

REFRAMING ISLAMIC VALUES IN EDUCATION MANAGEMENT: EVALUATING THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM THROUGH AN ISLAMIC LEADERSHIP LENS

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Abstract

The transformation of education in Indonesia through the Independent Curriculum emphasizes flexibility, differentiatory learning, and character strengthening. However, its implementation in Islamic educational institutions requires a more in-depth study of how Islamic values are represented and integrated in learning practices. This research aims to evaluate the Independent Curriculum from the perspective of Islamic *leadership* and offer a framework for *reframing* Islamic values in education management. Using a qualitative approach with a case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis in schools and madrassas that implemented the Independent Curriculum. Thematic analysis reveals that the integration of Islamic values, such as amanah, adl, ikhtiyar, and ihsan, remains partial and highly dependent on teachers' initiative and the school leadership culture. The findings also confirm that leaders who practice Islamic leadership principles are able to create a more ethical, collaborative, and character-oriented learning culture. This research proposes a model of integrating Islamic values at three levels: curriculum, learning practices, and school leadership. Overall, this study highlights the importance of harmonizing national curriculum policies with Islamic values, as well as the need for more systematic guidelines to support the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in the Islamic education context.

Keywords: *Independent Curriculum; Islamic Education Management; Islamic Leadership; Islamic values; Reframing the Curriculum; Character Education; Curriculum Integration.*

Introduction

The changing paradigm of global education emphasizes flexibility, learning independence, and 21st-century competencies based on creativity, critical thinking, and character. This shift occurred in response to technological disruption, job market needs, and rapid social developments. In this context, various countries are trying to formulate curricula that are not only adaptive but also relevant to their respective cultural and religious values (UNESCO, 2021). Indonesia, with the world's largest Muslim population, faces a strategic challenge to maintain the relevance of Islamic values in national education policy. The integration of Islamic values is important so that the transformation of education remains based on the moral and spiritual identity of the nation.

The Merdeka Curriculum is present as the most progressive reform in the Indonesian education system, which emphasizes learning differentiation, Pancasila Student profiles, and competency-based approaches. This curriculum is positioned to foster creativity, independence, and flexibility of teachers and students (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022). However, although the Merdeka Curriculum is designed to be inclusive and adaptive, critical studies on the extent to which the components of Islamic values are integrated into it are still limited. This is important, considering that Islamic educational institutions such as madrassas and pesantren-based schools have their own pedagogical approaches that emphasize spirituality, manners, and moral leadership.

Various previous studies have highlighted the integration of Islamic values in education management, but many of them have focused on institutional aspects or the character of students, rather than an analysis of the national curriculum (Alam et al., 2020; Rosyada, 2018). Meanwhile, the majority of studies on the Independent Curriculum discuss pedagogical effectiveness, teacher readiness, and implementation problems (Habibi et al., 2023). This gap shows the need to evaluate the Independent Curriculum from the perspective of Islamic education management, especially through an Islamic leadership framework that emphasizes the concepts of trust, adl (justice), shura (deliberation), and ihsan.

Islamic leadership is an approach that combines spiritual, moral, and ethical aspects in decision-making and management of educational institutions. The Islamic leadership model emphasizes integrity, justice, service, and community empowerment principles that are in line with the vision of transformative education (Beekun & Badawi, 1999). The use of this framework allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the Independent Curriculum, especially in assessing whether its policy structure and learning practices support the formation of a holistic Islamic character. Thus, reframing the curriculum through the lens of Islamic leadership is a strategic effort to maintain the relevance of spiritual values in modern education.

Reframing Islamic values in education management does not mean replacing the structure of the national curriculum, but harmonizing the principles of modern learning with the foundation of Islamic values. This approach involves reinterpreting values such as manners, responsibility, honesty, social care, and spirituality, to align with the demands of competency-based learning. Recent studies show that the integration of religious values into the curriculum can improve students' motivation, psychological well-being, and character quality (Mahfud et al., 2022). Therefore, the evaluation of the Independent Curriculum through the perspective of Islamic leadership helps to ensure that the transformation of education remains in line with the nation's moral identity.

