

Unveiling The Merdeka Curriculum: A Comprehensive Inquiry Into Islamic Religious Education Transformation At Vocational High School

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ABSTRACT

This study comprehensively investigates the transformation process of Islamic religious education in Vocational High Schools (SMK) as it adapts the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum introduced by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture. The research was carried out at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung, one of the top vocational schools in Lampung province. The primary goal of this study is to investigate the changes in planning, learning methods, learning materials, assessment, and the future of Islamic religious education in response to the adoption of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. This study also examines the problems, opportunities, and implications of transforming Islamic religious education in the vocational setting in response to today's more complicated needs. Data were obtained using a qualitative approach, including classroom observations, in-depth interviews with teachers, principals, and students, and document analysis. The research findings revealed that SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung employed various methods to align Islamic religious education learning with the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum principles. The methods include developing contextual teaching modules, using innovative learning approaches like project-based learning, collaborative case studies, and industry partnerships, and incorporating digital technologies into the teaching and learning process. In conclusion, this study contributes to a better understanding of the transformation efforts of Islamic religious education in vocational high schools in response to changes in the national curriculum. The study's findings can be utilized to help other vocational schools improve the quality of Islamic religious education and prepare students for the challenges of the modern workplace.

Kata Kunci: Kurikulum Merdeka, Pendidikan Agama Islam, Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan (SMK)

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini secara komprehensif mengkaji proses transformasi pendidikan agama Islam di Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan (SMK) dalam mengadaptasi Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar yang diperkenalkan oleh Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia. Penelitian dilakukan di SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung, salah satu sekolah kejuruan unggulan di Provinsi Lampung. Tujuan utama

penelitian ini adalah untuk menelusuri perubahan dalam perencanaan, metode pembelajaran, materi ajar, penilaian, serta arah masa depan pendidikan agama Islam sebagai respons terhadap penerapan Kurikulum Merdeka. Penelitian ini juga menelaah berbagai permasalahan, peluang, dan implikasi dari transformasi pendidikan agama Islam di lingkungan pendidikan kejuruan dalam menghadapi kebutuhan zaman yang semakin kompleks. Data diperoleh melalui pendekatan kualitatif dengan teknik observasi kelas, wawancara mendalam dengan guru, kepala sekolah, dan siswa, serta analisis dokumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung menerapkan berbagai strategi untuk menyesuaikan pembelajaran pendidikan agama Islam dengan prinsip-prinsip Kurikulum Merdeka. Strategi tersebut meliputi pengembangan modul ajar kontekstual, penerapan pendekatan pembelajaran inovatif seperti pembelajaran berbasis proyek, studi kasus kolaboratif, serta kemitraan dengan industri, dan integrasi teknologi digital dalam proses belajar-mengajar. Kesimpulan, penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap pemahaman yang lebih mendalam mengenai upaya transformasi pendidikan agama Islam di sekolah menengah kejuruan sebagai respons terhadap perubahan kurikulum nasional. Temuan penelitian ini dapat dimanfaatkan untuk membantu sekolah kejuruan lainnya dalam meningkatkan kualitas pendidikan agama Islam dan mempersiapkan siswa menghadapi tantangan dunia kerja modern.

INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia has undergone several curricular revisions to improve educational quality and generate graduates with 21st-century skills (Hasanah & Khoiruttobib, 2023). One of the most critical adjustments was the launch of the Merdeka Curriculum by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2022. This curriculum intends to allow education units to design the curriculum based on the requirements and potential of their regions (Ahmad et al., 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, curriculum reform is closely linked to educational transformation. The curriculum functions not merely as a technical guideline but as a strategic instrument that shapes the learning culture, pedagogical orientation, and students' character development (Rani, 2014). In the context of Islamic Religious Education, curriculum transformation is expected to foster holistic learning that integrates spiritual values, moral formation, critical thinking, and social responsibility (Asfiati, 2023), especially within vocational education, which is traditionally oriented toward technical skills and employability (Aulia et al., 2025).

Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum is a historic turning point in Indonesia's educational system, emphasizing project-based learning and developing 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, cooperation, and communication (Harun, 2021; Sarrayu et al., 2025). However, implementing this new curriculum is directly associated with the issues and obstacles that schools across Indonesia confront (Mariati, 2021), especially vocational high schools. Vocational education

plays a critical role in training the next generation to meet the needs of an increasingly dynamic workplace. The Indonesian government implemented the Merdeka Curriculum as an educational innovation to improve the relevance and quality of vocational education (Fatah et al., 2022).

Empirically, Previous studies have examined the Merdeka Curriculum to teach Islamic religious education in vocational institutions. However, the study is limited to the vocational high schools 's readiness to implement the Merdeka curriculum and its problems (Fatah et al., 2022; Nelfasari et al., 2023), followed by the integration of other subjects in Islamic religious education subjects using an interdisciplinary approach (Empaldi, 2023) and aspects of planning, implementation, and assessment (Arifin et al., 2021; Ariska dwi et al., 2024; Hunaepi & Suharta, 2024). While these studies contribute valuable insights, they largely examine the Merdeka Curriculum from partial or fragmented perspectives, without comprehensively addressing how Islamic Religious Education is transformed as a learning system within a specific vocational school context.

SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung is one of the leading vocational high schools implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at the SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung is an intriguing topic to investigate in the context of Islamic religious education. As one of Lampung's major vocational schools, SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung has difficulty integrating Islamic education into a more flexible and open curriculum. However, even though Merdeka Belajar has been implemented at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung, no complete research has been conducted to investigate the transformation of Islamic religious education learning at this school, which is distinctive and distinct from others. In addition, at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung, we looked at the future of Islamic religious education learning in vocational high schools in the context of Merdeka Belajar.

SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung is a leading school implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. As a result, this study is critical for understanding how the transformation process of Islamic religious education learning occurs at the school when applying the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Changes in planning, methods of learning, learning materials, assessment, and the future of Islamic education learning are all issues that must be addressed. Therefore, this study addresses a clear research gap by providing a comprehensive inquiry into the transformation of Islamic Religious Education learning at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung under the Merdeka Curriculum. Furthermore, this research might disclose the problems, opportunities, and implications of transforming Islamic education in a vocational school setting to meet the increasingly complex demands of the times.

The findings of this study are expected to provide new insights into the development of Islamic education that is relevant and adaptable to changes in the national curriculum, as well as a reference for other vocational schools seeking to improve the quality of Islamic education in vocational schools by implementing an innovative curriculum that is relevant to the needs of the 21st century.

RESEARCH METHODS

This is descriptive qualitative research because it seeks to investigate or depict the social context under study extensively, comprehensively, and in-depth. The research location was SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung, at Prof. Dr. Ir. Sumantri Brojonegoro Street No.1, Rajabasa Sub-district,

Bandar Lampung City, Lampung Province. The research subjects were an Islamic religious education teacher, the head of the curriculum, the head of the general program, and the P5 coordinator of SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung, who were chosen using the purposive sampling technique. Interview approaches were employed to gather data on the challenges and strategies Islamic religious education teachers face in implementing the Merdeka curriculum. Furthermore, the observation method supplements the data from interviews and documentation.

Researchers conducted the qualitative analysis using Miles and Huberman's concept, which states three stages to analyzing qualitative research data: data reduction, data presentation (data display), conclusion drawing, and verification. Furthermore, the data validity test employed triangulation of procedures and sources (Sugiyono, 2017).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Unveiling the Merdeka Curriculum at Vocational High Schools

There has been a major transformation in Islamic education at vocational high schools in recent years. This transformation is reflected in implementing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, which aims to enhance the quality and relevance of Islamic religious education for students (Empaldi, 2023). Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is a curriculum with a variety of intracurricular learning opportunities. The content will be adjusted to give students enough time to explore concepts and improve competencies. Teachers can choose from various instructional methods to personalize learning to the requirements and interests of their students (Mariati, 2021).

