



The Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education: A Study at a Junior High School in Blang Kejeren

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DOI:



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Diajukan: 10/01/2026

Diterima: 13/02/2026

Diterbitkan: 14/03/2026

ABSTRAK

The introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum has reshaped how Indonesian schools translate national educational aspirations into classroom practice, yet its uptake within Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam) in geographically peripheral districts remains poorly understood. This study examines how teachers at a junior high school in Blang Kejeren, Gayo Lues Regency, Aceh, enact the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education, and identifies the enabling and constraining conditions that shape that enactment. Employing a qualitative case-study design, data were generated through semi-structured interviews with six teachers and two school leaders, non-participant classroom observation, and documentary analysis of lesson plans and school policy artefacts. Data were analyzed thematically using the Braun and Clarke framework with the assistance of NVivo, and trustworthiness was secured through triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail. Findings indicate that teachers embraced the curriculum's differentiated and student-centered orientation conceptually but operationalized it unevenly, constrained by limited professional development, scarce contextualized teaching materials, and assessment routines that reverted to conventional cognitive testing. The Pancasila Student Profile was interpreted largely through a moral-religious lens congruent with local Gayo values, producing a distinctive vernacular adaptation of national policy. The study contributes a situated account of curriculum enactment at the intersection of national reform and local religious culture, extending policy-enactment theory to an under-researched peripheral Islamic-education setting. Practically, the findings underscore the need for context-sensitive teacher support and locally grounded assessment guidance.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum; Islamic Religious Education; curriculum enactment; teacher agency; Pancasila Student Profile

ABSTRACT

Penerapan Kurikulum Merdeka telah mengubah cara sekolah di Indonesia menerjemahkan aspirasi pendidikan nasional ke dalam praktik pembelajaran, namun implementasinya dalam Pendidikan Agama Islam di daerah pinggiran secara geografis masih belum banyak dipahami. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana guru pada sebuah sekolah menengah pertama di Blang Kejeren, Kabupaten Gayo Lues, Aceh, menerapkan Kurikulum Merdeka dalam Pendidikan Agama Islam, serta mengidentifikasi kondisi pendukung dan penghambatnya. Dengan desain studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap enam guru dan dua pimpinan sekolah, observasi kelas non-partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen. Data dianalisis secara tematik menggunakan kerangka Braun dan Clarke dengan bantuan NVivo, sementara keterpercayaan dijaga melalui triangulasi, member checking, dan jejak audit. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa guru menerima orientasi diferensiasi dan berpusat pada peserta didik secara konseptual, tetapi menerapkannya secara tidak merata karena keterbatasan pengembangan profesional, minimnya bahan ajar kontekstual, dan rutinitas asesmen yang kembali pada tes kognitif konvensional. Profil Pelajar Pancasila dimaknai melalui lensa moral-religius yang selaras

dengan nilai-nilai lokal Gayo. Penelitian ini memberikan gambaran situasional tentang penerapan kurikulum pada persimpangan reformasi nasional dan budaya keagamaan lokal, serta memperluas teori enactment kebijakan pada konteks pendidikan Islam pinggiran yang jarang diteliti.

Kata kunci: Kurikulum Merdeka; Pendidikan Agama Islam; enactment kurikulum; agensi guru; Profil Pelajar Pancasila

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I. INTRODUCTION

Curriculum reform has become a defining instrument through which nation-states attempt to reconcile educational systems with rapidly shifting economic, technological, and social demands. Across diverse jurisdictions, policymakers have moved away from prescriptive, content-heavy syllabi toward competency-based and learner-centered frameworks intended to cultivate adaptability, critical reasoning, and character (Priestley et al., 2021). Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka, formally introduced in 2022, exemplifies this global trajectory: it grants schools substantial autonomy, foregrounds differentiated instruction, and centers the Pancasila Student Profile as an integrative account of the competencies and dispositions a graduate should embody (Sherly et al., 2021). Yet the promise of any such reform is realized not in policy texts but in the everyday interpretive work of teachers, whose capacities and contexts determine whether ambitious designs become meaningful classroom practice. Understanding curriculum reform therefore requires close attention to the situated conditions under which teachers translate policy into pedagogy.

