



## **The Implementation of Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Islamic Education Learning to Develop Students' Independent Character**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose** – This study aims to examine the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Islamic Education (PAI) learning, covering the aspects of planning, implementation, and evaluation, as well as how this curriculum contributes to shaping students' independent character at SMP Sumpah Pemuda Jakarta Barat.

**Methodology/approach** –The research employs a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. Triangulation techniques are applied to ensure the validity of data collected through in-depth interviews with the School Principal, Vice Principal for Curriculum Affairs, PAI teachers, and student representatives, as well as direct classroom observations .

**Findings** – The research findings indicate that the planning of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is carried out collaboratively between the school administration and PAI teachers, although challenges remain in understanding the new curriculum. In its implementation, learning focuses more on practical activities rather than theoretical lessons, such as memorizing Quranic verses, which has proven effective in fostering students' independence. Meanwhile, the evaluation process is conducted holistically, combining written tests, oral assessments, and practical worship evaluations, all of which contribute to strengthening students' independent character.

**Novelty/value** – This study provides new insights by demonstrating that the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in PAI learning has a positive impact on developing students' independent character. However, challenges remain, particularly in teachers' and schools' understanding of the new curriculum. The uniqueness of this research lies in its holistic evaluation approach and its focus on student independence within the context of religious education.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Education is a fundamental aspect of national development. As a deliberate and planned effort, education aims to create a conducive learning environment in which students can develop optimally in various aspects, including intelligence, personality, and noble character. One of the primary goals of education is to shape a generation that is characterized by independence, critical thinking, and responsibility. However, the reality on the ground shows that students' independent character is still relatively weak. This is reflected in students' tendency to rely on others when making decisions, poor study habits, and academic behaviors that do not reflect independence, such as cheating and seeking out exam leaks.

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a strategic role in shaping students' character, including

instilling values of independence. Through PAI lessons, students are taught fundamental principles such as honesty, responsibility, and the ability to make independent decisions. Additionally, religious education serves as a means to strengthen students' spirituality and faith, enabling them to face life's challenges with strong moral principles. Thus, the effectiveness of PAI in shaping independent character is an important aspect to consider in the national education system.

As the education system in Indonesia evolves, the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum emerges as an innovation that offers greater flexibility for teachers and students in the learning process. This curriculum is designed to allow for a more personalized and relevant approach to learning, according to the needs and potentials of the students. In the context of PAI, the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum requires teachers to be creative in delivering material so that students can more easily understand and internalize religious values, including aspects of independence. The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is a new curriculum implemented at SMP Sumpah Pemuda in West Jakarta, particularly in PAI lessons, so its effectiveness in shaping students' independent character still needs further examination.

Several relevant studies have been reviewed to identify similarities and differences and prove that this research has its own uniqueness. The first study, by Rantisa Wardani (2023), discusses the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in PAI lessons at SMA Negeri 5 Rejang Lebong. The similarity lies in the focus on the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in PAI, while the difference is that this study only highlights supporting and inhibiting factors without relating it to student character formation. Next, the research by Ma'ruf Saifudin (2023) examines the application of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in shaping student character at MAN 2 Ponorogo. This study is relevant because it discusses the role of the curriculum in character formation but differs in that it was conducted at the Madrasah Aliyah level and did not focus on specific subjects, whereas this research is more specific to PAI learning at the junior high school level. Finally, the study by Robi Awaludin (2024) investigates the application of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in PAI at SMA Negeri 1 Candipuro, South Lampung, focusing on teacher preparation, implementation, and assessment. The main difference is that this study focuses more on the impact of curriculum implementation on shaping students' independent character at SMP Sumpah Pemuda in West Jakarta. Therefore, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is not only implemented in PAI lessons but also plays a role in shaping student character at the junior high school level.

This research aims to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in PAI lessons in shaping students' independent character at SMP Sumpah Pemuda in West Jakarta. The main focus of this research includes three aspects: planning, implementation, and evaluation of PAI lessons in the context of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. By examining these three aspects, this research is expected to provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of the curriculum in enhancing students' independent character.

