

## CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INDEPENDENT CURRICULUM IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (PAUD)

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### Abstract:

This study aims to critically analyze the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Early Childhood Education (PAUD) with a focus on the integration of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), identify challenges and opportunities for its implementation, and provide recommendations for PAI integration strategies that are contextual, creative, and in line with the spirit of independent learning. The method used is a literature study with a qualitative descriptive approach, utilizing literature from scientific journals, books, research reports, and policy documents. The results of the study indicate that the Independent Curriculum opens up space for PAI integration through thematic, project-based, and fun learning, which supports the formation of Islamic character as well as 21st-century competencies. Challenges faced include limited teacher competency, infrastructure readiness, and suboptimal policy support, while opportunities lie in curriculum flexibility, a holistic approach, and parental involvement. This study recommends project-based, creative, contextual PAI integration strategies, as well as strengthening teacher training and collaboration with parents to support successful implementation. These findings are expected to serve as a reference for teachers, schools, and policymakers in optimizing PAI integration in PAUD in an adaptive and meaningful manner.

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### Keywords:

Independent Curriculum; Islamic Religious Education; Early Childhood Education; Independent Learning; Integration of Religious Values

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## INTRODUCTION

The curriculum is a fundamental element of the education system, determining the direction, quality, and relevance of learning. It serves not merely as a technical guideline but also as a reflection of the educational goals to be achieved, the material framework, and the evaluation strategies used. The quality of students and educational outcomes are highly dependent on the curriculum implemented in educational institutions (Rahmah, Ummah, Fauzia, Rahmadani, & Hasanah, 2022). At the Early Childhood Education (PAUD) level, the curriculum is designed to stimulate children's overall potential through enjoyable learning experiences. PAUD focuses not only on cognitive development but also on fostering positive character traits and the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual development of children. Thus, PAUD plays a crucial role as a foundation for developing a holistic personality in the early stages of human development (Rahmah et al., 2022).

Amidst the dynamics of social and economic change and technological advancement, the Indonesian government introduced the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) in response to the demands of 21st-century education. Launched in 2021 by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, this curriculum aims to create a more contextual, enjoyable, and meaningful learning experience for students through greater

learning freedom for teachers and students (Kemendikbudristek, 2021). The principle of "freedom to learn, freedom to play" is a characteristic of the PAUD level, with an emphasis on the interests, needs, and developmental stages of children (Ngaisah, Munawarah, & Aulia, 2023; Priantini, Suarni, & Adnyana, 2022).

The Independent Curriculum is expected to address the weaknesses of conventional learning models, which tend to be mechanistic and memorization-oriented. Through a child-centered approach that allows for creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking, and innovation, learning becomes more relevant, participatory, and developmentally appropriate (Angga, Suryana, Nurwahidah, Hernawan, & Prihantini, 2022; Fadillah & Hibana, 2022). In addition, the Independent Curriculum also introduces the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), which offers project-based learning experiences to internalize Pancasila values such as mutual cooperation, diversity, independence, and critical thinking (Rahmah et al., 2022; Retnaningsih & Khairiyah, 2022).

One of the innovations of the Independent Curriculum relevant to early childhood education (PAUD) is flexibility in assessment. Assessments are geared toward holistically examining children's development, encompassing cognitive, affective, social, spiritual, and moral dimensions, not just academic aspects. This allows teachers to design adaptive, engaging, and meaningful learning activities (Aghnaita, Norhikmah, Aida, & Rabi'ah, 2022; Shalehah, 2023). However, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Early Childhood Education (PAUD), particularly in integrating Islamic Religious Education (PAI), still faces challenges. PAI, as an integral part of developing children's religious and moral character, is often not fully and creatively accommodated within the Independent Curriculum framework. Teachers' limited understanding of the application of a project-based approach to Islamic values, the limited availability of relevant learning media, and the lack of practical guidance are real obstacles in the field (Prameswari, 2020; Sibagariang, Sihotang, & Murniarti, 2021).