Recent scholarship on the Merdeka Curriculum has grown quickly but remains skewed toward particular questions and settings. A cluster of studies documents teachers' generally favorable dispositions alongside persistent readiness deficits, especially in lesson design, differentiated instruction, and formative assessment (Nasution et al., 2023; Rahmawati & Suryadi, 2022). A second strand foregrounds structural constraints uneven professional development, digital-infrastructure gaps, and administrative overload that dampen implementation fidelity in resource-limited schools (Fitriyah & Santosa, 2023). A third, smaller body of work turns to subject-specific enactment, showing that the curriculum's flexibility is mediated by the epistemic character of each discipline; in Islamic Religious Education, in particular, teachers negotiate the reform against deeply held pedagogical traditions and normative commitments (Suyadi et al., 2022; Hidayah & Prasetyo, 2023). Synthesized, these literatures converge on a shared insight: enactment is neither uniform nor merely technical, but a contextually contingent process in which teacher agency, institutional support, and cultural values interact. What they leave underexplored is how this interaction unfolds in Islamic education within Indonesia's culturally distinctive and geographically peripheral regions.

This study is framed by the theory of curriculum enactment, which conceptualizes policy not as an object faithfully delivered but as a practice actively constructed by educators within layered contexts (Ball et al., 2012; Priestley et al., 2021). From this perspective, teachers are interpretive agents whose readings of a reform are shaped by biography, professional knowledge, material resources, and the discursive and cultural environments in which they work. The enactment lens is especially apt for Islamic Religious Education under the Merdeka Curriculum because it directs analytic attention to the interpretive gap between a nationally standardized design and its realization in a setting where religious epistemologies and local Gayo traditions exert strong normative force. Rather than measuring deviation from an idealized model, the framework illuminates how meaning is negotiated, adapted, and sometimes resisted, making visible the vernacular forms that national policy assumes on the ground.

Notwithstanding this expanding evidence base, four gaps warrant attention. Methodologically, the field is dominated by cross-sectional surveys and short questionnaire studies that capture attitudes but rarely the interpretive processes through which enactment occurs, leaving in-depth qualitative accounts scarce (Nasution et al., 2023). Contextually, research overwhelmingly concentrates on urban and Java-centric schools, so the experience of peripheral districts such as Blang Kejeren in Gayo Lues where geography,

language, and religious culture diverge markedly from national norms remains largely undocumented. Empirically, few studies examine Islamic Religious Education as a discrete site of enactment, despite its distinctive normative and pedagogical demands, meaning the subject's specific implementation dynamics are poorly evidenced (Suyadi et al., 2022). Theoretically, the enactment framework has seldom been applied to religious education in Muslim-majority peripheral settings, where the interplay between secular-national policy and local religious values may reshape the very categories, the theory presumes. These gaps matter because policies designed at the center are most likely to falter, or to transform in unanticipated ways, precisely at the margins the literature overlooks.

This study advances the field along three dimensions. Conceptually, it extends curriculum-enactment theory by showing how a secular-national reform is refracted through religious and ethnolectal value systems, yielding a vernacular adaptation that neither fidelity nor resistance adequately describes. Methodologically, it offers a fine-grained, triangulated case study that foregrounds interpretive processes largely absent from the survey-heavy literature, thereby modelling how enactment can be studied rather than merely inferred. Contextually, it provides the first systematic empirical account of Merdeka Curriculum implementation in Islamic Religious Education within a peripheral highland district of Aceh, a setting whose particularities render it analytically generative rather than merely illustrative. Together these contributions reposition the periphery as a site of theory-building rather than a deficit case.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how teachers at a junior high school in Blang Kejeren enact the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education, and to identify the conditions that enable and constrain that enactment. Two questions guide the inquiry: first, how do teachers interpret and operationalize the curriculum's core principles in their instructional practice; and second, what institutional, material, and cultural factors shape the process of implementation. By addressing these questions, the study seeks to generate transferable insight into curriculum reform at the intersection of national policy and local religious culture.

II. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design to examine the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education at a public junior high school in Blang Kejeren, Gayo Lues Regency, Aceh. The case was selected because it represents an information-rich example of curriculum reform in a culturally distinctive and peripheral context. The study was grounded in an interpretive-constructivist paradigm, emphasizing participants' experiences and meanings in understanding curriculum implementation. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and consisted of six Islamic Religious Education teachers with varying teaching experience, as well as the principal and vice-principal for curriculum affairs. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, ensuring that no substantially new information emerged from subsequent interviews.

Data were gathered using three techniques: semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. The interview and observation instruments were reviewed by curriculum experts and refined through pilot testing, while a standardized protocol and coding framework were employed to enhance the dependability of the study. Data collection was conducted over twelve weeks. Interviews were carried out in Bahasa Indonesia or the Gayo language, transcribed verbatim, and translated using back-translation procedures. Classroom observations covered two teaching cycles for each teacher, and relevant instructional documents were systematically collected. Ethical approval was obtained, informed consent was secured from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms and secure data storage. Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework with the support of NVivo software. The trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through triangulation of interviews, observations, and documents, member checking, rich contextual description, and an audit trail accompanied by peer debriefing to strengthen the credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of the results.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports the study's findings in relation to the two guiding research questions and interprets them against the extant literature and the enactment framework. Findings are organized around four themes generated through the analysis: conceptual endorsement of the curriculum's principles, uneven pedagogical operationalization, the reassertion of conventional assessment, and the religious-cultural refraction of the Pancasila Student Profile.

Across all participants, the Merdeka Curriculum's core orientations differentiation, student autonomy, and character formation were embraced as pedagogically desirable and, notably, as compatible with existing conceptions of good Islamic teaching. Teachers described the reform as liberating them from an overloaded, content-driven syllabus and enabling closer attention to individual learners. One senior teacher observed, "This curriculum lets me teach the child in front of me, not only the material in the book." This conceptual receptivity accords with survey-based findings that Indonesian teachers hold broadly positive attitudes toward the reform (Rahmawati & Suryadi, 2022; Nasution et al., 2023). Interpreted through the enactment lens, such endorsement reflects the interpretive alignment that occurs when a policy resonates with teachers' prior professional values, a precondition that facilitates, though does not guarantee, substantive change. That the alignment was framed in explicitly religious-pedagogical terms, however, signals that endorsement here rests on locally specific grounds rather than on generic acceptance of reform.

Despite consistent conceptual support, the operationalization of student-centered and differentiated pedagogy was uneven, observed in some lessons yet absent in others, with several teachers reverting to whole-class exposition under time and material constraints. Observation revealed that differentiated tasks, where present, were often improvised rather than systematically planned, and that teachers with fewer years of service and less exposure to training struggled to translate principle into design. A mid-career teacher conceded, "I understand differentiation in theory, but with forty students and few resources, I fall back on what I know." This gap between endorsement and enactment corroborates evidence that readiness deficits and resource scarcity impede fidelity in under-resourced schools (Fitriyah & Santosa, 2023), while extending it by showing that the constraint operates not merely as a lack of willingness but as a breakdown in the interpretive-material chain the enactment framework foregrounds. The finding contradicts more optimistic accounts that infer practice change from positive attitudes, underscoring that dispositional support is a necessary but insufficient condition for pedagogical transformation. Theoretically, it demonstrates that agency is enabled or foreclosed by the material and professional-development contexts in which teachers are embedded (Priestley et al., 2021).

