



The Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum Based on Islamic Values in the Formation of Students Religious Character at Anbata Elementary School, Medan

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to analyze the strategies for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum based on Islamic values at elementary school Anbata Medan and to examine its impact on students' religious character formation.

Methodology: This study employed a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through participatory classroom and school-culture observations, in-depth interviews with the principal, teachers, and students, and document analysis of the operational curriculum and teaching modules. Data analysis followed interactive qualitative analysis techniques without the use of specific statistical software.

Main Findings: The findings reveal that Islamic values are integrated through three main pathways: curriculum planning by embedding tawhid and adab into learning objectives and modules; co-curricular P5 projects, particularly "Building Body and Soul," implemented through spiritual habituation and moral studies; and a school ecosystem that reinforces religious character through congregational prayer, Qur'anic memorization, and courteous school culture as a hidden curriculum.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study offers a novel integrative model demonstrating how the Merdeka Curriculum can be operationalized as a value-based character education framework grounded in Islamic principles at the elementary level. It advances existing knowledge by illustrating the synergy between formal curriculum planning, P5 projects, and school culture in shaping holistic religious character.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka Curriculum policy is currently transforming the landscape of national education in Indonesia. One of its primary objectives is learning recovery, which is designed to address learning loss by allowing educational institutions to adapt learning programs to the diverse needs of students [1]. This curriculum emphasizes flexibility, contextualization, and student-centered learning as key principles. However, in the contemporary digital era, educational challenges extend beyond academic achievement alone. Moral degradation and an increasing character crisis among young generations have become serious concerns that demand immediate attention [2]. As a result, the development of religious character has become an essential aspect that must be integrated into school curriculum policies. Therefore, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

should not only focus on cognitive outcomes but also prioritize character formation rooted in strong moral and spiritual values [3].

The Merdeka Curriculum provides significant opportunities for Islamic-based schools due to its adaptable learning structure. Abdillah, Asiah, and Suwiyono [4] note that the flexibility of this curriculum enables Islamic educational institutions to integrate religious values more effectively into learning activities [4]. One of the main pillars of the Merdeka Curriculum is the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5), in which the first dimension emphasizes faith in God Almighty, devotion, and noble character [1]. From the perspective of Islamic education [4] explains that this dimension reflects the internalization of tauhid, worship practices, and *akhlakul karimah*, which should be cultivated from an early age [5]. These values are not merely administrative indicators but represent the core mission of Islamic education. Merdeka Curriculum philosophically aligns with the objectives of Islamic education when implemented through a value-based approach [6]. This alignment creates a strategic space for Islamic schools to strengthen students' religious character through both formal and informal learning activities.

Education is essentially not only a process of transferring knowledge but also a medium for transmitting values that shape students' personalities. Education must prioritize moral, ethical, and scientific principles as integral components of the learning process [7]. Consequently, teachers hold a central role in actively designing and implementing learning activities that align with educational goals, selecting appropriate instructional methods, and evaluating student progress to assess learning outcomes [8]. Islamic Religious Education plays a crucial role in moral and character education by not only equipping students with religious knowledge but also fostering attitudes, behaviors, and competencies based on Islamic teachings. Its ultimate goal is the formation of good character and ethical conduct in daily life. Therefore, Islamic education serves as a foundation for nurturing individuals who are faithful, morally upright, and intellectually capable. Such individuals are essential for building a harmonious, responsible, and value-oriented society [9].

Elementary school Anbata Medan is an Islamic elementary school located in the city of Medan that uniquely integrates the national curriculum with strong Islamic values. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at this school provides flexibility in learning while simultaneously strengthening students' religious identity amid the city's cultural diversity. This contextual flexibility enables the school to design learning experiences that are relevant to students' spiritual and social realities. By embedding Islamic values into daily learning practices, the school seeks to ensure that students' spiritual development remains balanced with academic growth. It is expected that the Merdeka Curriculum at elementary school Anbata Medan can function as a protective framework that nurtures students' spirituality while safeguarding them from negative external influences. In this way, the school positions religious character education as a core component of holistic student development.

Although numerous studies have examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, such as those conducted by [10]-[13] research focusing specifically on Islamic values as the foundational basis of curriculum implementation at the elementary school level remains limited. Studies begun to explore this area; however, the synchronization between learning outcomes and the habituation of character-building practices in schools still requires deeper investigation [14]-[16]. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the strategies used in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum based on Islamic values at elementary school Anbata Medan and to examine its impact on the formation of students' religious character. By exploring this integration, the study seeks to bridge the gap between curriculum design and character practice in Islamic elementary education. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of integrative character education models and to support the strengthening of value-based education within Islamic elementary school environments..