The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum at vocational high schools is an education system that emphasizes competency, flexible learning, and Pancasila's ethos. This curriculum consists of three phases. In phase 1 (Grade 10), students study general courses like English, Mathematics, Informatics, and fundamental vocational subjects. In phase 2 (Grades 11 and 12), the students study more technical vocational subjects related to their selected specialist concentration. These disciplines encompass a more technically advanced set of competency units (Kemenristekdikti, 2022).

In phase 3 (Grades 11 and 12), the students study creative and entrepreneurial disciplines, which serve as tools for them to realize and express their abilities. Students can investigate occupational subjects within their skill concentration, vocational subjects across skill concentrations, general subjects, or elective group courses offered during phase F of SMA/MA. Merdeka Curriculum empowers schools to customize the curriculum based on their needs and potential, and refers to competency criteria. The primary focus is on strengthening expertise and competence to prepare graduates to enter the workforce. The Merdeka Curriculum includes ten fields of knowledge and fifty expertise programs (Kemenristekdikti, 2022).

Learning encompasses multiple disciplines rather than focusing solely on one. Developing digital skills such as critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, and communication is also prioritized. Learning is intended to be relevant to daily life, and local industry demands to provide students with a greater grasp of how to apply their knowledge in practice. The Merdeka Curriculum also considers soft skills and character development, such as understanding Pancasila. This policy makes vocational high school education more relevant to labour market needs and improves students' job skills (Pertiwi & Pusparini, 2021).

The SMA (Senior High School), SMK (Vocational High School), and MA (Islamic Senior High School) curriculum comprises phases: phase E for the tenth grade and phase F for the eleventh and twelfth grades. The SMA/MA curriculum framework is structured into intracurricular learning and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project, which receives around 30% of the total learning hours yearly. The P5 project allows for flexible implementation in terms of both content and time. The Pancasila profile project's content must include references to the Pancasila student profile, both in terms of implementation time and substance. To manage implementation time, add the allotment of project lesson hours from all disciplines and the time required to accomplish each project (Kemenristekdikti, 2022).

With the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, vocational high schools is anticipated to generate graduates who are more work-ready, skilled, and responsive to the needs of the business/industrial world in the contemporary digital age. However, its implementation requires the readiness and assistance of all stakeholders, including teachers, schools, government officials, and industrial partners.

B. Merdeka Curriculum: Transforming Islamic Religious Education Learning in SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung

The reform of Islamic religious education learning at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung begins with the design, implementation, and assessment stages. Several points of findings are presented in the following table:

Table 1. Transformation of Islamic Religious Education Learning under the Merdeka Curriculum at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung

Dimension	Empirical Findings
Curriculum Planning	Teaching modules replace lesson plans; intensive IHT for teachers
Diagnostic Assessment	Early assessment of students' readiness and Qur'an literacy levels
Learning Strategies	PBL, collaborative learning, case studies, contextual learning
Learning Content	Integration of Islamic values with vocational contexts
Assessment Methods	Performance-based projects, self-assessment, journals
Stakeholder Involvement	Students, parents, and industry partners are involved in the evaluation

Table 1 shows that the *first* stage in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum into Islamic Religious Education at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung is the planning process. According to interviews with the Head of the General Program at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung, which was a pioneer in implementing the Continuous Professional Development (PK) program with the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, the transition from the 2013 Curriculum (K13) to the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum resulted in several adjustments and innovations. For example, teaching modules replace lesson plans. Thus, throughout the planning stage, SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung makes a significant effort to perform internal-level socialization, also known as In-House Training (IHT). IHT helps Islamic religious education teachers learn and adapt rapidly to the new curriculum. It enables them to

integrate Merdeka Belajar Curriculum ideas into Islamic religious education learning techniques (Apriyani, 2023).

SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung has also produced a School Operational Curriculum, which displays the school's commitment to creating lesson plans that align with its vision and mission. This document is crucial in ensuring lesson plans align with school goals. Furthermore, SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung has two monitoring stages: internal and external. School management oversees internal monitoring, while the education office oversees external monitoring. This stage ensures that the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is implemented as planned and satisfies the standards. Monitoring and evaluation are critical tools for determining how well the Merdeka Curriculum is being implemented (Interview).