Assessment emerged as the site where reform aspirations most consistently gave way to established practice, as the curriculum's formative, competency-oriented intent was displaced by conventional cognitive testing. Teachers reported designing written examinations that mirrored pre-reform formats, driven partly by unfamiliarity with authentic assessment and partly by school reporting routines that continued to privilege numerical grades. "We are told to assess the whole child," one teacher remarked, "but the report card still asks for a number." This reversion aligns with international evidence that assessment is the most change-resistant component of competency-based reform, where systemic backwash sustains familiar practices (Priestley et al., 2021). It diverges, however, from policy narratives that treat assessment reform as a straightforward matter of teacher training, revealing instead a structural misalignment between curricular ambition and institutional accountability. The policy implication is significant: without coherent reform of reporting and accountability structures, assessment innovation is unlikely to take root, regardless of teacher capacity.

The most distinctive finding concerns how teachers interpreted the Pancasila Student Profile, which they read predominantly through Islamic ethical categories and local Gayo moral norms rather than through the civic-secular framing of national policy documents. Dimensions such as "faith, piety, and noble character" were foregrounded and mapped onto the concept of *akhlaq*, while values of cooperation and independence were narrated through community traditions of mutual aid. A school leader explained, "For us, the Pancasila profile is *akhlaq*; we already teach this, only now it has a new name." This religious-cultural refraction exemplifies the enactment framework's central claim that policy is reconstructed rather

than received, and it extends the theory by evidencing a vernacular adaptation in which national categories are neither faithfully reproduced nor rejected but assimilated into a pre-existing moral order. Such adaptation resonates with scholarship on the contextual mediation of Islamic education reform (Suyadi et al., 2022; Hidayah & Prasetyo, 2023), while contributing a specifically peripheral, ethnolectal case that the literature has not documented. The finding carries a dual implication: it signals genuine local ownership that can sustain implementation, yet it also raises the prospect of interpretive drift from national policy intent, a tension that curriculum authorities must engage rather than suppress.

Several limitations qualify these findings. The single-case design, while affording depth, constrains breadth, so the transferability of the account depends on the reader's judgement of contextual similarity rather than on statistical warrant. The reliance on self-report, though mitigated by observation and document analysis, may still overstate the coherence of teachers' practice. Finally, the twelve-week window captures a particular moment in an unfolding reform and cannot speak to how enactment matures over time. These constraints delimit the claims advanced here and motivate the future directions noted below.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study set out to analyze how teachers at a junior high school in Blang Kejeren enact the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education and to identify the conditions shaping that enactment. The findings show that teachers endorsed the reform's principles conceptually yet operationalized them unevenly, that formative-assessment ambitions were displaced by conventional testing under institutional pressure, and that the Pancasila Student Profile was refracted through Islamic and local Gayo moral frameworks into a distinctive vernacular form. Enactment, in this setting, was thus neither faithful implementation nor outright resistance but situated reconstruction shaped by teacher agency, material conditions, and religious-cultural values.

The study's scientific contribution lies in extending curriculum-enactment theory to religious education in an Indonesian peripheral context, demonstrating how a secular-national reform is assimilated into a pre-existing moral order and thereby enriching the theory's account of vernacular adaptation. Theoretically, it repositions the periphery as a generative site for understanding policy transformation rather than as a deficit case. Practically, it indicates that teacher support must be context-sensitive grounded in locally relevant materials and sustained professional development if principle is to become practice. In terms of policy, the findings argue for aligning assessment and reporting structures with curricular intent and for engaging, rather than overriding, the local religious interpretations through which reform is realized. Future research should pursue longitudinal and multi-site comparative designs across Indonesia's diverse regions to trace how such vernacular enactments evolve and to test the transferability of the present account. Within its stated limits, the study offers an evidence-based foundation for more responsive curriculum implementation at the intersection of national policy and local religious culture.

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