This research aims to evaluate the Independent Curriculum through the lens of Islamic leadership to find opportunities, challenges, and relevant models of integrating Islamic values in education management. The contribution of this research lies in the preparation of a new perspective (reframing) that combines modern curriculum policies with Islamic ethics and leadership values. This approach is expected to provide practical recommendations for Islamic education stakeholders, both madrasas, public schools, and

Islamic boarding schools in order to implement the Independent Curriculum in a contextual, adaptive manner, and remain based on comprehensive Islamic principles.

Theoretical Studies

Educational Management in a Contemporary Perspective

Modern education management emphasizes the effectiveness of the learning process, curriculum development, leadership, and strengthening the character of students. Contemporary models highlight the importance of result-based management, school autonomy, and collaboration between teachers, principals, and stakeholders (Bush, 2020). In a global framework, education management is directed to improve the quality of learning while being adaptive to rapid technological and social changes. This approach seeks to create an inclusive, flexible, and competency-oriented learning environment for the 21st century.

Islamic Values in Education Management

Islamic values provide an ethical and spiritual foundation for the implementation of education. Principles such as *amanah* (responsibility), *adl* (justice), *shura* (deliberation), *sidq* (honesty), and *ihsan* (moral excellence) are fundamental guidelines for decision-making in educational institutions (Alam et al., 2020). These values not only shape the character of students, but also become a moral framework for teachers, school leaders, and educational organizations. Research shows that the internalization of Islamic values increases discipline, intrinsic motivation, and strengthens morality in schools (Mahfud et al., 2022).

Islamic Leadership as a Frame of Analysis

Islamic leadership is a holistic approach that combines spiritual vision, morality, and *servant leadership* in the implementation of education. This model emphasizes integrity, justice, empathy, and community empowerment (Beekun & Badawi, 1999). In the context of education management, Islamic leadership directs school leaders to ensure that curriculum policies and learning practices are aligned with the moral values and spiritual needs of students. This framework is relevant for evaluating the Independent Curriculum because it provides a different normative lens than conventional management approaches.

Independent Curriculum: Principles, Structure, and Implementation

The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to create flexible, contextual, and student-centered learning. The main principles include learning differentiation, simplification of competencies, strengthening the *profile of Pancasila Students*, and teacher autonomy in choosing teaching tools (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022). The implementation of this curriculum is expected to foster creativity and independence of students. However, a number of studies have identified challenges such as teacher readiness, lack of training, and difficulties in integrating moral and religious content in general subjects (Habibi et al., 2023). Therefore, the integration of Islamic values needs to be reviewed in the context of this curriculum.

Integration of Islamic Values in the National Curriculum

The integration of Islamic values into the national curriculum has become a significant theme in the study of Indonesian education. This integration is typically achieved through

strengthening character education, the incorporation of religious ethical values into subjects, the practice of religious habituation, and morality-based contextual learning (Rosyada, 2018). Previous research has demonstrated that a curriculum that effectively integrates religious values can improve students' religious attitudes, prosocial behaviors, and learning motivation (Mahfud et al., 2022). However, studies related to the Independent Curriculum are still limited in examining how Islamic values can be reframed to meet the demands of competency-based learning.

Reframing Islamic Values in the Context of the Independent Curriculum

Reframing is the process of reinterpreting the structure of the modern curriculum to remain in harmony with Islamic values without changing the core goals of the national curriculum. Reframing Islamic values in the Merdeka Curriculum involves re-emphasizing spirituality, ethics, and character, and connecting them to contemporary pedagogical approaches. Values such as *effort* (effort), *trust*, and *ihsan* can be translated into competency indicators, assessment design, and project-based learning activities. In the perspective of Islamic leadership, this reframing also requires school leaders to facilitate a learning culture that is in line with Islamic morality, while also being responsive to global change.

Research Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore in depth how Islamic values are reflected, interpreted, and integrated in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum through the perspective of Islamic leadership. The qualitative approach allows researchers to understand the natural context, social dynamics, and construction of meaning formed by teachers, principals, and Islamic education stakeholders (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data was collected through in-depth interviews, direct observations, and analysis of curriculum documents and school policies. Informants were selected using purposive sampling techniques, namely the selection of participants who are considered to have the best understanding of the application of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic-based educational institutions, such as madrasas, integrated Islamic schools, and Islamic boarding schools.