This is where the research gap lies. Although many studies discuss the Independent Curriculum and its implementation in Early Childhood Education (ECE) in general (Angga et al., 2022; Rahmah et al., 2022), critical studies specifically analyzing how this curriculum can effectively integrate Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in the ECE context are rare. Existing studies are mostly descriptive and have not yet explored in-depth strategies for integrating Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in P5 or project-based learning in ECE. This research presents a novelty in the form of a comprehensive literature review on the integration of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) into the Independent Curriculum at the ECE level, identifying challenges and opportunities, and offering a new perspective to maximize the synergy between Islamic values and the principles of independent learning.

Based on this, this study aims to: (1) Critically analyze the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in PAUD in relation to the integration of Islamic Religious Education; (2) Identify the challenges and opportunities for implementing Islamic Religious Education within the framework of the Independent Curriculum in PAUD; (3) Provide literature-based recommendations for PAI integration strategies that are contextual, creative, and in accordance with the spirit of independent learning. Significantly, this study is expected to enrich the discourse on the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in PAUD, especially in terms of the integration of Islamic values appropriately and relevantly. The findings of this study are also expected to serve as a reference for educators, policymakers, and education practitioners in designing Islamic Religious Education learning

that is in line with the principles of the Independent Curriculum, so that early childhood education in Indonesia becomes more holistic, meaningful, and contextual.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study employed a library research method through a qualitative descriptive approach (Satori & Komariah, 2014; Sugiyono, 2013; Untung, 2019) to critically examine the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at the Early Childhood Education (PAUD) level. This approach was chosen because it allowed researchers to explore various previous research findings, policy documents, reference books, and relevant scientific articles, then synthesize them into a deeper understanding of the dynamics of this curriculum's implementation in the field.

Data was collected from various credible literature sources, including accredited scientific journals that examine the Independent Curriculum, independent learning, and Islamic Religious Education practices in Early Childhood Education (PAUD). Additionally, textbooks, research reports, scientific dissemination results, and official policy documents from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology also served as the primary sources for the review (Prastowo, 2016). The data collection process was carried out by searching online databases such as Google Scholar, national journal portals, and university digital libraries, using keywords such as "Independent Curriculum", "independent learning", "PAUD Islamic religious education", "PAUD", and "children's Islamic character education".

The selected literature was rigorously selected based on inclusion criteria: it discussed the Independent Curriculum or the concept of independent learning with a focus on the dimensions of Islamic Religious Education in Early Childhood Education (PAUD), was published within the last five years to ensure relevance and up-to-dateness, had a clear methodology, and was published by a credible institution. Conversely, literature that was too general, irrelevant, or did not meet academic standards was excluded from the analysis. (Prastowo, 2016).

All data were analyzed using content analysis techniques as explained by (Afifuddin & Saebani, 2012). This analysis was conducted through a coding stage to identify key themes, then grouping the information based on emerging dimensions, such as the substance of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) material in the Independent Curriculum, implementation strategies in Early Childhood Education (PAUD), contributions to Islamic character formation, and challenges and opportunities. The results of this grouping were then synthesized into a coherent narrative that not only describes the actual situation but also provides a critical analysis of its implementation practices.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, this study employed source triangulation, which involves comparing information from various types of literature to test the consistency of the findings (Arikunto, 2011). Each reference was reviewed for credibility by examining the publisher's reputation, topic relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. The research process began with problem identification, followed by the collection of relevant literature, selection based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, systematic content analysis, and the compilation of the results in a comprehensive narrative. Thus, this study not only presents a description of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education in Early Childhood Education (PAUD), but also offers constructive criticism, reveals gaps in previous research, and demonstrates potential contributions to the development of Islamic education policy and practice in Indonesia.



## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Critical Analysis of the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the Integration of Islamic Religious Education in Early Childhood Education (PAUD)**

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Early Childhood Education (PAUD) marks a major shift in the way children are educated, from a uniform, teacher-centered model to a more personalized, creative, and child-centered learning model (Priantini et al., 2022). The main principle of this curriculum, namely independent learning, provides ample space for children to develop their interests, talents, and learning experiences relevant to their lives (Ngaisah et al., 2023). In the context of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), this paradigm shift opens up new possibilities for integrating Islamic values in a more vibrant, contextual, and developmentally appropriate way.

Conceptually, the integration of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) within the Merdeka Curriculum framework can be achieved by integrating religious values not only as a standalone subject but also into children's daily classroom activities. For example, thematic activities about the environment can be integrated with Islamic values, such as cleanliness as part of faith, or the theme of togetherness can be linked to the teachings of mutual assistance in Islam (Fadillah & Hibana, 2022). Other research also shows that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) integration is more effective when presented through real-life experiences, rather than simply memorization or lectures, so that children directly experience these values in their lives (Angga et al., 2022).

However, a literature review also revealed that in practice, many Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers still experience confusion in translating PAI learning outcomes into the spirit of independent learning. Most teachers are accustomed to more formal and instructional approaches, so when given the freedom to design creative and enjoyable activities, they lack the resources and pedagogical skills to do so effectively ((Angga et al., 2022). This difficulty is compounded by the lack of official guidelines explaining concrete examples of PAI integration within the broad and flexible themes of the Independent Curriculum. Furthermore, the integration of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in early childhood education (PAUD) is often influenced by teachers' perceptions of religion itself. Some teachers tend to view religious education solely as memorizing prayers or prayer recitations, neglecting broader affective, social, and moral aspects (Ngaisah et al., 2023). However, the Independent Curriculum (Curriculum Merdeka) provides significant opportunities to present Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values in a more diverse manner, for example through projects, stories, role-playing, and outdoor activities.

From a policy perspective, the Independent Curriculum also appears to lack specific support for the integration of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in Early Childhood Education (PAUD). Curriculum documents tend to be general, requiring teachers to interpret them independently. This creates the risk of inconsistencies between schools in developing PAI learning programs that align with the principles of independent learning. Therefore, the need for practical guidance and teacher training focused on integrating PAI into the Independent Curriculum is urgent. On the other hand, there are also good practices from schools that have successfully integrated PAI creatively and contextually. For example, teachers invite children to create small projects to share food with their classmates during Ramadan, or organize flower planting activities while teaching about the importance of caring for God's creation. These practices demonstrate that the Independent Curriculum, when implemented well, actually enriches the way teachers deliver PAI, making it more enjoyable, applicable, and relevant to children's worlds.

Critically, it can be concluded that the Independent Curriculum provides a highly potential framework for integrating Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in Early Childhood Education (PAUD), provided teachers receive adequate support. The freedom it offers opens up space for creativity, but also demands high pedagogical skills to maintain a balance between learning freedom and achieving essential religious education goals. Therefore, interventions such as teacher training, the development of guidelines for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) integration based on the Independent Curriculum, and documentation of good practices from the field are urgently needed to ensure that Islamic values can be authentically present in children's learning processes in this new curriculum era.

### **Challenges and Opportunities for Implementing Islamic Religious Education within the Independent Curriculum Framework in Early Childhood Education (PAUD)**

The implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) within the Independent Curriculum framework in Early Childhood Education (PAUD) presents a unique dynamic: on the one hand, it offers extensive opportunities for pedagogical innovation, but on the other, it also poses a number of challenges that need to be carefully managed. The independent learning paradigm allows teachers to be creative in delivering religious material contextually, but this freedom also demands the ability to articulate PAI values within a broader range of learning themes (Ngaisah et al., 2023).

