encounters epistemological resistance. Educators frequently struggle to balance the promotion of student autonomy with the preservation of sacred truths, doctrinal boundaries, and traditional religious authority.

Previous studies on Islamic education under the *Merdeka Belajar* policy have largely focused on technical and administrative compliance, such as aligning lesson plans with national standardized rubrics or reporting general implementation stages in schools (Desrianti & Yuliana Nelisma, 2022). What remains unknown and inadequately explored in current literature is the deeper pedagogical essence of "learner independence" (*merdeka*) when applied specifically to religious subject matter. Specifically, there is a lack of empirical insight into how Islamic educators dynamically balance student autonomy (free choice and differentiated learning) with the structured moral expectations of *ta'dib*, as well as how structural and cultural barriers constrain this balance in real-world classroom environments (Mestari et al., 2025).

To bridge these literature gaps, this study investigates the practical implementation, pedagogical strategies, and underlying constraints of applying the *Merdeka Belajar* framework within IRE. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical case study at SMP-IT Al-Uswah Banyuwangi—an exemplary pioneering institution in the region—this research examines how progressive educational concepts (such as Deweyan progressivism) are operationalized in IRE learning. By identifying concrete instructional models (e.g., differentiated project-based learning) alongside structural bottlenecks, this study advances international scholarship by providing a nuanced model of how constructivist learner agency can be effectively contextualized within faith-based curricula without compromising religious integrity.

Literature review

The *Merdeka Belajar* program was born in response to various issues within the education system, one of which relates to the pressure placed on students to achieve certain grades. Through this program, teachers and students are expected to have more space to learn freely, creatively, and innovatively. *Merdeka Belajar* fundamentally emphasizes freedom of thought, which teachers must first possess. Student freedom of learning is difficult to achieve if teachers lack the freedom to think and manage the learning process (Soro et al., 2023). *Merdeka Belajar* can be interpreted as providing more space for students to experience the learning process comfortably, calmly, and

free from pressure. This concept also emphasizes the importance of paying attention to each student's potential, interests, and natural talents.

The Independent Curriculum is a curriculum approach that offers a variety of intracurricular learning. It aims to optimize learning content, allowing students sufficient time to understand concepts and strengthen their competencies. Teachers are given flexibility in selecting various learning tools, allowing learning to be tailored to students' needs and interests (Rahayu et al., 2022). The Merdeka Curriculum has characteristics that distinguish it from previous curricula implemented in Indonesia. These characteristics serve as the basic concepts for implementing curriculum-based learning (Amelia Rizky Idhartono, 2022), including: *First*, project-based learning through the *Pancasila* Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). Students are given the opportunity to understand important themes and to respond to these issues in accordance with the stages and needs. This project provides significant benefits for students by strengthening their character, developing problem-solving skills in various situations, and demonstrating responsibility and concern for surrounding issues (Ningtyas, 2021). *Second*, the Merdeka Curriculum focuses on strengthening essential material so that students have more adequate opportunities to deepen their basic competencies, particularly literacy and numeracy. This emphasis on core material also provides teachers with space to implement more interactive and collaborative learning, for example, through discussion, argumentation, and collaborative problem-solving, including project- and problem-based learning. Furthermore, schools no longer solely prioritize student academic achievement but instead place greater emphasis on the development of soft skills (Ningtyas, 2021). *Third*, flexibility for teachers to implement learning tailored to students' contexts and abilities. The Independent Curriculum provides greater flexibility for teachers, students, and schools in organizing learning activities. Compared with previous curricula, this approach is considered more adaptive because it allows for greater adjustment to local needs and contexts. One of the main advantages of the Independent Curriculum is that it gives teachers the freedom to design more engaging and relevant learning. Teachers can choose learning methods that suit students' learning styles and utilize resources available in the surrounding environment to enhance the learning experience. This allows learning to be more lively and contextual for students (Indarta et al., 2022).

The concept of freedom to learn aligns with the educational values proposed by Ki Hajar Dewantara and aligns with the philosophical theory of progressivism advocated by John Dewey. It emphasizes the development and individual needs of students who seek independence in their learning (Faiz & Kurniawaty, 2020). These values include: *First*, flexibility: the time and location of learning vary, demonstrating flexibility in the teaching and learning process. *Second*, free Choice: Allows students to acquire knowledge based on their comfort and inclinations in specific areas. *Third*, personalized learning: provides differentiated learning and assessment according to student abilities. *Fourth*, project-based: integrates students' skills, theories, and abilities directly into practical contexts. *Fifth*, link and match: a concept where education is tailored to the needs of society and the demands of the workplace. *Sixth*, data interpretation: emphasizes that understanding and interpreting data can be used to address problems and analyze situations as needed (Nurwahidah & Eva Syarifatul Jamilah, 2022).

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive, analytical, and field-based methods (field research). This method was chosen to observe or describe the situation and conditions occurring at SMP-IT Al-Uswah Banyuwangi, especially in the learning of Islamic religious education. This research was conducted using a field-based approach, which places the researcher directly in the research environment. This study is a qualitative research project aimed at gaining a deep understanding of the school's situation and conditions (Wasehudin et al., 2023). The method used is a descriptive-analytical one, in which the researcher conducts direct observations, interviews, and in-depth analysis of various aspects of school life, both academic and non-academic.