Based on the identified research gap, this study offers novelty by specifically analyzing the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum grounded in Islamic values at the elementary school level, with a particular focus on the formation of students' religious character through both instructional and habituation-based practices. Unlike previous studies that emphasize policy analysis or general implementation, this research integrates curriculum strategy analysis with the practical cultivation of religious character in a real school, namely elementary school Anbata Medan. The urgency of this research is reinforced by ongoing concerns regarding moral degradation and character crises among younger generations in the digital era, which demand immediate and value-based educational responses. By providing empirical insights into how Islamic values can be systematically embedded within the Merdeka Curriculum, this study is expected to contribute to the development of an integrative and contextually relevant character education model for Islamic elementary schools.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design conducted at elementary school Anbata Medan. Qualitative research was chosen to obtain an in-depth and contextual understanding of the

implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum based on Islamic values in shaping students' religious character. The case study design allowed the researcher to examine the phenomenon comprehensively within its real-life setting, particularly in relation to curriculum reform and its practical implementation in schools [17].

The research procedure began with data collection through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. Participatory observation was conducted to examine learning activities, school culture, and religious habituation practices related to character formation. In-depth interviews were carried out with key informants, including the school principal, teachers, and students, to obtain diverse perspectives on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Documentation studies involved reviewing the school's operational curriculum, teaching modules, and other relevant instructional documents to support and validate the observational and interview data [17]. Informants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the relevance, depth, and validity of the information obtained, in line with qualitative research principles emphasizing the role of key informants [18].

Data analysis was conducted chronologically through several stages, namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, following the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman [19]. Data reduction involved selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data obtained from the field to identify relevant information related to the research objectives. The reduced data were then systematically organized and presented to facilitate interpretation and pattern identification. Conclusions were drawn through continuous verification and reflection throughout the research process to ensure analytical rigor.

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, triangulation of data sources and data collection techniques was applied to confirm consistency across observations, interviews, and documentation [20]. This qualitative study produced descriptive data concerning the research subjects, informants, and research setting. The findings were presented in the form of detailed descriptions and interpretations using words and expressions derived from the research process, without statistical calculations. This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon within its real-life and supported a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum based on Islamic values.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Integration of islamic values into learning outcomes (CP) and learning objectives flow (ATP)

To answer the first research problem regarding how Islamic values are integrated into curriculum planning, the findings of this study at elementary school Anbata Medan show that learning planning within the Merdeka Curriculum begins with an in-depth analysis of the government-defined Capaian Pembelajaran (CP). Rather than adopting CP merely as fixed cognitive targets, the school systematically modifies them at the level of the Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran (ATP) by embedding Islamic values as the spiritual foundation of each competency to be achieved. This approach reflects the school's commitment to ensuring that curriculum planning supports not only academic mastery but also the development of students' religious character. The integration of Islamic values is therefore positioned as an essential component of curriculum planning, not as an additional or supplementary element. Such planning aligns with the flexible nature of the Merdeka Curriculum, which grants schools and teachers autonomy to contextualize learning based on their institutional values (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Consequently, learning planning at elementary school Anbata Medan becomes a strategic process for internalizing tauhid across subjects.

The strategy for integrating Islamic values into CP and ATP at elementary school Anbata Medan is implemented through several systematic steps, as summarized in Table 1. These strategies demonstrate how curriculum planning is operationalized to link subject matter with spiritual and moral dimensions. Teachers are encouraged to critically interpret learning outcomes and identify opportunities for value integration within each subject. This approach supports the view that knowledge is not value-neutral but should guide learners toward recognizing divine wisdom and ethical responsibility. The planning process thus reflects a holistic understanding of education that integrates cognitive, affective, and spiritual domains.

Table 1. Strategies for integrating islamic values into CP and ATP

No.	Strategy	Description	Supporting References
1	Deconstruction of Learning Outcomes (CP)	Teachers analyze CP not only as cognitive targets but also to identify embedded spiritual values. For example, in IPAS lessons on the water cycle, learning content is connected to the concept of Allah's power in regulating the universe, as reflected in Surah Al-Anbiya verse 30.	[16]
2	Character-Based Learning Objectives	ATP is designed by incorporating the principle of "Adab before Knowledge," ensuring that each learning phase addresses religious	[22]

	Flow (ATP)	affective aspects alongside content mastery. Indonesian language literacy objectives are integrated with reading texts containing exemplary stories of the Prophet and his Companions.	
3	Modification of Teaching Modules	Teaching modules include the component of theologically nuanced “trigger questions” (<i>pertanyaan pemantik</i>) that stimulate students’ religious awareness before introducing core subject material.	[1]