One of the main challenges frequently encountered in the field is the gap in teacher competency in designing Islamic Religious Education (PAI) lessons that align with the spirit of the Independent Curriculum. Many early childhood education (PAUD) teachers have a general education background or limited knowledge of PAI, making it difficult to interpret religious values into creative and enjoyable learning activities (Fadillah & Hibana, 2022). This is further exacerbated by the lack of training specifically addressing the integration of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) into the themes and projects of the Independent Curriculum. As noted by (Angga et al., 2022), most current teacher training remains general and focuses more on technical curriculum concepts than on developing contextual religious content.

Another challenge lies in the lack of adequate resources and references. PAI teaching materials available in early childhood education (PAUD) often take the form of rigid textbooks, which do not support experiential or project-based learning as required by the Independent Curriculum (Shalehah, 2023). In addition, policies at the institutional level also play a role: some schools do not have a clear vision regarding the integration of Islamic Religious Education into the thematic curriculum, so that its implementation becomes merely a formality, not touching on the substantive meaning of religious education itself (Sibagariang et al., 2021).

Beyond technical and policy issues, parental involvement is also a determining factor, sometimes presenting its own challenges. In many cases, parents still believe that religious education can only be delivered through memorizing prayers, reading the Quran, or stories of the Prophets, making them less supportive of a more open and contextual Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning model (Rahmah et al., 2022). This mismatch in expectations between schools and parents can lead to resistance to the new methods introduced within the Independent Curriculum framework.

Despite these challenges, implementing Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in the Independent Curriculum also offers significant opportunities. The curriculum's flexibility allows teachers to adapt Islamic Religious Education (PAI) materials to children's real-world

situations, for example through games, community-based projects, or explorations of the surrounding environment imbued with Islamic values (Safithri, Syaiful, & Huda, 2021). The implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), for example, is very much in line with PAI values such as mutual cooperation, environmental care, and moral integrity (Rahmah et al., 2022). Through these projects, children not only learn about religion as a doctrine, but also as a real guide to life in their daily lives.

Another opportunity arises from technological advancements and broader access to information. Teachers now have easier access to inspiration and share best practices through online platforms, enabling Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teaching to become more varied and innovative (Retnaningsih & Khairiyah, 2022). Similarly, government policies that facilitate community and educational institution participation in curriculum development can also be leveraged to strengthen the role of PAI in early childhood education (PAUD).

Thus, existing challenges can actually be overcome with the right strategies. Limited teacher competency can be addressed through more targeted training, resource gaps can be filled through creativity and collaboration, and parental resistance can be mitigated through effective communication regarding the goals and benefits of contextual Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. As noted by (Aghnaita et al., 2022), the successful integration of PAI into the Independent Curriculum depends heavily on the synergy between teachers, parents, schools, and the government, who view religious education not merely as a formal ritual but as an integral part of character development in children from an early age.

### **Recommendations for Integrating Islamic Religious Education Strategies That Are Contextual, Creative, and in Accordance with the Spirit of Independent Learning**

Based on the results of the literature analysis and the identification of previous challenges and opportunities, this study offers several strategic recommendations for integrating Islamic Religious Education (PAI) contextually, creatively, and in line with the spirit of independent learning in Early Childhood Education (PAUD) units. These recommendations are based on the principle that religious education should not be separated from the world of children but should be integrated into learning experiences that are enjoyable, meaningful, and developmentally appropriate (Fadillah & Hibana, 2022). First, PAUD teachers need to be trained to design theme- and project-based PAI learning that is relevant to children's daily lives. The Independent Curriculum, through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), already provides a framework that can be utilized to introduce Islamic values in a practical way. For example, the theme of environmental care can be linked to Islamic teachings on cleanliness as part of faith, which can be manifested in activities such as collecting trash together or caring for plants at school (Safithri et al., 2021). In this regard, teachers are required to be creative in formulating success indicators that are not only cognitive, but also affective and psychomotor.