The research was conducted at SMP-IT Al-Uswah Banyuwangi, a private junior high school in Banyuwangi Regency actively pioneering the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. This site was chosen purposively because several of its educators serve as "Teacher Leaders" (*Guru*

Penggerak) under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, acting as regional trainers for *Merdeka Curriculum* implementation. To obtain rich and credible data, 10 informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement in policy-making, instructional design, and learning activities. These informants comprised 1 school principal as the primary policymaker regarding institutional vision and curriculum governance, 3 PAI subject teachers (including certified *Guru Penggerak*) responsible for designing teaching modules, implementing differentiated instruction, and executing project-based learning, as well as 6 students (consisting of two students each from Grade VII, Grade VIII, and Grade IX) to capture student engagement levels, learning experiences, and responses to practical IRE instructional activities.

Data were gathered using three complementary techniques, namely direct observation, and document review. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with all 10 informants. Interviews with the school principal focused on curriculum policy, facility support, and administrative integration, while interviews with IRE teachers explored teaching module design, differentiation strategies, and technical obstacles. Interviews with students examined their engagement, perceptions of classroom autonomy, and practical learning experiences. Meanwhile, direct non-participant observations were conducted during PAI instructional sessions both inside the classroom and outside, specifically at the school mosque. These observations focused on teacher-student dynamics, flexible learning setups, project execution, and practical activities such as Grade VII prayer and dhikr practice in the mosque, *sujud tilawah* calligraphy tasks, Grade IX interactive discussions on animal slaughter, and honesty role-play sessions. Furthermore, document review was utilized to support, verify, and triangulate observational and interview findings. The reviewed documents encompassed institutional curriculum policies (school profile and Education Unit Operational Curriculum/KOSP), instructional planning tools (learning outcomes/CP based on the Director General of Islamic Education Decree No. 3302 of 2024, learning objective flows/ATP, teaching modules, annual programs, and semester programs), as well as student work artifacts including *sujud tilawah* calligraphy artworks, *akhlak mahmudah* mind-mapping worksheets, and instructional video materials. To obtain data for this study, researchers used observation, interviews, and document review. Observations of various student activities, both in and outside the classroom, especially in the teaching and learning process in IRE learning. Interviews were conducted with relevant informants in the study, including the principal (as an informant for policymakers) and teachers and students involved in teaching and learning. Document study is a data collection technique used to strengthen, support, and verify the validity of data obtained through previous data collection techniques.

To ensure research validity and scientific rigor, the study employed data triangulation techniques, specifically source triangulation and method triangulation. Source triangulation was achieved by cross-verifying information across different informant levels, comparing statements from the school principal, instructional practices of IRE teachers, and learning feedback from students. Method triangulation was conducted by systematically comparing and validating data gathered through in-depth interviews, direct classroom and mosque observations, and official curriculum document reviews.

Results

Implementation of the independent learning concept in IRE

Conceptualization of the planning stage

In Islamic religious education (IRE) teaching, there are steps that must be taken to ensure the implementation of the independent learning concept can proceed according to guidelines and systematically. In the planning stage, teachers develop Islamic religious education lessons by considering established learning objectives and targets, and selecting appropriate materials, methods, and strategies to meet students' needs and characteristics. Teachers also prepare teaching materials, including official textbooks from the Ministry of Education and Culture, develop teaching modules, annual programs, semester programs, learning objective flows, and learning outcomes (Yadi & Subando, 2026). All these tools are then compiled into one for ease of use by teachers and as a guide for planning longer-term learning within the educational unit, ensuring that learning outcomes are achieved by the end of the learning phase. At SMP-IT Al-

Uswah, this planning is carried out collectively by all Islamic religious education teachers. Additionally, this phase includes in-depth training on implementing the Merdeka curriculum, ensuring that learning materials adhere to the education unit operational curriculum (EUOC), which serves as a comprehensive guide for the learning process and the Merdeka curriculum components, including the *Pancasila Student Profile, Learning, and Assessment*. This activity takes place before the start of the new academic year.

Implementation phase

The implementation phase involves following a plan formulated in accordance with the established learning materials. Furthermore, alignment with the learning concept, which incorporates the values of independent learning within the *Merdeka Curriculum* and John Dewey's philosophical theory of progressivism, is highlighted. Researchers observed Islamic religious education lessons at SMP-IT Al-Uswah during the 2023-2024 academic year.

The operationalization of *Merdeka Belajar* in IRE instruction shifts the learning paradigm from passive knowledge transmission to experiential immersion. At SMP-IT Al-Uswah, seventh-grade IRE instruction on prayer and *dhikr* was intentionally relocated from traditional classrooms to the school mosque. Conceptually, this spatial shift transcends a mere change of physical environment; it functions as a pedagogical intervention that reconstructs learner agency and deepens religious meaning-making. By practicing rituals directly within a sacred space, students transition from abstract memorization to embodied spiritual experience. This flexible approach decouples religious education from rigid spatial constraints, reflecting John Dewey's progressivist framework of learning through direct experience. Furthermore, the continued utilization of asynchronous learning videos—originally developed during the COVID-19 pandemic—extends learning autonomy beyond classroom hours, allowing learners to continuously engage with spiritual content at their own pace (Christidamayani & Kristanto, 2020).