According to the interview findings, Islamic religious education teachers at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung take significant initiatives to transform Islamic religious education learning, including: 1) Analyzing learning outcomes to develop specific, quantifiable learning objectives. This analysis identifies the learning outcomes students must obtain from receiving Islamic religious education, including an awareness of religious principles, ethics, and significant religious concepts. 2) Perform a diagnostic assessment of student readiness. The goal is to determine each student's level of knowledge, skills, and specific needs. The planning method for implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education takes an adaptive and participative approach to learning (Hasanah, 2023). Early diagnostic assessments allow teachers to design more effective learning, while early agreements with students encourage student participation in the learning process (Wahyuningsih et al., 2023). 3) Constructing the teaching module takes into account several crucial criteria. First, the module is created after assessing the learning outcomes. Second, it considers the findings of the diagnostic examination used to determine each student's initial conditions and learning needs. Third, the module is designed to align with previously established learning objectives (Interview).

This learning module is delivered logically and thoroughly. It contains complete learning resources, clear learning rules, tasks that students must accomplish, and varied activities that help students reach their learning objectives (Maulida, 2022). Implementing this module will make Islamic religious education's teaching and learning process at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung more successful and consistent with the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum principles. Furthermore, Islamic religious education teachers at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung have created a variety of learning methodologies and strategies specific to the content being taught. In general, they begin by mapping out students' characteristics and abilities. For example, categorizing the capacity to read the Qur'an as high, medium, or low. Each will receive different treatment and learning approaches based on their ability.

Second, implementing Islamic religious education learning based on the Merdeka Curriculum. According to interviews with the head of curriculum in implementing learning to integrate diverse methods, Islamic religious education teachers at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung prioritize modifying learning methods based on the subject to be taught and the unique characteristics of their classrooms. The methods used include:

1) Project-based Learning: Vocational high schools students are assigned real-world tasks about their area of expertise, such as establishing an Islamic website, creating an online zakat

application, or organizing a charity event. These initiatives allow students to apply religious values in the workplace setting. 2) Collaborative Learning: Students are divided into small groups to discuss, collaborate on tasks, or finish projects together. 3) Case Study: The teacher gives real-life cases or scenarios involving religious or ethical difficulties in the workplace. Students are encouraged to examine, discuss, and propose solutions based on religious beliefs. 4) Problem-Based Learning: Students are presented with real-world issues or challenges that must be solved using the ideals of religious teachings. 5) Contextual Learning: The materials are linked to real-world contexts and vocational high school students' competence areas. 6) Field Trip: Students are invited to visit areas related to the studied materials. 7) Using technology to illustrate religious concepts and make learning more dynamic and interesting (Interview).

Islamic religious education teachers have worked hard to create a dynamic learning environment where students can better understand and implement religious and ethical ideals daily. Furthermore, SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung implements the "Lampung Mengaji" program, which emphasizes religious and moral values in Islamic religious education learning and supports the development of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum.

The findings of this study demonstrate SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung's commitment to implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, creating a learning environment that supports students in learning independently and collaboratively, and preparing them to become competent graduates. The school's efforts and continuous improvement show its dedication to providing students with more meaningful and relevant learning experiences.

Third, the Islamic religious education Learning evaluation is based on the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. Based on the findings of interviews and observations, it is clear that Islamic religious education teachers at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung have adopted a comprehensive approach to evaluating students as they apply the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. They use various evaluation methods, including oral assessments, questions/tests, performance evaluations, practical projects, journals, and self-assessments, to ensure that the evaluation encompasses knowledge, abilities, and attitudes. These methods enable teachers to evaluate student development better and provide relevant feedback, improving learning results. With these methods, SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung teachers try to create an educational environment that promotes students' overall religious development (Interview).