The integration strategies outlined above illustrate that learning planning at elementary school Anbata Medan is conducted in a deliberate and reflective manner. By embedding Islamic values within ATP and teaching modules, the school ensures that every learning activity contributes to strengthening students’ religious awareness. This approach moves beyond administrative compliance and emphasizes meaningful value internalization. It also supports the Islamic educational perspective that knowledge should lead learners toward a deeper understanding of themselves and their Creator. In this regard, the findings corroborate [23] theory that Islamic knowledge must guide individuals toward self-recognition and recognition of God. Therefore, the ATP designed at elementary school Anbata Medan functions not merely as a technical planning document but as a foundational instrument for building students’ religious character from the earliest stage of learning design. Thus, the findings unequivocally indicate that curriculum planning at elementary school Anbata Medan serves as a foundational instrument for religious character formation, not merely an administrative requirement.

3.2. Internalization through P5: Elaboration of themes via worship habituation and adab studies

In response to the second research problem concerning how Islamic values are internalized through co-curricular activities, based on the findings of this study, the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5) at elementary school Anbata Medan emerged as the most effective medium for internalizing Islamic values within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. Among the implemented themes, “*Build His Soul and Body*” demonstrated particularly strong relevance to religious character development [24]. The school interpreted this theme by emphasizing not only physical and mental health but also spiritual well-being through the strengthening of students’ faith. This interpretation reflects an integrative understanding of human development that aligns with Islamic educational philosophy. By positioning spiritual health as the core foundation, elementary school Anbata Medan ensured that the P5 program transcended secular interpretations of well-being. Consequently, P5 functioned as a strategic platform for embedding Islamic values through experiential and habitual practices.

The internalization strategy within P5 was operationalized through several structured activities, as presented in Table 2. These activities were intentionally designed to reinforce the P5 dimension of “Faith and Piety to God Almighty, and Noble Character” with a strong theological grounding. Each activity connected abstract values to concrete student experiences, enabling meaningful internalization. This approach aligns with the flexible nature of P5, which allows schools to contextualize project content based on local and institutional values [25]. As a result, P5 at elementary school Anbata Medan became an effective vehicle for cultivating *akhlaqul karimah* through continuous practice.

Table 2. Strategies for Internalizing Islamic Values in P5 at elementary school Anbata Medan

No.	Strategy	Description	Supporting References
1	Integration of Adab Studies in Projects	Each project begins with <i>kajian adab</i> based on classical Islamic educational literature. Before engaging in physical or social activities, students are introduced to <i>adab al-‘alim wa al-muta‘allim</i> (ethics of teachers and learners) and the importance of purifying intention (<i>ikhlas</i>), strengthening the theological foundation of the P5 dimension of faith and piety.	[26]
2	Worship Habituation as Core Activity	Within the theme “ <i>Bangunlah Jiwa dan Raganya</i> ”, spiritual health is cultivated through routine worship practices such as congregational <i>dhuha</i> prayer, morning <i>dhikr</i> , and Qur’anic literacy. These activities function as <i>riyadhah</i> (spiritual training) to foster discipline and inner tranquility among students.	[22]
3	Islamic-Themed Concrete Actions	Students engage in practical actions, such as environmental cleanliness campaigns, linked to the hadith <i>an-nazhafatu minal iman</i> (cleanliness is part of faith). Through these activities, the value of being “noble in character” is directly practiced in students’ interactions with their surroundings.	[2]

The findings indicate that the P5 program at elementary school Anbata Medan successfully harmonizes Pancasila principles with prophetic values. The flexibility inherent in P5 allows schools to select and develop project content that aligns with their institutional identity [25]. Elementary school Anbata Medan utilized this flexibility to ensure that every project contributed meaningfully to the formation of akhlaqul karimah. Character education theory emphasizes that religious values are more effectively internalized through direct experience and consistent habituation rather than solely through classroom instruction [2]. The findings clearly show that P5 at elementary school Anbata Medan successfully transforms Islamic values into daily practices that shape students' behavior, discipline, and moral awareness.

3.3. School ecosystem: Religious culture as a support for the merdeka curriculum

To address the third research problem regarding the role of the school ecosystem, based on interviews with the principal and teachers at elementary school Anbata Medan, the findings reveal that the formation of students' religious character does not occur solely within classroom instruction but is strongly reinforced by the broader school ecosystem through the creation of a consistent religious culture. One informant stated that the Merdeka Curriculum provides schools with the flexibility to integrate religious practices into daily routines rather than positioning them as extracurricular or additional activities. As expressed by a teacher, "The Merdeka Curriculum allows us to integrate activities such as Qur'anic reading and congregational prayers into our daily routines, making them a foundation for students before they receive general subject matter" (Interview, September 10, 2024).