The concept of free choice is also found in IRE lessons. This concept takes into account students' learning rhythms and focuses on understanding the concepts applied, with material selected based on teacher-student agreements, tailored to their needs, and delivered at the appropriate time. In ninth grade, there is material on animal slaughter, and teachers and students at SMP-IT Al-Uswah Banyuwangi discussed this topic as *Eid al-Adha* approached. This was done to meet students' needs so that at the moment of slaughtering the sacrificial animal, students could learn more deeply and explore the material.

IRE at SMP-IT Al-Uswah Banyuwangi implements a project-based learning method, based on portfolio assignments planned and agreed upon during the initial work meeting for the 2023-2024 academic year. Project-based learning (PBL) and differentiated instruction serve as structural vehicles to cultivate creative expression and accommodate cognitive diversity in IRE. In Grade VII, portfolio assignments requiring students to create *sujud tilawah* calligraphy and articulate its philosophical meaning transform abstract ritual recitations into tangible artistic expressions. This project-based model moves beyond rote memorization, fostering deeper aesthetic and theological reflection. Furthermore, differentiated instruction is operationalized through multi-modal activities: visual learners construct mind maps of commendable morals (*akhlak mahmudah*), auditory learners engage in critical discussions, and kinesthetic learners participate in role-playing scenarios focused on honesty. Conceptually, this multi-sensory differentiation validates diverse learning styles, transforming the PAI classroom into an inclusive space where moral values are internalized through collaborative discourse and active performance rather than top-down indoctrination.

IRE teachers use a differentiated approach to presenting learning materials based on students' learning styles. Students are identified into three learning styles in accordance with the independent curriculum guidelines: visual, audio, and kinesthetic. This allows teachers to innovate and create, developing teaching media to ensure the material is accessible to all students. In the module document study, there is a group assignment to create a mind map of commendable morals and then present the results, followed by an honesty role-play quiz. This is included in differentiated learning because, indirectly, students with a visual learning style learn through mind maps, students with an audio learning style learn through discussions and presentations, and students with a kinesthetic learning style learn through hands-on role-plays.

Structural and pedagogical obstacles to implementing independent learning in IRE *Temporal constraints and the challenge of deep religious reflection*

A prominent structural barrier is the allocation of PAI instruction, which is restricted to three credit hours (120 minutes) per week in junior high schools. Conceptually, religious instruction requires reflective space, ethical deliberation, and deep dialogical engagement. The institutional constraint of limited time forces teachers into an instructional trade-off between covering extensive syllabus requirements and facilitating meaningful moral discussions. Consequently, students' opportunities for critical reflection, open questioning, and deep conceptual engagement with complex contemporary ethical issues remain constrained (Muaddyl Akhyar et al., 2024).

pedagogical inertia and the tension of paradigm shifts

The transition toward *Merdeka Belajar* creates pedagogical tension between traditional teacher-centered norms and the student-centered mandate. In religious education, traditional approaches often position the educator as the sole authority of theological truth, fostering passive student compliance. Shifting this paradigm requires teachers to re-conceptualize their identity from authoritative transmitters of dogma to reflexive facilitators of moral inquiry. This transformation is particularly complex in IRE, where instructional outcomes encompass not only cognitive mastery but also affective internalization and character formation. Overcoming this entrenched inertia demands ongoing pedagogical re-tooling and institutional support. In IRE, this challenge becomes even more complex because material contains not only knowledge but also relates to values, beliefs, and the formation of religious attitudes. Therefore, teachers need to adapt their role, not only as transmitters of material but also as facilitators, guiding students to understand, discuss, and practice religious values in their daily lives.

Institutional dualism and infrastructure disparities

In the *Merdeka Belajar* era, IRE lessons in junior high, elementary, and high schools are based on the curriculum developed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, even though these schools are under the auspices of the local Education Office or the Ministry of Education and Culture. This creates confusion in the development of learning materials by Islamic religious education teachers. The Ministry of Religious Affairs only formulates the CP and TP, but not the ATP and teaching modules. The teaching materials for IRE at SMP-IT Al-Uswah are developed collectively with the Islamic Religious Education Subject Teacher Group (IRESTG) from junior high schools throughout Banyuwangi Regency. This follows up on the problem mentioned in the previous paragraph. Therefore, to address this issue, adopt the CP and TP from the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Education No. 3302 of 2024, then formulate the ATP and develop teaching modules in accordance with the Ministry of Education and Culture guidelines. Al-Uswah Islamic Junior High School in Banyuwangi, along with many other schools, especially in rural areas, faces serious challenges in improving the technological infrastructure that supports Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and the implementation of the concept of independent learning. One major obstacle is limited internet access, which can slow down or even hinder learning processes that require an online connection. A lack of stable, fast internet access can make it difficult for students and teachers to access online learning resources, videos, or interactive content that could enhance their learning experience.