Data analysis was carried out using a thematic model that involved an open, axial, and selective coding process to identify conceptual patterns related to the values of Islamic leadership and the implementation of the Independent Curriculum (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The validity of the data is maintained through source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking to informants to ensure the validity of the findings. The analysis process is carried out iteratively between field data and theoretical frameworks so that the interpretation remains consistent with the concept of Islamic values and Islamic leadership. Thus, this research method allows the development of a comprehensive understanding of how the Independent Curriculum can be reframed to be in harmony with Islamic moral, ethical, and spiritual principles in education management.

Results and Discussion

The Integration of Islamic Values in the Learning Practice of the Independent Curriculum is Still Partial

The findings show that most teachers and leaders of Islamic educational institutions understand the Independent Curriculum as a flexible policy and provide room for adaptation of religious values. However, the integration of Islamic values into the teaching apparatus is still partial, depending on the teacher's initiative, not on the curriculum structure itself. Values such as *amanah*, *ikhtiyar*, *adab*, and *shura* often appear in project-based learning activities (P5), but are not systematically documented in the learning objectives. This is in accordance with previous findings that the integration of religious values in the national curriculum often depends on the capacity of teachers and school culture (Rosyada, 2018). Thus, the Independent Curriculum provides space for the integration of Islamic values, but does not provide an operational mechanism that clarifies how these values are lowered into competency indicators.

Islamic Leadership Encourages More Meaningful and Character-Oriented Implementation

Analysis of field data shows that schools or madrassas with leaders oriented to *Islamic leadership* tend to be more successful in realizing Islamic values in learning. Leaders who prioritize the principles of *adl* (justice), *rahmah* (care), and *ihsan* are able to build a school culture that is consistent with spiritual values. The leader is actively involved in academic supervision, ensuring that teachers are able to combine the learning outcomes (CP) of the Independent Curriculum with moral education. These results are in line with the literature that Islamic leadership strengthens organizational ethics and forms a morality-based learning environment (Beekun & Badawi, 1999). Thus, the successful implementation of Islamic values does not only depend on the curriculum, but also on the quality of institutional leadership.

The Construction of the Meaning of the Independent Curriculum by Teachers in Islamic Education Institutions

Teachers build the meaning that the Independent Curriculum provides pedagogical freedom that can be used to strengthen Islamic character education. However, teachers also reported initial confusion about how to break down Islamic values into CP, ATP, teaching modules, and formative assessment formats. Some teachers associate the profile of Pancasila Students with the concept of *human resources*, stating that values such as mutual cooperation and independence are actually in line with Islamic teachings. These findings show that there is an opportunity for reframing, namely interpreting the Independent Curriculum through the lens of Islamic leadership without changing the structure of the national curriculum. However, teachers need more systematic guidelines so that the integration of Islamic values is not just an individual interpretation, but standardized in learning planning.

Implementation Challenges: Teacher Resiliency, Lack of Contextual Modules, and Unclear Guidelines for Religious Values

Some of the main challenges were identified, namely: the readiness of diverse teachers, especially in developing teaching modules based on Islamic values; lack of explicit

learning resources integrating academic competence with Islamic values; confusion in character assessments, because spiritual and moral assessments do not yet have a standardized rubric; the unclear translation of P5 into relevant Islamic activities. This challenge reinforces the results of previous research showing that the Independent Curriculum faces structural barriers in its implementation, including teacher competence and a lack of module examples (Habibi et al., 2023). In the context of Islamic education, these obstacles are increasingly complex because teachers must also consider moral mandates and value integration.

Reframing: An Integration Model of Islamic Values in the Independent Curriculum

Based on thematic analysis, this study proposes a model of reframing Islamic values at three levels: Curriculum Level, Aligning CP and elements of the Pancasila Student Profile with Islamic values such as *amanah*, *ihsan*, and *ikhtiyar*. Learning Level, Reducing Islamic values to the form of competency indicators, pedagogical strategies, and contextual teaching modules based on Islamic projects. School Leadership Level, Practicing *Islamic leadership* through supervision, culture of manners, and deliberation-based collaboration.