The results of this study are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of studies on the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum and provide practical benefits to schools, teachers, and other educational stakeholders. Therefore, this research aims not only to understand the implementation of educational policies but also to provide strategic recommendations to improve the effectiveness of PAI lessons in shaping students' more independent and competitive character.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Merdeka Belajar Curriculum**

The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is an innovation in Indonesia's education system aimed at providing freedom for students and educators in the learning process. Historically, the term "curriculum" was first used in the context of sports in ancient Greece, derived from the words "curir," meaning runner, and "curere," meaning the racecourse. The term began to be recognized in the field of education in Scotland in 1829 and was widely adopted in the United States nearly a century later. John Dewey, a philosopher of education, developed the concept of progressivism, emphasizing the importance of experience in learning. According to him, the curriculum should be flexible and experience-based, so students not only memorize theories but also understand and apply the material in everyday life. The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum implemented in Indonesia follows this approach, where students are given space to develop their interests and talents. According to Purnawanto, cited by Ayi Suherman, this curriculum allows for more varied learning experiences, with flexibility for teachers to choose teaching tools that are better suited to students' needs. The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is expected to provide an enjoyable learning experience and enhance students' competence, character, and mindset, preparing them to face the workforce and global challenges.

The fundamental concept of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum emphasizes several key principles: student independence, creativity, innovation, and community involvement in the learning process. This curriculum prioritizes flexibility in learning, allowing students to take a more active role in determining how they learn, according to their interests and talents. Additionally, the innovative approach to teaching methods encourages teachers to develop diverse, engaging, relevant, and adaptive strategies to meet the needs of the changing times. This concept also stresses the involvement of the community in education, making learning more contextual and aligned with local needs. The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum responds to global changes that demand higher-quality graduates who are adaptive and possess 21st-century skills. With its competency-based, inclusive, and flexible approach, this curriculum aims to produce graduates who not only have academic expertise but also critical thinking skills and the ability to engage in lifelong learning.

The characteristics of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum reflect the government's efforts to improve the quality of education with a more flexible approach, focusing on essential content. Initially developed as a prototype curriculum for learning recovery, it has now become a national standard. Key characteristics of this curriculum include project-based learning aimed at developing the Pancasila Student Profile, focusing on essential content to help students gain a deeper understanding of literacy and numeracy, and offering flexibility in learning with approaches tailored to the context and needs of students. Another advantage is the reduction of non-essential learning material, allowing students more time to understand the concepts being taught. Moreover, this curriculum allows students to choose subjects that align with their talents and interests, unlike the previous system that restricted choices from the outset. The learning approach is also more interactive, using projects and discussions on contextual issues to develop character and the Pancasila Student Profile. Thus, the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum not only simplifies the learning load but also provides space for students to be more active in determining the course of their education.

The implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is a process involving planning, execution, and evaluation in the education field. The term "implementation" refers to the actions or mechanisms used to carry out a system in order to achieve specific goals. This curriculum, introduced by the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, Nadiem Anwar Makarim, is designed to be more flexible and focused on fundamental content, as well as developing students' uniqueness and abilities. The implementation of this curriculum aims to enhance graduates' competencies in both soft and hard skills, making them more relevant to the demands of the times. One significant change in the implementation of this curriculum is the reduction in face-to-face learning hours and the simplification of teaching materials that were previously seen as burdensome for students. This curriculum emphasizes the development of competencies as well as the formation of character and creativity. Additionally, the learning is student-centered, where educators serve as facilitators who help students develop their potential. This curriculum also encourages more interactive educational strategies between educators

and students, as well as creative practices that help students build their own knowledge. Therefore, the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum is expected to create a more inclusive, flexible educational environment that supports students in facing future challenges.

### **Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Learning**

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is the process of interaction between educators and students aimed at shaping character and enhancing religious understanding based on Islamic values. The word "learning" comes from the root word "ajar," which means guidance or instruction provided to help someone gain new understanding. In the context of PAI, learning aims to create behavioral changes in the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. PAI is strongly rooted in the Qur'an, as stated in QS. Al-Mujadalah, verse 11, which emphasizes that Allah will elevate the status of those who have faith and knowledge. According to Ibn Kathir's Tafsir, knowledge refers to both religious and beneficial worldly knowledge, while the Tafsir Al-Muyassar emphasizes that knowledge is a primary means to draw closer to Allah.