Discussion

The meaning and implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* concept in IRE

Based on research findings, the *Merdeka Belajar* concept within the *Merdeka Curriculum* has a significant impact on shaping a new learning paradigm. This concept allows students the freedom to actively participate in the learning process, creating learning that is more contextual and relevant to their daily lives. Learning conducted outside the classroom as a learning space for IRE material demonstrates that the context of space and time need not be tied to the classroom, providing students with a more in-depth learning experience. This experiential learning also aligns with John Dewey's theory of progressivism, which emphasizes the importance of active,

experiential learning. The *Merdeka Belajar* concept encompasses flexibility, free choice, personalized learning, project-based learning, and link-and-match learning.

Rather than merely summarizing local implementation, these findings demonstrate a shift in religious pedagogy from dogmatic transmission to constructivist internalization. Internationally, this aligns with global trends in religious education that advocate for student-centered, experiential models to foster intrinsic motivation and critical thinking (Schweitzer & Schreiner, 2020). While Western progressivism often separates secular learning from sacred dogma, the implementation in IRE shows a unique convergence: progressive autonomy is utilized to deepen theological commitment rather than weaken it. This contrast highlights that freedom of choice in Islamic education does not lead to secularization, but rather to an authentic, personal appropriation of faith.

The positive impact of *Merdeka Belajar* is evident in the development of students' personalities and characters. They not only acquire knowledge of Islamic teachings but also apply them in various life contexts. They become more responsible, tolerant, and caring towards others, in line with the values taught in Islam. This holistic approach also helps students develop social and life skills essential to preparing them for the challenges of the modern world. They learn to communicate effectively, work in teams, and take initiative in problem-solving—all values emphasized in Islamic teachings (Faiz & Kurniawaty, 2020). In the context of contemporary Islamic education globally, this holistic transformation responds to calls by international scholars for an "Islamic holistic education" that harmonizes spiritual maturity with 21st-century competencies (Sahin, 2018). The novel contribution of this finding lies in demonstrating how national educational reform (*Merdeka Belajar*) can serve as an effective instrument to operationalize classical Islamic concepts like *ta'dib* (moral education) and *tarbiyah* within a modernized, secular-guided curriculum framework.

With the free choice approach, when students feel in control of their learning and can choose topics or methods that interest them, their motivation to learn increases. They feel more enthusiastic and take the initiative to explore the material, which, in turn, can improve their academic performance (Burritt et al., 2025). The free choice approach can also increase student engagement in learning. When students feel that their opinions and preferences are valued, they tend to be more active and engaged in the learning process. They feel more involved and take ownership of their learning, which can improve the quality of classroom interactions and discussions (Hadiansah, 2022). Furthermore, this approach allows for the creation of a collaborative learning environment between teachers and students. Students are not merely recipients of information but also actively involved in the learning process (Faiz & Kurniawaty, 2020). They are encouraged to think critically, ask questions, and discuss the various Islamic concepts they learn. With the support and guidance of their teachers, students can deepen their understanding of Islamic teachings and apply them in their daily lives. They learn not only to earn grades but also to gain a broader understanding of religion and become better individuals.

Differentiated learning and project-based learning as strategies to increase student engagement

Differentiated learning and project-based learning (PBL) occupy a central position in the contextualization of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, particularly in IRE. The combination of these two strategies enables teachers to design learning experiences that not only accommodate diverse learning profiles but also encourage active and meaningful student engagement. PBL offers a project-based learning framework centered on contextual problems or tasks. In Islamic Religious Education, PBL can be realized through portfolio assignments such as creating calligraphy for the *sujud* recitation (prostration) or short lecture videos, or social and religious projects involving the surrounding community (Tambak et al., 2026; Abdullah et al., 2025). This approach encourages students not only to memorize but also to understand the meaning of prayers and apply the teachings' values in real life.

Within the *Merdeka Curriculum* framework, differentiated learning is a strategy that adapts the content, processes, and products of instruction to suit students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This approach provides students with diverse assignment options, activities, media, and assessment formats, so that each learner can achieve a learning path that suits their

characteristics. Differentiated learning that integrates visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles allows students to choose the learning method that best suits their needs. For some students, visualizations of calligraphy or diagrams can help them understand worship concepts, while for others, oral discussions or practical activities involving standing are more effective. This differentiated learning model aligns with findings that flexible and diversity-based learning enhances student motivation and engagement in class (Mestari et al., 2025). Globally, the integration of differentiated instruction and PBL in religious subjects addresses a long-standing critique: that faith-based education relies heavily on rote memorization. Similar to research in European and North American multicultural religious classrooms, catering to diverse learning profiles enhances inclusion and deepens cognitive processing (Panjwani & Revell, 2018; Tambak & Sukenti, 2025). The theoretical novelty identified here is the conceptual integration of differentiation with Islamic *hikmah* (wisdom and individualized pedagogy) proving that adaptive teaching strategies can preserve sacred core concepts while accommodating modern student diversity.