Islamic religious education teachers at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung use two methods to assess student satisfaction in learning Islamic religious education based on the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum: 1) direct interviews with students and 2) questionnaires with structured and open-ended questions that allow students to detail their views on various aspects of learning, including teaching methods, teaching materials, and the overall learning experience. 3) Industry surveys test students' ability to apply their knowledge and abilities in the workplace. 4) The school also includes parents by surveying them. The survey seeks parents' perspectives and input on their children's learning experiences. The survey allows schools to assess parental satisfaction with implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum (Interview).

C. Future Directions for Islamic Religious Education Learning in Vocational High Schools in the Context of Merdeka Belajar

Islamic Religious Education at vocational high schools plays a vital part in influencing students' lives. It provides a solid basis for Islamic principles and educates students with the skills and information they need to excel in the workplace (Mugiyanta, 2016). The Merdeka Belajar concepts must explore future directions to ensure the efficiency and relevance of Islamic religious education in SMK. These future directions include applying Islamic teachings in vocational training programs by incorporating technology (Hadi et al., 2023) and digital resources into Islamic religious education learning and encouraging collaboration between SMKs and industry partners to provide students with real-world experiences.

Furthermore, the transformation of Islamic education learning in vocational high schools should prioritize strengthening critical thinking and problem-solving abilities and encouraging students to apply Islamic ideals in their personal and professional lives (Alfirda, 2024). Thus, Islamic religious education at vocational high schools can help students develop into well-rounded persons skilled in their subjects and uphold Islamic principles and ethics. As a result, they will be better prepared to handle modern-day problems, excel, and contribute positively to society as responsible Muslims (Susyanto et al., 2022).

To successfully transform Islamic religious education learning in SMK, the Merdeka Belajar concept, which emphasizes student-centred learning, competency-based education, and flexible learning, must be implemented (Ferdaus & Novita, 2023). Aligning Islamic teaching in vocational high schools with Merdeka Belajar principles fosters a dynamic and engaging learning environment. It will allow students to direct their education, develop appropriate skills, and adapt to the changing needs of industry and society. In short, Islamic education in vocational high schools must evolve to meet the needs of tomorrow.

According to studies conducted at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung, government and school support, teacher passion, and student enthusiasm exist. They contribute to implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum for Islamic Religious Education at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung. Islamic religious education teachers are also helped by providing worship facilities at school and suitable facilities for worship activities, which make it easier and more supportive for students to exercise their religious beliefs. Furthermore, the Qur'an and Islamic education books are extremely valuable resources for Islamic education learning and religious comprehension (Hamida et al., 2024).

In summary, when Islamic religious education learning is reorganized based on the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, its position in vocational schools will be more successful, with defined objectives and aims. Implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung poses problems, such as teachers' difficulty adjusting to the new approach and students' slow adaptation to these changes. However, these problems can be solved effectively with the support and efforts offered to successfully apply the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Islamic religious education learning at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the development of Islamic religious education at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung after applying the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. It is known that this school has made different efforts to align Islamic religious education learning with Merdeka Belajar principles, which emphasize student-centred, contextual, and competency-based learning. Significant modifications

are made to lesson plans, teaching module development, learning methodologies, learning resources, and assessment systems. Islamic religious education teachers strive to create learning experiences that are more meaningful, real, and relevant to their students' future work environments. Students gain a religious understanding relevant to their occupational sectors through project-based learning methodologies, case studies, and industry relationships. However, this study highlighted significant barriers to adopting the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, including teacher preparedness and reluctance to change. As a result, further efforts are required to increase teacher ability and raise awareness and support among all stakeholders.

Implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum to reform Islamic religious education at SMKN 2 Bandar Lampung is a positive step toward educating students to handle the challenges of today's workplace while strengthening their religious foundations. This research gives significant insights into optimal practices and areas that require additional development in Islamic education in the vocational high school setting. Based on these findings, this study recommends strengthening continuous professional development programs for Islamic religious education teachers, particularly in competency-based learning design, authentic assessment, and the integration of Islamic values within vocational contexts. In addition, greater institutional support and collaboration between schools, education authorities, and industry partners are needed to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of curriculum implementation. Future research is also recommended to explore students' learning experiences and long-term outcomes of Islamic religious education under the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum across diverse vocational school contexts.

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