This statement highlights how religious culture serves as a preparatory framework that shapes students' attitudes and dispositions toward learning. Consequently, the school ecosystem functions as a contextual environment that supports the internalization of Islamic values in a natural and continuous manner. At elementary school Anbata Medan, religious school culture is manifested through two flagship programs that consistently shape students' daily experiences. The main elements of this religious culture are summarized in Table 3. Through these practices, religious values become embedded in students' routines, attitudes, and social interactions.

Table 3. Religious culture practices within the school ecosystem of elementary school Anbata Medan

No.	Cultural Practice	Description	Supporting References
1	Collective Worship Practices	Congregational <i>Dhuha</i> , <i>Zuhur</i> , and <i>Asr</i> prayers are implemented as daily routines to foster discipline and spiritual responsibility. These practices also instill values of togetherness, solidarity, and mutual support, as students pray collectively and develop a sense of brotherhood and shared spiritual commitment.	[27]
2	Qur'anic (Tahsin and Tahfidz)	Every morning before formal lessons begin, students participate in Qur'anic literacy sessions focused on <i>tahsin</i> (recitation improvement) and <i>tahfidz</i> (memorization). This program supports the "Independent" and "Faithful" dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile and promotes continuous interaction with the Qur'an.	[28]

Observational data further support these findings, showing that all students at elementary school Anbata Medan participate earnestly in congregational Zuhur and Asr prayers. When the call to prayer is heard, students promptly proceed to the school prayer hall, demonstrating a strong sense of responsibility toward fulfilling their religious obligations. This behavior reflects not only obedience to religious rules but also the internalization of discipline and respect for institutional norms. Such consistent practices contribute significantly to students' spiritual readiness and moral awareness prior to academic learning. As a result, religious observance becomes an integral part of students' daily school life rather than a separate ritual activity.

The Qur'anic literacy program, conducted systematically and continuously, is further strengthened by structured planning, regular muraja'ah sessions, the addition of new verses, and collaboration between the school and parents through a communication logbook. The provision of rewards for students who excel in tahsin and tahfidz motivates learners and fosters a deeper emotional attachment to the Qur'an. However, classroom observations indicate that limitations in time allocation and the number of students per halaqah can hinder optimal learning if not supported by appropriate instructional planning and time-adjusted teaching methods. These findings suggest that effective implementation of Qur'anic literacy programs requires careful pedagogical design to maximize learning outcomes. Nonetheless, continuous engagement with the Qur'an remains a key factor in strengthening students' religious literacy and character formation.

Previous studies reinforce the significance of this school ecosystem. [27] emphasize that a religious school culture functions as a powerful hidden curriculum that accelerates the internalization of character and

Islamic values within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. Similarly, [29] argue that the success of character education largely depends on a supportive and conducive school ecosystem. The integration of local school culture, such as Qur'anic literacy, with the flexible structure of the Merdeka Curriculum creates educational harmony that extends beyond cognitive competence to behavioral piety. At elementary school Anbata Medan, this ecosystem has proven to be a key supporting factor that facilitates differentiated learning implementation, as students already possess strong mental readiness and proper adab developed through consistent religious habituation. These findings provide clear evidence that the school ecosystem at elementary school Anbata Medan plays a decisive role in sustaining and strengthening the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum based on Islamic values

3.4. Integration through extracurricular activities and school culture

Based on interviews with the student affairs coordinator at elementary school Anbata Medan, the integration of Islamic values is implemented extensively through extracurricular activities and the habituation of school culture. The informant emphasized that the internalization of Islamic values is not confined to classroom instruction but is embedded in daily practices that define the school's identity. As stated in the interview, "To integrate Islamic values, we do not focus solely on classroom materials. The culture of greeting and handshaking at the school gate, the habituation of congregational prayers, and the tahfidz and tahsin programs are the spirit of this school. Within the Merdeka Curriculum, these are incorporated as part of religious-based interest and talent development" (Interview, September 12, 2024). This statement illustrates how extracurricular activities and school culture function as complementary mechanisms that strengthen the formal curriculum. Consequently, the Merdeka Curriculum at elementary school Anbata Medan is implemented through a holistic approach that integrates academic, spiritual, and social dimensions.