In addition to increasing engagement, the combination of differentiated learning and PBL also contributes to the development of students' character and religious identity. When students are given the freedom to choose topics, product formats, and presentation methods, they feel more responsible for their learning. Research in elementary and secondary schools shows that students who learn using the differentiated PBL model tend to demonstrate better discipline, cooperation, and responsibility than those in classes that use only lecture methods (Wiyono et al., 2024; Miratunisa et al., 2026). Theoretically, integrating differentiated learning and PBL aligns with the holistic learning principle of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, which integrates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects in a single learning experience. In the calligraphy project for the *sujud tilawah* (prostration) recitation, for example, students not only memorize the text but also process its meaning, practice writing skills, and express the values of their faith in creative works. This approach strengthens the connection between religious knowledge, values, and behavior in real life.

From a teaching practice perspective, implementing this model requires thorough teacher preparation, including designing essential questions, determining assessment criteria, and creating rubrics that are sensitive to differences in student abilities (Permatasari & Heriansyah, 2024). Research shows that differentiated learning integrated with PBL increases learning effectiveness, both in terms of learning outcomes and student engagement, provided it is accompanied by teacher training and mentoring. Taking all these findings into account, it can be concluded that differentiated learning and PBL are complementary strategies highly relevant to supporting the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in IRE. This combination not only increases student engagement and learning outcomes but also strengthens character and 21st-century skills, providing a holistic learning experience. Therefore, further research and practice in various educational contexts are essential to strengthen the empirical basis and policy for implementing the differentiated PBL model in Indonesia.

Obstacles to the implementation of independent learning

Although many positive aspects have been identified in the implementation of independent learning, several obstacles remain that impact the smooth implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. One of these is limited learning time. To address this challenge, it is crucial for teachers to develop effective learning strategies that enable students to learn independently and engage in in-depth discussions about IRE. This may involve using innovative teaching techniques, assigning reflective assignments outside of class hours, or integrating religious learning into relevant extracurricular activities. With a creative and focused approach, teachers can maximize available time and overcome the challenges of providing in-depth IRE learning within a busy schedule (Muaddyl Akhyar et al., 2024).

Another obstacle is shifting the teacher-centered learning mindset that has become the dominant paradigm in the Indonesian education system. In this structure, knowledge and direction primarily come from the teacher, while students act as recipients of information and instruction. While this model has been successful in many contexts, the shift to independent learning marks a revolution in education. Independent learning positions students as active

agents in the learning process, enabling them to take control of their own education. This is especially true in Islamic religious education, which encompasses not only scientific knowledge but also the doctrines of faith and Islam that must be instilled in students (Wasehudin et al., 2023). This pedagogical tension between traditional teacher authority and student autonomy is not unique to Indonesia. Global research on Islamic education in post-colonial and modern contexts reveals a systemic challenge: transitioning teachers from authoritative truth-transmitters to learning facilitators without losing spiritual authority (Memon & Alhashmi, 2018). What this study clarifies (what these findings mean) is that the resistance to *Merdeka Belajar* in IRE is not merely a technical skill deficit, but an epistemological barrier. Teachers often view learner autonomy as a potential threat to doctrinal orthodoxy. Resolving this constraint requires a global rethinking of teacher professional development in faith-based contexts, framing autonomy as a tool for genuine spiritual conviction rather than cognitive deviance.

Adapting teachers' roles is also crucial to changing this mindset. Teachers need to expand their role from mere conveyors of information to facilitators of learning, encouraging students to be active in their own learning. This requires developing new pedagogical skills for teachers and a willingness to shift their paradigms about the learning process (Huda, 2017; Tambak, 2026). Furthermore, the need for support and active involvement from schools, parents, and the community is key to overcoming this obstacle. Schools need to create an environment that encourages experimentation, innovation, and exploration in more independent Islamic religious education learning. Parents also need to be involved in understanding the importance of independent learning for their children's development. The surrounding community can also be a valuable resource in providing support and inspiration for this change (Desrianti & Yuliana Nelisma, 2022). Another equally important obstacle is inadequate policies. The *Merdeka Curriculum* policy requires teachers to develop complex teaching materials, and the continued lack of technological skills among many teachers leads to an over-focus on administrative tasks. This hinders their ability to fulfill their primary duties as educators and student facilitators (Nurwahidah & Eva Syarifatul Jamilah, 2022; Amalia et al., 2026; Sukenti & Tambak, 2025).

The final obstacle is inadequate facilities. Learning activities based on the independent curriculum require supporting facilities and infrastructure to enable teachers to create conducive learning environments and incorporate innovation and creativity into their teaching (Pratama et al., 2025). To address this challenge, significant investment is needed in improving schools' technology infrastructure. This may include increasing internet access, procuring adequate hardware, and training teachers to use technology effectively in learning. By improving technology infrastructure, schools can create a more inclusive, interactive learning environment that supports independent learning for all students (Mahfud et al., 2024; Sukenti, Tambak, & Ningsih, 2026). This digital divide mirrors findings from global studies in developing nations implementing modern curriculum reforms, emphasizing that curricular agency remains constrained by structural inequalities.