In practice, PAI learning focuses on the development of character, morality, and piety in students. Islamic education is not only limited to religious practices such as prayer, fasting, and zakat but also aims to build students' character so that they can face moral and social challenges in the modern era. According to Nasution, the main goal of PAI in general schools is to create pious individuals with noble character. This is in line with Nisa's opinion, cited by Cici Wiswanti, which states that PAI learning must be able to nurture, educate, and guide students morally and spiritually through a systematic and planned approach.

The method of PAI learning is a crucial aspect in ensuring the effectiveness of material delivery. Ahmad Sya'i emphasizes that PAI learning methods must consider students' potential, educators' skills, materials, conditions, and learning media to be more effective and efficient. Several elements must be considered in this method, including (1) a systematic set of actions conducted by the educator, (2) the delivery of material to students, (3) the presence of competencies and learning indicators, (4) the educator's deep understanding, and (5) the formation of students' character to possess noble personality and closeness to Allah. Furthermore, the PAI learning method should be directed toward achieving the educational goals of Islamic religion, as formulated by the Ministry of National Education, which includes nurturing faith and creating students with noble character according to Islamic teachings.

PAI learning sources play an essential role as the main reference in understanding and internalizing Islamic teachings. The primary sources in PAI learning are the Qur'an and Hadith, which serve as guidelines for every material taught. Additionally, learning sources can include books, journals, and various Islamic literatures that help deepen students' understanding of Islamic teachings. From the perspective of Islamic education, learning sources function as references for imparting knowledge and values that have been proven true.

The functions of PAI learning include various aspects that contribute to shaping individuals who are religious and possess good morals. First, PAI serves as a medium to instill Islamic values through quality learning. Second, PAI functions to create an insan kamil, an individual who excels in personality and morality. Third, PAI has the function of rahmatan lil 'alamin, which means making students individuals who can spread peace in social life. In addition, PAI has three main functions: (1) nurturing strong faith, (2) forming habits of worship, righteous deeds, and noble character, and (3) raising awareness of the importance of caring for nature as a gift from Allah.

Thus, PAI learning is a process that involves active interaction between educators and students with a systematic approach, appropriate methods, suitable learning resources, and clear functions in shaping individuals who possess noble character and piety towards Allah.

### **Student's Independent Character**

An independent character is part of an individual's traits and personality, reflected in behavior that does not rely on others to complete tasks and responsibilities. Etymologically, the word character comes from the Latin *karakter* or Greek *kharassein*, which means to mark or distinguish. In French, *caractère*

means to sharpen or deepen, while in English, character refers to one's nature, personality, and role. The Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language (KBBI) defines character as habits, nature, mental traits, morals, or ethics that distinguish one person from another. Terminologically, character refers to how an individual behaves in accordance with moral principles. If a person is honest, helpful, and has integrity, they show a good character. Conversely, if a person behaves dishonestly, cruelly, or greedily, they demonstrate a bad character. Character is also closely related to personality, where someone is said to have character if their behavior reflects strong moral values.

Independence itself is an attitude that an individual must develop to live without depending on others. According to KBBI, independence is defined as the condition of being able to stand on one's own and not rely on others. Therefore, an independent character is a value related to the individual, where a person has an attitude and behavior that does not easily depend on others to solve problems and accomplish tasks. A person with an independent character trusts their ability to face challenges and complete responsibilities without relying on others' help.

There are several traits that indicate someone has an independent character. First, the individual takes initiative in various matters and does not wait for orders or directions from others to act. Second, they are able to complete tasks and responsibilities given to them independently. Third, an individual with an independent character finds satisfaction in their own hard work, not just in external rewards. Additionally, an independent person has the ability to overcome obstacles through their own efforts and strategies. In a book written by Novita Majid, an individual is said to have an independent character if they have a sense of responsibility, can work independently, are creative and initiative, master skills in their field, value time, and are self-confident. Moreover, an independent individual is open to others' opinions and can take care of their own personal needs. Thus, someone with an independent character is better prepared to face life's challenges without relying on others.