The tahfidz and tahsin programs at elementary school Anbata Medan serve as flagship extracurricular activities that aim not only at achieving memorization targets but also at cultivating proper adab toward the Qur'an. These programs emphasize respect, discipline, and emotional attachment to the holy text, reinforcing students' religious identity. In addition, the consistent practice of handshaking and polite social interaction (adab al-mu'asyarah) is institutionalized to foster emotional closeness between teachers and students. Such practices help create a nurturing and respectful school climate that supports moral development. Through continuous habituation, these values are internalized naturally by students and reflected in their daily behavior. This integration demonstrates that character education is most effective when values are lived and practiced rather than merely taught.

These findings are consistent with the study by [26], which asserts that religious extracurricular activities function as strategic instruments in supporting the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in developing soft skills and religious character that cannot be fully addressed within formal instructional hours. A consistent school culture contributes to the creation of a safe and comfortable learning environment that is conducive to students' moral and emotional growth. Furthermore, the success of value integration through extracurricular activities highlights the importance of informal learning spaces in character education. Such spaces allow students to experience religious values in authentic and meaningful contexts. Therefore, extracurricular and cultural programs at elementary school Anbata Medan play a vital role in reinforcing the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum.

3.5. Supporting and inhibiting factors

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum based on Islamic values at elementary school Anbata Medan is influenced by various supporting and inhibiting factors. Interviews with educators revealed that strong parental support and teacher competence are the primary enabling factors. One classroom teacher explained, "Parents are highly cooperative in monitoring students' prayers and memorization at home. In addition, the regular Merdeka Curriculum training we attend helps us creatively integrate Islamic values into teaching modules" (Interview, September 12, 2024). This collaboration between school and family strengthens the continuity of character education beyond the school environment. Teacher professionalism and continuous capacity building also play a significant role in ensuring effective curriculum implementation.

However, the study also identified several inhibiting factors, particularly limitations in facilities and time management. Educators reported constraints related to the limited capacity of worship facilities during congregational prayers and the challenge of balancing the administrative demands of the new curriculum with intensive character habituation activities. These challenges reflect common technical obstacles faced by schools during curriculum transitions. This finding aligns with [30]-[40], who argue that synergy between schools and parents is the key determinant of success in character education within the Merdeka Learning era. At the same time, limitations in supporting infrastructure and teachers' mental readiness to adapt to curriculum changes often emerge as significant barriers that require strategic managerial solutions from school leadership.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted in a single Islamic elementary school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational

contexts with different institutional characteristics. Second, the qualitative approach prioritizes depth of understanding rather than measurable outcomes, therefore the impact of Islamic value integration on students' religious character was not quantitatively assessed. Third, data were collected primarily from school leaders, teachers, and students, without involving parents as formal research participants. Future studies may employ mixed-method approaches, include comparative school settings, or incorporate longitudinal designs to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on character formation.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at elementary school Anbata Medan has successfully integrated Islamic values as the primary foundation for the formation of students' religious character. This integration is carried out comprehensively through learning planning, co-curricular activities, and the school ecosystem. At the planning stage, teachers modify the Learning Objectives Flow (ATP) and teaching modules by embedding values of *tauhid* and *adab* within general subject matter. In the co-curricular domain, particularly through the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5) theme "Wake up your body and soul," religious character is strengthened through spiritual *riyadhah*, worship habituation, and structured *adab* studies. Furthermore, the creation of a religious school culture, manifested in congregational prayers, Qur'anic memorization programs, and the cultivation of polite and respectful behavior, functions as a hidden curriculum that reinforces students' Islamic identity. Despite challenges related to limited facilities and administrative workload, strong collaboration between the school and parents has emerged as a key success factor. The merdeka curriculum at anbata elementary school Medan is not merely perceived as an administrative reform but as a strategic opportunity to develop graduates who possess high intellectual capacity while maintaining noble character (*Kamil human*).

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be proposed. First, schools implementing the Merdeka Curriculum are encouraged to systematically integrate Islamic values into learning objectives and teaching modules across subjects, rather than limiting character education to Islamic Religious Education alone. Second, school leaders should strengthen teacher capacity through continuous professional development focused on value-based curriculum implementation and character habituation strategies. Third, collaboration between schools and parents should be institutionalized through regular communication and joint character-building programs to ensure consistency between school and home environments. Fourth, future research is recommended to involve comparative or longitudinal studies across different Islamic elementary schools to examine the sustainability and broader impact of Islamic value integration within the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, N.H. and R.; Methodology, N.H.; Investigation, N.H., R., and T.R.; Data Curation, N.H. and M.R.F.; Formal Analysis, N.H.; Writing -Original Draft Preparation, N.H.; Writing -Review & Editing, R. and B.S.; Visualization, M.R.F.; Supervision, B.S.; Project Administration, N.H.; Resources, T.R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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