Thus, research findings indicate that implementing IRE in the independent learning era yields a deeper understanding through a student-centered process. With a holistic approach, learning is effective and provides Islamic values and goodness that can be applied in daily life. Providing comprehensive training and understanding to teachers and students, as well as preparing appropriate facilities, is an effective way to address the challenges of implementing the independent curriculum in IRE. Ultimately, this study offers global implications for religious education: it proves that student-centered educational policies can coexist with and enhance traditional religious curricula, provided that pedagogical reforms are accompanied by institutional support, epistemological reorientation, and equitable technological infrastructure.

Conclusion

The implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* in IRE significantly improves learning quality and student character by integrating flexibility, differentiated learning, and PBL into daily practice. The novel contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that learner autonomy and progressive methods can harmonize with classical Islamic concepts (*ta'dib* and *tarbiyah*), strengthening religious internalization rather than compromising doctrinal values. Theoretically and practically, this research proves that constructivist paradigms can effectively coexist with sacred religious

instruction, offering concrete models for educators. Despite these achievements, challenges such as limited time, traditional teacher-centered mindsets, and administrative burdens persist. While limited by its qualitative focus on a single school setting, this study carries important implications for policy and practice, emphasizing the urgent need for teacher pedagogical reorientation, administrative simplification, and infrastructure development to build adaptive, relevant, and meaningful Islamic education.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Contributions of the authors in this article: First author, contributed as concepts and drafters of the article, data analyzers and interpreters, collecting data, writing the manuscript and critically revising the article. Second author, as the drafter of the manuscript, collecting data and critically revising the article. All authors agree to take responsibility for all aspects of this work. Both authors contributed equally and approved the final version of the article for publication.

Funding statement

There is no funding for this research

Data availability statement

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Declaration of use artificial intelligence

The author uses generative AI in this paper for the data analysis process.

Acknowledgment

We want to thank to Graduate School of Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta, Indonesia, including all the informants involved in this research, who have supported this research well. The resulting scientific work can be a trigger to bring up better works in the future.

References

- Abdullah, M. R., Muhamad, F. N., Hj Abdullah, Z., Amonov, B., & Yaakob, M. A. (2025). Exploring the mediating effect of academic self-efficacy on metacognitive awareness and students' academic writing skill in Islamic higher education. *Journal of Instruction and Islamic Religious Education*, 1(2), 135-152. <https://doi.org/10.63826/jiire.v1i2.175>
- Amalia, A. C., Zalwira, N., Abd Ghani, A. R., Firdaus, F., Rizal, S. U., & Ratu, A. (2026). Madrasa and digital learning transformation: Integrating technological pedagogical and content knowledge and makarim sharia into fostering madrasa teachers' teaching skills. *Journal of Instruction and Islamic Religious Education*, 2(1), 36-52. <https://doi.org/10.63826/jiire.v2i1.166>
- Agonács, N., & Matos, J. F. (2019). Heutagogy and self-determined learning: a review of the published literature on the application and implementation of the theory. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 34(3), 223-240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680513.2018.1562329>
- Alkouatli, C. (2018). Pedagogies in Becoming Muslim: Contemporary Insights from Islamic Traditions on Teaching, Learning, and Developing. *Religions*, 9(11), 367. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9110367>
- Amelia Rizky Idhartono. (2022). LITERASI DIGITAL PADA KURIKULUM MERDEKA BELAJAR BAGI ANAK. *Devosi: Jurnal Teknologi Pembelajaran*, 12(2), 91-96. <https://doi.org/10.36456/devosi.v6i1.6150>
- Anida, A., Ristawati, R., Mahmudi, M., & Ramadhan, M. (2024). Kreativitas Guru PAI Dalam Meningkatkan Pembelajaran Agama Di SMP Negeri 1 Darussalam Aceh Besar. *Jurnal*