The formation of an independent character in a person is influenced by various factors, generally divided into internal and external factors. Internal factors include gender, age, and inherent traits a person is born with. External factors include family education, school, and the social environment, which play a role in shaping a person's attitude and independence. According to Mansur Muslich, character is a moral and mental quality that forms through education and socialization from an early age. Hurlock also explains that parenting patterns are a major factor in developing an independent character. Parents who provide guidance and attention to their children's activities and needs, both in their studies and social interactions, will shape more independent children. Furthermore, gender also plays a role, with boys tending to be more independent than girls due to social factors that shape them to be more assertive. Another influencing factor is birth order in the family, where the firstborn child is usually more independent than the youngest, who often receives more attention from parents and siblings.

The importance of an independent character in life, especially in the field of education, cannot be overlooked. Character education from an early age is essential because childhood is a golden age that determines an individual's future development. If an independent character is instilled from a young age, the individual will be better prepared to face challenges in various aspects of life. In the context of education, independence is very important in the learning process. According to Suparno, students who are independent in learning are more likely to achieve success and accomplishments. Forms of learning independence include self-awareness to study, confidence in completing tasks, not depending on others during exams, and having discipline in managing time and planning learning strategies. Moreover, independent students can control their thinking, implement the strategies they have planned, and evaluate their learning outcomes. With a strong independent character, students will not only succeed academically but also in their social and professional lives in the future. Therefore, the formation of an independent character must be a priority in education so that students can grow into independent, confident, and responsible individuals.

## **METHOD**

This research was conducted at SMP Sumpah Pemuda Jakarta Barat, located at Jl. Joglo Raya No. 36, Kembangan Subdistrict, West Jakarta. This school is a private educational institution established on October 28, 1987, under the auspices of the Al-Mujahidin Islamic Education Foundation. The study

uses a qualitative method, where data is naturally collected with the aim of understanding the phenomenon of implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning and its contribution to the development of students' independent character. Data collection techniques used include direct observation, interviews with the school principal, curriculum vice principal, PAI teachers, and several students as informants, as well as documentation of various written sources that support the research. The collected data consists of primary data, obtained directly from the field through interviews and observations, and secondary data sourced from official documents, previous studies, and relevant literature.

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction aims to filter out information relevant to the research focus, while data presentation helps the researcher systematically organize information to understand emerging patterns. The conclusions drawn will evaluate how well the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in PAI learning contributes to the development of students' independent character, the challenges faced in its implementation, and the effectiveness of the strategies applied by teachers. The validity of the data is tested through triangulation, extended observations, as well as tests of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure the validity of the research findings. The results of this study are expected to contribute to improving the effectiveness of implementing the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in PAI learning and its role in building students' independent character at SMP Sumpah Pemuda Jakarta Barat.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Research Findings

The findings of this research indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMP Sumpah Pemuda Jakarta Barat has positively contributed to shaping students' independent character. These findings were obtained through interviews with educators, students, and school management involved in the curriculum's implementation. The collected data provides a comprehensive picture of how the Merdeka Curriculum is applied in PAI teaching and its impact on the development of students' independent character. To facilitate understanding, the results of these interviews are presented in several key topics.

#### *Planning of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education*

Planning is a crucial initial stage in the process of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, especially in Islamic Religious Education (PAI). Based on observations, interviews, and documentation conducted at SMP Sumpah Pemuda Jakarta Barat, it was found that the curriculum planning process is carried out collaboratively and participatively, involving various key parties within the school.

The planning begins with the formation of a curriculum development team consisting of the Vice Principal for Curriculum and PAI teachers. The curriculum development process is communicative, where each team member plays an active role in designing a learning strategy for PAI that is adaptive to the needs and characteristics of the students. The full involvement of teachers in the development of the learning plan allows for clear task divisions based on the grade levels being taught, making the planning more targeted and contextual.

An interview with the Vice Principal for Curriculum revealed that this collaborative approach aims to align the objectives of PAI learning with the essence of the Merdeka Curriculum, which is to free students in the learning process according to their potential. This reflects the school's awareness of the

importance of active involvement from all education stakeholders in creating a curriculum that responds to the dynamics and challenges of contemporary education.