This model shows that reframing does not simply include religious elements in the modern curriculum, but synergizes Islamic spirituality with the flexible pedagogy of the Independent Curriculum. These results reinforce the argument that Islamic leadership is a bridge between national policies and expected moral values (Alam et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This research shows that the Independent Curriculum provides a wide space of flexibility for the integration of Islamic values, but its implementation is still partial and highly dependent on teachers' initiatives and school leadership culture. Values such as *amanah*, *adl*, *ikhtiyar*, and *ihsan* have emerged in learning practices and project activities, but have not been systematically structured in learning tools such as learning outcomes, teaching modules, and assessments. This shows that modern curriculum policies have not fully provided a clear operational mechanism to ensure the internalization of Islamic values in Islamic educational institutions.

In addition, the findings of the study confirm that Islamic leadership plays a significant role in strengthening the implementation of the Independent Curriculum with moral and spiritual values. School leaders who adopt *Islamic leadership* principles are able to create a character-based academic culture, encourage collaboration, and ensure that Islamic values are translated into pedagogical practice. Thus, the process of *reframing* the Independent Curriculum is important to synergize the demands of 21st century learning with the moral and spiritual identity of the Muslim community. This study recommends the development of more structured Islamic value integration guidelines, strengthening teacher competence, and school leadership models that are consistent with Islamic principles so that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum can be effective, contextual, and sustainable.

Suggestion

Development of Guidelines for the Integration of Islamic Values in the Independent Curriculum

A more structured guideline is needed to assist teachers and schools in integrating Islamic values into learning planning, especially in learning outcomes (CP), learning objectives (ATP), teaching modules, and assessments. This guide needs to be designed by relevant institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Islamic education associations, and curriculum experts so that teachers do not rely only on personal interpretation, so that the value integration process can run consistently and standardized.

Strengthening Teacher Competence in Islamic Pedagogy and Independent Curriculum

Teachers need to be provided with ongoing training that combines the pedagogical competencies of the Independent Curriculum with a deep understanding of Islamic values and ethics. This training includes Islamic project-based learning design, contextual module development, and character and spiritual assessment techniques. By increasing the capacity of teachers, the integration of Islamic values can be realized more effectively in daily learning practices.

Strengthening the Islamic Leadership Model in Educational Institutions

Islamic educational institutions need to encourage school principals and leaders to apply *Islamic leadership principles*, such as *amanah*, *adl*, *rahmah*, and *shurrah*. Leadership based on these values has been proven to encourage a more ethical, collaborative, and character-building school culture for students. The Islamic-based leadership training program needs to be improved so that school leaders are able to become the main director of value integration in the Independent Curriculum.

Development of Contextual Islamic Learning Resources and Modules

The development of teaching modules, literacy tools, and learning resources that explicitly combine general materials with Islamic values is very necessary. This material must be developed collaboratively between teachers, curriculum experts, and Islamic education academics to suit the character of students and the socio-cultural context of each school. Relevant modules will help teachers reduce workload while enriching the quality of learning.

Advanced Research to Expand Perspectives

Further research is recommended to explore the integration of Islamic values in the context of different educational institutions, such as Islamic boarding schools, integrated Islamic schools, and aliyah madrasas. The mixed-methods approach can also be used to validate findings through quantitative data on the impact of the Independent Curriculum on student character. In addition, cross-regional comparative research will help understand implementation variations and provide a more comprehensive picture.

Implicasi's theorem

Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on Islamic education management by showing that the integration of Islamic values in the modern curriculum can not only be done through normative approaches, but also through Islamic leadership-based

reframing. These findings confirm that *Islamic leadership* serves as an analytical framework that is able to bridge spiritual values with 21st-century pedagogy, thus contributing to the expansion of theories about the relationship between religious values, educational policy, and curriculum practice. In addition, this research opens up space for the development of a new conceptual model on how Islamic values can be operationalized at the level of policy, learning, and school governance in the context of a flexible national curriculum such as the Independent Curriculum.

Practical Implications

Practically, this research provides direction for schools, teachers, policymakers, and leaders of Islamic educational institutions to develop a strategy for the implementation of the Independent Curriculum that is more systematic and in line with Islamic values. The results of the research encourage schools to strengthen Islamic pedagogical training, develop contextual teaching modules, and implement supervision based on *Islamic leadership principles* so that learning not only focuses on academic competence but also character building. The government and Islamic educational institutions can also use the results of this research to develop clearer guidelines for the integration of religious values when implementing the Independent Curriculum, so that educational transformation can run more effectively, relevantly, and sustainably.

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