- Mudarrisuna: *Media Kajian Pendidikan Agama Islam*, 14(1), 105. <https://doi.org/10.22373/jm.v14i1.23653>
- Baihaqi, A., Rahman, A. N., Nurhasanah, N., Jenery, F. R., & Fitri, S. H. (2026). Digital transformation in madrasah education: A conceptual framework for integrating higher-order thinking skills and internet of things in teaching. *Journal of Instruction and Islamic Religious Education*, 2(1), 68-83. <https://doi.org/10.63826/jiire.v2i1.198>
- Blaschke, L. M., & Hase, S. (2015). Heutagogy, Technology, and Lifelong Learning for Professional and Part-Time Learners. In *Transformative Perspectives and Processes in Higher Education* (pp. 75-94). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-09247-8_5
- Burritt, A., Handasyde, K., McLean Davies, L., Janfada, M., & Ziebell, N. (2025). Religion and Worldviews Education: Curriculum and Pedagogical Approaches in Victorian Schools. *Religion & Education*, 52(3-4), 132-151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15507394.2025.2560765>
- Chapakiya, A., Abdullah, A. R., Mohamad Salleh, M. N., Luthfi, S., & Panjalu, G. F. (2025). Development of higher order thinking skill for students in madrasa southern Thailand: Engaging case-based learning methods. *Journal of Instruction and Islamic Religious Education*, 1(2), 121-134. <https://doi.org/10.63826/jiire.v1i2.174>
- Christidamayani, A. P., & Kristanto, Y. D. (2020). The Effects of Problem Posing Learning Model on Students' Learning Achievement and Motivation. *Indonesian Journal on Learning and Advanced Education (IJOLAE)*, 100-108. <https://doi.org/10.23917/ijolae.v2i2.9981>
- Desrianti, & Yuliana Nelisma. (2022). Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar Perpektif Manajemen Pendidikan Islam. *Al-Fahim : Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 4(2), 158-172. <https://doi.org/10.54396/alfahim.v4i2.309>
- Ezzani, M. D., Brooks, M. C., Yang, L., & Bloom, A. (2023). Islamic school leadership and social justice: an international review of the literature. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 26(5), 745-777. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2021.2009037>
- Faiz, A., & Kurniawaty, I. (2020). KONSEP MERDEKA BELAJAR PENDIDIKAN INDONESIA DALAM PERSPEKTIF FILSAFAT PROGRESIVISME. *Konstruktivisme: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Pembelajaran*, 12(2), 155-164. <https://doi.org/10.35457/konstruk.v12i2.973>
- Hadiansah, D. (2022). *Kurikulum Merdeka Dan Paradigma Pembelajaran Baru*. Rama Widya.
- Huda, N. (2017). MANAJEMEN PENGEMBANGAN KURIKULUM. *AL-TANZIM : JURNAL MANAJEMEN PENDIDIKAN ISLAM*, 1(2), 52-75. <https://doi.org/10.33650/al-tanzim.v1i2.113>
- Indarta, Y., Jalinus, N., Waskito, W., Samala, A. D., Riyanda, A. R., & Adi, N. H. (2022). Relevansi Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar dengan Model Pembelajaran Abad 21 dalam Perkembangan Era Society 5.0. *EDUKATIF: JURNAL ILMU PENDIDIKAN*, 4(2), 3011-3024. <https://doi.org/10.31004/edukatif.v4i2.2589>
- Mahfud, M., Razak, A. Z. A., & Gahlan, W. Y. (2024). Improving the Islamic Education Learning Quality through Classroom Management in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. *MUDARRISA: Jurnal Kajian Pendidikan Islam*, 16(2), 161-180. <https://doi.org/10.18326/mudarrisa.v16i2.902>
- Memon, N. A., & Alhashmi, M. (2018). Islamic Pedagogy: Potential and Perspective. In *Islamic Schooling in the West* (pp. 169-194). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73612-9_9
- Mestari, S. A., Kalaka, F. R. S., Hida, Y., Mas, S. R., & Badu, S. Q. (2025). Efektivitas Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi Dalam Meningkatkan Hasil Belajar Siswa Di Kelas Heterogen Sekolah Dasar. *EDUCATOR: Directory of Elementary Education Journal*, 6(1), 25-35. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.58176/edu.v6i1.2745>
- Miratunisa, U. K., Ahmed Abdulrahman, A.-A. H. A., Frimayanti, A. I., Muslimah, K. C., & Mohd Solah, S. (2026). Nurturing students' emotional intelligence in Islamic religious education: Integrating mindfulness and cooperative learning approach in teaching. *Journal of Instruction and Islamic Religious Education*, 2(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.63826/jiire.v2i1.12>
- Muaddyl Akhyar, Zukdi, I., & Nurfarida Deliani. (2024). Value-Based Leadership of Islamic Education Teachers and Its Role in Disciplinary Religious Practice Formation: A Qualitative Case Study in an Indonesian Public School. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 13(2), 97-105. <https://doi.org/10.14421/jpi.2024.132.97-105>