However, challenges arose, especially since the Merdeka Curriculum is a new curriculum that has not been long implemented at the school. One of the main challenges faced is the adaptation process to the new systematics and content of the teaching materials. This requires educators to adjust their teaching approaches through reflection on previous experiences and the results of evaluations from the previous school year. The adjustment strategy is carried out by aligning the teaching materials with the structure of the Merdeka Curriculum, ensuring that the learning remains relevant and applicable to the students. In addition to teachers and the curriculum team, students also play a role in the planning process. The school identifies the potential of students, particularly in terms of soft skills such as the ability to read the Qur'an, and involves them in learning activities as a form of empowerment. This approach not only strengthens academic aspects but also develops students' character and responsibility, which is one of the main focuses of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Furthermore, interviews with PAI teachers revealed that the planning process begins with an analysis of students' needs and development before preparing teaching modules. The learning approach is more focused on the practice of worship rather than just theory, as a way of reinforcing religious values in students' everyday lives. Teachers are also given the freedom to develop their teaching materials independently according to the conditions of their respective classes, although this creates challenges in coordination among teachers.

The main challenge faced in the planning stage is ensuring that the materials presented are well understood by students with diverse backgrounds and learning abilities. Therefore, input from students becomes crucial, particularly regarding varied and interactive teaching methods. Teachers realize that monotonous methods are less effective in improving students' understanding, so a flexible and contextual approach is needed.

To support teachers' readiness in planning and implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, the education foundation regularly holds training and workshops for educators. Although the effectiveness of the training is estimated to be 70–75%, technical issues such as limited time and teachers' busy schedules affect participation in the training.

Overall, the planning of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation in PAI teaching at SMP Sumpah Pemuda Jakarta Barat demonstrates the school's seriousness and commitment to implementing the national education policy. By actively involving various parties, considering students' needs, and applying adaptive strategies to the new curriculum, this planning process is expected to result in meaningful learning that focuses on developing students' independent character.

### ***Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI Teaching***

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMP Sumpah Pemuda Jakarta Barat shows a strong emphasis on practical approaches rather than theoretical ones. Based on observations, interviews, and documentation, the teaching is more directed toward direct activities that encourage students to actively engage in understanding and practicing Islamic teachings in daily life. This strategy aligns with the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum, which focuses on strengthening students' character and independence.

PAI teaching activities in the Merdeka Curriculum implementation are not only conducted in the classroom but also extend to routine religious activities in the school environment. The school has consistently implemented habituation strategies such as the reading of Juz Amma and scheduled congregational Zuhur prayers. Through this approach, students are trained to understand and practice Islamic values contextually, not just conceptually.



In addition to the habituation strategies, the successful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP Sumpah Pemuda is also supported by adequate facilities and infrastructure. Facilities such as the school mosque, sound systems, and a supportive worship environment are key factors in facilitating religious practice activities. With this support, students can undergo a more meaningful learning process that aligns with the curriculum's student-centered learning experience.

The Merdeka Curriculum encourages increased student participation in the learning process. In practice, students are not just recipients of information but actively engage in demonstrating worship practices, discussing, and showing the courage to present and contribute in class. This active involvement provides students with the opportunity to form a deeper understanding of the learning material, while also fostering a sense of responsibility for implementing religious teachings.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum also provides flexibility for teachers in adjusting teaching methods and strategies. PAI teachers at this school combine demonstration methods, lectures, and individual approaches to understand the needs of each student. This approach enables more personalized, adaptive, and context-appropriate learning. Teachers also provide guidance during practice sessions to ensure the learning objectives are optimally achieved.

Overall, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI teaching at SMP Sumpah Pemuda has had a positive impact on students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development. The focus on practice, habituation, active participation, and adequate facilities makes PAI learning not only focused on academic achievement but also on shaping students' religious character. This aligns with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes freedom of learning, student independence, and the reinforcement of life values in a real-world context.

#### ***Evaluation of the Merdeka Curriculum in PAI Teaching to Develop Students' Independent Character***

The evaluation of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMP Sumpah Pemuda was carried out systematically to assess the effectiveness of the learning process and evaluate its success in developing students' independent character. This evaluation not only aims to assess academic aspects but also seeks to evaluate the development of students' spiritual character and independence in practicing religious rituals. The evaluation process is ongoing, and its results are used to improve teaching methods and enhance learning outcomes.