Second, it is necessary to develop contextual and child-friendly learning media and resources. Rigid textbooks should be complemented with props, illustrated stories, songs, educational games, and short videos that teach Islamic values in a fun and accessible way for children (Aghnaita et al., 2022). Creativity in media selection can help children internalize religious values through real-life, emotionally engaging experiences, rather than simply through mechanical memorization. Third, teachers and schools are advised to strengthen communication with parents regarding the importance of contextual religious education. Parental support is crucial to ensuring consistency of Islamic Religious Education

values between school and home. Parenting programs that explain the concept of independent learning and how Islamic values can be taught through daily activities will help minimize resistance and increase children's understanding of new learning approaches (Rahmah et al., 2022).

Fourth, to improve teacher capacity, the government and educational institutions should develop ongoing training programs that not only teach the general concepts of the Independent Curriculum but also specifically address strategies for integrating Islamic values into theme- and project-based learning. This aligns with findings (Angga et al., 2022), that teachers who receive specific training are better able to adapt the curriculum effectively without sacrificing the substance of religious teachings. Fifth, learning evaluations also need to be aligned with the holistic approach advocated by the Independent Curriculum. Portfolio-based assessments, documentation of activities, and observation of children's daily behavior are more appropriate for measuring children's spiritual, moral, and social development than tests or memorization (Shalehah, 2023). Teachers can, for example, record children's behavior when praying together, sharing toys with friends, or maintaining environmental cleanliness as indicators of the success of religious education.

Finally, this study also recommends that schools utilize technology and professional networks to enrich good practices in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) integration. Digital platforms such as teacher forums, educational social media, or webinars can be utilized to share ideas, methods, and materials that have proven effective elsewhere (Pramudyani & Indratno, 2022). Cross-institutional collaboration can also foster innovation and ensure that Islamic values remain relevant to the context of children's lives in the modern era. These recommendations collectively emphasize that the integration of PAI in Early Childhood Education (PAUD) within the Merdeka Curriculum framework is not merely an attempt to maintain the formality of religious learning, but rather an endeavor to transform it into a living, dynamic, and enjoyable moral foundation for children. With contextual, creative strategies, and supported by the spirit of independent learning, PAI can be an effective means of building Islamic character in children from an early age, while simultaneously addressing the demands of 21st-century education that emphasizes creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking (Safithri et al., 2021).

## **CONCLUSION**

This research shows that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Early Childhood Education (PAUD), particularly in its integration of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), presents significant opportunities and challenges. First, the Independent Curriculum provides ample space for teachers to design contextual, creative, and child-centered learning. This freedom allows Islamic values to be introduced in a more enjoyable and relevant way to children's daily lives, through projects that integrate religious learning with the Pancasila Student Profile theme. Second, the integration of PAI within the Independent Curriculum framework faces several challenges, including: a lack of teacher preparedness in designing project-based PAI learning, limited resources and child-friendly media, and resistance from some parents who do not yet understand the concept of independent learning. Nevertheless, significant opportunities exist through government support, curriculum flexibility, and the potential for collaboration between schools, parents, and the community to create more contextual and enjoyable PAI learning. Third, recommended strategies include: ongoing teacher training to design project-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning; development of creative, contextual, and child-friendly media and learning resources;

strengthening communication and synergy with parents; utilizing technology and professional networks; and implementing a holistic assessment system based on portfolios and observations of child behavior. These strategies are expected to ensure that the integration of Islamic values in PAUD remains aligned with the principles of independent learning, while strengthening the formation of Islamic character relevant to the challenges of the 21st century.

This research theoretically enriches the study on the implementation of the Independent Curriculum by showing that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values in Early Childhood Education (PAUD) can be creatively internalized through a thematic, project-based, and fun approach, in line with constructivist principles that emphasize direct experience, collaboration, and emotional involvement of children. Practically, the results of this study provide guidance for teachers to design integrative and contextual PAI learning, for schools to provide supporting infrastructure and build communication with parents, and for policymakers to design relevant teacher training and evaluation systems, so as to create an adaptive, fun PAUD learning environment, and able to instill a strong Islamic character in the spirit of independent learning.

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