- Mulyasa, E. (2021). *Menjadi Guru Penggerak Merdeka Belajar*. Bumi Aksara.
- Ningtyas, R. K. (2021). *Konsepsi Pendidik Sekolah Dasar Tentang Profil Pelajar Pancasila*. Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia.
- Nurwahidah, & Eva Syarifatul Jamilah. (2022). Internalisasi Nilai-Nilai Merdeka Belajar dalam Pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam. *HEUTAGOGIA: Journal of Islamic Education*, 2(1), 83–96. <https://doi.org/10.14421/hjie.2022.21-06>
- Panjwani, F., & Revell, L. (2018). Religious education and hermeneutics: the case of teaching about Islam. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 40(3), 268–276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2018.1493269>
- Permatasari, N., & Heriansyah, H. (2024). Dampak Pembelajaran Diferensiasi dan PBL Terhadap Keterampilan Literasi Sains Peserta Didik di Sekolah Terpencil. *Jurnal Didaktika Pendidikan Dasar*, 8(3), 1177–1204. <https://doi.org/10.26811/didaktika.v8i3.1698>
- Pratama, P. Y. S., Suwastini, N. K. A., Nitiasih, P. K., Dantes, G. R., Mahayanti, N. W. S., Jayantini, I. G. A. R., & Minxia, Z. (2025). Mitigating Learning Losses: Causes, Manifestations, and Strategies for Post-Pandemic Educational Recovery. *Lentera Pendidikan : Jurnal Ilmu Tarbiyah Dan Keguruan*, 28(1), 120–144. <https://doi.org/10.24252/lp.2025v28n1i7>
- Rahayu, R., Rosita, R., Rahayuningsih, Y. S., Hernawan, A. H., & Prihantini, P. (2022). Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar di Sekolah Penggerak. *Jurnal Basicedu*, 6(4), 6313–6319. <https://doi.org/10.31004/basicedu.v6i4.3237>
- Rahman, A., & others. (2021). *Model Pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam Berbasis Riset*. Guepedia.
- Sahin, A. (2018). Critical Issues in Islamic Education Studies: Rethinking Islamic and Western Liberal Secular Values of Education. *Religions*, 9(11), 335. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9110335>
- Schweitzer, F., & Schreiner, P. (2020). International knowledge transfer in religious education: universal validity or regional practices? Backgrounds, considerations and open questions concerning a new debate. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 42(4), 381–390. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2019.1701987>
- Soro, Suharyanto, H., & Habibi, M. F. (2023). *Supervisi Pendidikan: Supervisi Dalam Kurikulum MBKM*. Penerbit P4I.
- Sukenti, D., Ningsih, R., Fatmawati, F., Maharani, S., & Irdianti, A. D. (2026). Islamic values and digital assessment practices in writing evaluation: a phenomenological inquiry among madrasah language teachers. *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam Al-Thariqah*, 11(1), 198–213. [https://doi.org/10.25299/althariqah.2026.vol11\(1\).28229](https://doi.org/10.25299/althariqah.2026.vol11(1).28229)
- Sukenti, D., Tambak, S., & Ningsih, R. (2026). Fostering Indonesian language teachers' assessment practices: The mediating role of emotional engagement in relationship mindfulness and psychological capital. *Journal of Pedagogical Sociology and Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JSPS,202645655>.
- Sukenti, D., & Tambak, S. (2025). The impact of teacher professional identity and psychological capital on learning assessment: Exploring emotional intelligence in language teachers. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 10(1), 18-36. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.202638001>
- Tambak, S., bin Fatah, M. D. U. H., Lubis, F. S., & Tambak, F. A. M. (2026). Negotiating authority and innovation: project-based learning and the changing professional landscape of madrasah teachers. *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam Al-Thariqah*, 11(1), 21-39. [https://doi.org/10.25299/althariqah.2026.vol11\(1\).27544](https://doi.org/10.25299/althariqah.2026.vol11(1).27544)
- Tambak, S., & Sukenti, D. (2026). Experiencing acculturative continuous professional development: A phenomenological inquiry into madrasa teachers' integration of digital learning and indigenous knowledge of Malay culture. *Journal of Pedagogical Sociology and Psychology*, 8(2), e44699. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JSPS.202644699>
- Tambak, S., & Sukenti, D. (2024). Student Involvement Within Islamic Teacher Education: For a Future Profession. *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)*, 11(2), 317-352. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v11i2.8141>
- Tambak, S. (2026). Metode Pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam Kontemporer Integrasi Epistemologi Nilai dan Transformasi Pedagogis.

Doi: [https://doi.org/10.25299/al-thariqah.2026.vol11\(2\).28417](https://doi.org/10.25299/al-thariqah.2026.vol11(2).28417)

- Tambak, S., & Sukenti, D. (2025). Islamic professional madrasa teachers and motivation for continuous development: a phenomenological approach. *Journal of Education and Learning (EduLearn)*, 19(1), 81-90. <https://doi.org/10.11591/edulearn.v19i1.21301>
- Tambak, S., Abdullah, M. R., Nurhayati, N., Chapakiya, A., & Filya, M. P. (2026). Fostering excellent learning: exploring madrasa teachers' learning methods into improve students' Islamic behaviors. *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam Al-Thariqah*, 11(2), 300-318. [https://doi.org/10.25299/al-thariqah.2026.vol11\(2\).29090](https://doi.org/10.25299/al-thariqah.2026.vol11(2).29090)
- Wasehudin, W., Rohman, A., Nizarudin Wajdi, M. B., & Marwan, M. (2023). Transforming Islamic Education through Merdeka Curriculum in Pesantren. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 9(2), 255-266. <https://doi.org/10.15575/jpi.v9i2.28918>
- Wiyono, H., Rahayuningtyas, W., & Anggoro, B. K. (2024). Tren Pembelajaran Diferensiasi dalam Kajian Guru di Indonesia: Analisis Jurnal Terindeks Sinta. *JoLLA Journal of Language Literature and Arts*, 4(5), 512-520. <https://doi.org/10.17977/um064v4i52024p512-520>
- Yadi, Y., & Subando, J. (2026). Pengembangan Modul Ajar Pendidikan Agama Islam dengan Pendekatan Deep Learning dalam Kurikulum Merdeka pada SDIT Luqman Al Hakim Surakarta. *TSAQOFAH*, 6(2), 2042-2048. <https://doi.org/10.58578/tsaqofah.v6i2.8757>