Technically, PAI evaluation is carried out using two main methods: written tests and oral tests. Written tests are used to measure students' conceptual understanding of the religious material presented, while oral tests are used to assess students' practical abilities, such as reading prayer texts, reciting the Qur'an, and correctly pronouncing short Surahs. The oral evaluation is conducted individually, where the teacher calls students one by one for direct testing, focusing on the accuracy of pronunciation and fluency in recitation.

Success indicators for learning are determined based on the achievement of specific practical and measurable targets. For example, students are considered successful if they can read Surah Al-Fatihah to Al-Asr correctly and fluently. This achievement becomes the primary benchmark for assessing how well students have mastered the PAI material. In addition to academic aspects and worship skills, the evaluation also covers affective dimensions, such as increased confidence and independence in performing religious practices independently, both inside and outside the school environment.

The evaluation results are analyzed by the PAI teachers to identify students who need further guidance. If students do not meet the target, the teacher will provide additional programs such as practice exercises



or individualized reinforcement of material. Evaluation is not only used to assess outcomes but also as a basis for decision-making in improving teaching strategies, including personalized approaches for students facing challenges. Teachers actively seek the reasons behind students' low achievements and provide solutions based on their individual needs.

The Merdeka Curriculum, which focuses on self-development and students' independence, has provided space for PAI learning to significantly contribute to developing students' independent character. Through structured and ongoing evaluation, teachers can ensure that PAI teaching not only conveys material but also shapes strong religious attitudes and behaviors. Despite challenges such as differing characteristics and motivation among students, this evaluation process is a crucial tool in supporting the achievement of holistic educational goals.

### **Discussion**

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMP Sumpah Pemuda Jakarta Barat has shown a positive impact on shaping students' independent character. The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to provide freedom for students to develop their potential, which contributes to strengthening their character, especially independence. As an initial step, planning is a crucial phase in implementing this curriculum. In the context of PAI, the planning focuses not only on cognitive aspects but also includes character development. As stated by Putri (2024), this curriculum offers flexibility for teachers in determining the teaching material and methods suited to the students' conditions. Therefore, good planning should integrate spiritual values and character, which are expected to shape independent and responsible students.

Thorough planning is essential to ensure that the learning process achieves the desired outcomes. Fadillah (2023) states that planning in the Merdeka Curriculum should be based on the individual potential of each student. Teachers need to create a learning environment that supports students' independence, such as giving students the opportunity to choose learning methods that align with their interests. This enables students to develop life skills that are more independent, such as time management, problem-solving, and taking responsibility for their own learning. Therefore, planning that is based on the characteristics and needs of students plays a crucial role in shaping their independence.

In the implementation phase, teachers are given the freedom to choose learning methods that suit the students' needs. This allows teachers to be more adaptive in managing the learning process. Wahyuni (2022) mentions that although there is freedom in method selection, implementation must still be structured with clear goals to achieve the desired outcomes. In the context of PAI, implementation not only aims to transfer religious knowledge but also to shape students' religious character. Teachers are expected to integrate values such as discipline, integrity, and independence into every aspect of learning. Learning based on these values helps students not only master religious knowledge but also develop strong character.

Evaluation in the Merdeka Curriculum is different from traditional evaluation systems that focus more on knowledge tests. Evaluation in this curriculum is more holistic, encompassing the assessment of students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Bagaskara et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of evaluation that includes students' character development. This is done through observing students' behaviors and attitudes in daily life, not just through written exams. In this way, evaluation becomes a tool to measure students' achievements not only in academic terms but also in their personal growth and character development.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study reveals that the planning of the Merdeka Curriculum is carried out collaboratively between the school and the PAI teachers, although there are still challenges in understanding the new curriculum. In the implementation phase, there is a greater emphasis on religious practices, such as memorizing Quranic verses, which has proven to be effective in supporting students' independence. Evaluation is conducted holistically, combining written tests, oral assessments, and religious practices, all of which contribute to the development of students' independent character. Based on these findings, it is recommended that the school continues to strengthen training for teachers to improve their understanding and skills in implementing the curriculum, as well as improving facilities that support practical learning. Additionally, enhancing collaboration between the school and teachers in curriculum planning and implementation is also crucial to optimize learning outcomes.

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